The Haymarket Martyrs and the origins of May Day

Joseph Kishore
7 May 2024

The following speech was given by Joseph Kishore, the national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (US), at the International May Day 2024 Online Rally, held Saturday, May 4.

I am standing near the historical monument for the Haymarket Martyrs, working class leaders of Chicago who, in the 1880s, were framed up and executed for a crime they did not commit.

The International Committee of the Fourth International is marking May Day, the international day of working class solidarity. But what many workers may not know is that May Day had its origins here at Haymarket, and in the Eight Hour Day movement that emerged after the Civil War.

During the Civil War, Karl Marx had predicted the emergence of the American working class. In 1864, on behalf of the First Workers International, he wrote to congratulate Abraham Lincoln on his reelection, in the middle of the Civil War.

"The workingmen of Europe feel sure that, as the American War of Independence initiated a new era of ascendancy for the middle class," Marx wrote, "so the American Antislavery War will do for the working classes."

Marx's prognosis was quickly vindicated. By 1867, he was able to write in *Capital* that it was "out of the death of slavery [that] a new life at once arose. The first fruit of the Civil War was the eight hours' agitation that ran with the seven-leagued boots of the locomotive from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from New England to California."

In those years Chicago epitomized the colossal growth of American capitalism and the American working class. It grew from about 100,000 in 1860 when Lincoln first accepted the nomination for president, to 500,000 in 1880. And it was an international workforce. In the 1880s, the city's population was 80 percent foreign-born or the children of foreign-born.

In 1886, the call once again went up among these workers for the eight-hour day: "Eight hours for work, eight hours for sleep, eight hours for what we will!" was their slogan.

Strikes and protests were held across the country on May 1. In Chicago, a march drew 80,000. On May 4 police violently attacked a follow-up rally in Haymarket Square. A bomb went off. In the explosion and police melee, seven officers and four civilians were killed.

Authorities railroaded leaders of Chicago's working class through a sham trial. Four of those falsely accused were executed on November 11, 1887: George Engel, Adolph Fischer, Albert Parsons, and August Spies.

The convicted sang the Marseillaise as they were taken to the gallows. Spies' last words were "The time will come when our silence will be more powerful than the voices you strangle today."

A fifth martyr, Louis Lingg, was murdered or committed suicide in jail a day earlier.

Two years later, in 1889, the Second International was founded in Paris, on the 100th anniversary of the French Revolution.

A French delegate motivated a resolution for "a great international demonstration" of May Day to mark the recent American events. Demonstrations were held throughout Europe and North America in 1890. The anniversary was marked each year thereafter. Russian workers first observed it in 1891, Chinese workers in 1927.

It is high time to revive the socialist and internationalist traditions of May Day!

© World Socialist Web Site

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site