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The Significance of the Haymarket Tragedy Then and Now

by Veronika Janas

(English 1102)

Haymarket Riot, also called Haymarket Affair or Haymarket Massacre, a violent confrontation between police and labor protesters in Chicago on May 4, 1886, became a symbol of the international struggle for workers' rights. Since its designation as International Workers' Day by the Second International in 1889, the Haymarket tragedy has been associated with May 1 and celebrated all around the world. William J. Adelman, a historian and professor of labor and industrial relations at the University of Illinois, admits that "no single event has influenced the history of labor in Illinois, the United States, and even the world, more than the Chicago Haymarket Affair" (Adelman 29). Although the Haymarket Riot occurred a long time ago and may seem to some as an event reserved for the history books only, the issues that led to the Haymarket affair are problems that are still with us today: unemployment, the rights of minority groups, a fair distribution of wealth, freedom of speech and assembly, political corruption, police surveillance and brutality and the rights of American workers to organize unions of their choice. The series of events that ignited the Haymarket bomb consisted of a tragic combination of intention, accident, and surprise. According to *The Dramas of Haymarket*, an online project produced by the Chicago Historical Society, while the Haymarket bomb was unquestionably a terrifying shock for many people, to some on the other hand, the bomb was no surprise. Viewed in retrospect, many historians agree, that the bomb explosion was almost inevitable, especially when and where the incident occurred - on the evening of May 4, 1886, at a labor protest rally in a manufacturing and wholesale district in Chicago, Illinois. That one explosion set off a chain of events that turned eight anarchists into martyrs, brought on America's first "Red Scare"-promotion of widespread fear by a society or state about a potential rise of anarchism and turned May Day into an international holiday (*The Dramas of Haymarket*).

The Dramas of Haymarket examined the connection and the importance of the mechanization and the improvement of the factory system and their influence on the events related to Haymarket Riot. These improvements might have originated abroad, but by the 1840s the United States was on course to become the world's leading industrial nation. Industrialization and the social developments have without a doubt, transformed the whole nation. The defining conditions of this time and place were the upheavals of the nineteenth century. Central among these was the Industrial Revolution, which irreversibly altered virtually every aspect of human experience wherever it reached. A second defining condition of the period was the continuation of the democratic movement that began with the creation of the United States in the late eighteenth century. Over the next one hundred years and more, European nations experienced an uncertain pattern of reform and often repressive reaction that, along with uncertain economic conditions, brought masses of immigrants westward across the Atlantic (*Whither America*).

In his book *Haymarket Revisited*, William Adelman examines relationships between immigrants, who came to Chicago early on and those, who came in the 1830's and 1840's who were mostly of German, Irish and Eastern European descent. Those, who came to Chicago early, naturally had the greatest opportunity to achieve success, since land was cheap, and everything still had to be built. The Anglo-Saxon Protestants like George Pullman, Marshall Field, Potter Palmer and Cyrus McCormick, who came from New England and the East, dominated the life of the city throughout the second half of the 19th century. Their heirs continued to control the city politically until the 1930's. The Irish and German immigrants who came in the 1840's, were regarded as inferior and a cheap

labor to be exploited by the earlier settlers (Adelman 2). Racial and ethnic conflicts became an early characteristic in Chicago. The wealthy businessmen of the city would not face the problems they had created for their workers. They wanted to believe that their workers could become rich just as they had and when thousands of workers were unemployed, the rich immediately assumed, that the poor must be lazy. “The period after the Civil War was a difficult time for workers all over the country, but more difficult for Chicago workers because of the Great Chicago Fire that left over 100,000 people homeless” (Adelman 4). Many construction workers who were helping to rebuild the city were exploited by their employers and didn’t even receive pay for the work performed since there was no law requiring workers to be paid. New machinery was destroying the jobs of even skilled workers and with an ever-increasing supply of surplus labor of immigrants in Chicago, there was always someone to take their place if they wouldn’t accept a wage cut or longer hours. “By 1855 there were more foreign-born voters in Chicago than native-born” (Adelman 3). The rich businessmen of the city were afraid of losing political control of the city and they organized a racist, anti-foreigner, anti-worker political party known as Know-Nothings.

As historian William Adelman asserts, “the cycles of economy, the seasonal nature of many jobs and the abundance of cheap foreign labor, made unemployment and destitution a way of life in Chicago” (Adelman 5). This was in sharp contrast to the great fortunes that were being made at the same time by men like George Pullman, Marshall Field, Potter Palmer and Cyrus McCormick. Workers in the United States had been fighting since the day of Andrew Jackson’s Administration for shorter working hours. Under President Van Buren, federal employees won the ten-hour day (Adelman 14). The government was expected to be a role model for the private sector, but private employers refused to follow voluntarily the government’s example. Therefore, workers found they had to strike each individual employer to win the shorter hours.

