

MAY DAY

and

The Haymarket Massacre



The place was Chicago, the year 1886, and the ground fertile with revolution. With the Union's victory in the U.S. Civil War — and the triumph of waged over enslaved labor, of capitalist industrial over slavery-based production — the development of capitalism in the U.S. Empire, long impeded by the backwardness of the Southern plantation economy, at last accelerated toward maturity. The country's industrial output exploded, and its industrial proletarian workforce, swelled by Black freed persons and waves of migration and settlement from Europe, Asia, and Latin America, dramatically expanded. As U.S. capitalism matured, so did the proletariat mature as a class.

Chicago was then the central hub of the country's transcontinental railway network. It connected the old U.S. colonial metropolises of the northeast Atlantic coast — New York, Boston, etc. — to the developing settler colonies along the Pacific.

The city had also earned a reputation as America's larder, thanks to its massive slaughtering yards and meat industry. The Union Stock Yard & Transit Co. was founded by a number of railway firms in 1865. By the 1880s, the Union Yard spread over 375 acres and housed 75,000 hogs, 21,000 cattle, and 22,000 sheep at any given time. Each year, the Yards slaughtered somewhere on the order of 2 million animals. The horrible noise and the even worse stench were internationally infamous. This abattoir of animal (and, through overwork, exhaustion, and accident, human) flesh was famously cataloged by the socialist journalist and author Upton Sinclair in his 1906 novel *The Jungle*. By the end of the 1860s, the huge meatpacking firms in Chicago had perfected an ice-cooled refrigerator car, designed to transport meat by railway across the country without ruining it.

As the railyards and the stockyards consolidated, Chicago's burgeoning industrialists were stricken with an unquenchable thirst for cheap labor. In 1880, the U.S. population was 50 million. Between 1880 and 1920, over 20 million Southern, Eastern, and Central European migrants entered the U.S., with smaller numbers arriving from Mexico, China and other east Asian countries, and the Ottoman Empire. In the 1870s alone, 60,000 Europeans flooded into Chicago, reaching a