Paul Avrich, a distinguished professor of history, describes the Haymarket Riot, as a pivotal event in the history of both the anarchist and labor movements that began on May 3, 1886, when the Chicago police fired into a crowd of strikers at the McCormick Reaper Works, killing and wounding several men. The following evening, May 4, the anarchists held a protest meeting and a crowd of about 2500 people gathered on Desplaines Street near Haymarket Square in Chicago. August Spies, a labor newspaper editor, protested against what had happened the day before at the McCormick Reaper Plant. Next Albert Parson, a labor leader spoke, and he was followed by Samuel Fielden, a Methodist preacher and community leader. Towards the end of the meeting, which had proceeded peacefully, without an incident, as Fielden was about to finish his speech, a formation of 176 armed policemen attacked the crowd, that had by then dwindled down to about 200 (Avrich 11). Suddenly, a dynamite bomb was thrown by someone unknown. It was the first time such a device was ever used in the United States. The bomb landed in the middle of the police, killing one man and seriously injuring dozens of others. The police shot into the crowd, killing at least four workers and wounding several civilians, as well as some of their own men. Sixty-seven policemen were hurt, eight of whom afterwards died (Avrich 12). As William Adelman points out, for the next several weeks freedom of speech and assembly ended in Chicago and other cities throughout the country. Hundreds of labor and ethnic community leaders were arrested. The Knights of Labor was blamed for the violence and the newspapers, business and eventually the public turned against labor unions and everyone cried for “law and order” (Adelman 1). Although the bomb thrower was never apprehended, eight Chicago anarchists were brought to trial and convicted of murder. Judge Joseph Gary, who was assigned to the case, made the trial a travesty of justice. Before he formally pronounced the sentence, he emphasized that “the real passions at the bottom of the hearts of the anarchists were envy and hatred of all people whose condition in life was better than their own, who were more prosperous than themselves” (Smith 135). Spies denounced the judicial system that had sentenced himself and his comrades to death, charging the state with deliberately plotting to use Haymarket incident as a pretext to eliminate the leaders of the working class. “You may pronounce the sentence upon me,”

Spies declared, “but let the world know that in A.D. 1886, in the state of Illinois, eight men were sentenced to death because they believed in a better future, because they had not lost their faith in the ultimate victory of liberty and justice!” (Avrich 286). On November 11, 1887, after unsuccessful appeals to the Illinois Supreme Court and the United States Supreme Court, four of the anarchists were hanged and a fifth committed suicide in his cell the day before the execution. Paul Avrich criticized the trial of the Chicago anarchists to be “one of the most unjust in the annals of American jurisprudence” (Avrich 11). Many critics have described the trial to resemble a charade. Eric Arnesen, a history professor at the University of Illinois, claims that no evidence linked the defendants to the bomb that killed the police officers, prosecution witnesses engaged in wholesale perjury and the jury was visibly prejudiced (Arnesen). In 1893, Governor John Altgeld, who was always very sympathetic to the workers of Illinois, decided to pardon the three surviving prisoners on the grounds that the convictions were made based on insufficient evidence and by clearly prejudiced jury and biased judge (Adelman 25).

Carl Smith, a professor of English and American culture, provides an insightful description of the Chicago Anarchists. According to him, each of the Haymarket Eight believed in different philosophies, but to all of them the word “anarchism” meant “freedom”. They saw the government, the businessmen and the police working in violation of the principles Americans fought for during the American Revolution. They feared the great new concentration of wealth that had taken place since the Civil War and were concerned about the new machinery, that was replacing even most skilled workmen (Smith 111-112). These men, who were far ahead of their time, believed in worker control over key industries, which is now allowed by law in many countries, where workers can elect representatives to the Boards of Directors of large companies producing major consumer items.

The consequences of this tragedy for immigrants were far reaching. Europeans of all nations had been welcomed in America during the post-Civil War years, but after the bombing, all immigrants became suspects. James Green, a professor of labor history points out, that at a time when immigrants seemed to be overwhelming cities like Chicago, “the Haymarket events provoked a new kind of paranoia among millions of native-born citizens, who grew much more fearful of aliens in their midst” (Green 11). The initial reactions to Haymarket bombing had created a long-lasting impression of the immigrant as a dangerous figure and reinforcing the widespread xenophobia at the time. To many, the bomb justified anti-immigrants fears that blamed the continuing economic distress and the rising trend of labor trouble on the arrival of people, especially non-English speaking political and economic refugees from Europe.

The Haymarket meeting and bombing, the subsequent riot, arrests, trial, and executions, and related events of that time period form one of the most remarkable incidents in the history of Chicago, the United States and of working people everywhere and had a long-lasting effect on the labor movement in the United States. Green ingeniously argues that “Haymarket case challenged, like no other episode in the nineteenth century, the image of the United States as a classless society with liberty and justice for all” (Green 12). Today, with unemployment increasing, automation leaving more and more workers unemployed, labor and community groups again see the necessity for political and social change. The possibility of history repeating itself is almost inevitable. Take for example the left-wing protest movement, Occupy Wall Street, that began in 2011 in New York City's Wall Street financial district. The main issues raised by Occupy Wall Street movement were social and economic inequality, greed, corruption and the undue influence of corporations on government, particularly from the financial services sector. “We are the 99%”, refers to income and wealth inequality in the U.S. between the wealthiest 1% and the rest of the population (We are the 99%). Without a doubt, the battle for social justice, equality, freedom of speech and assembly and democracy in the workplace that the Haymarket Martyrs fought for is still relevant, even today.

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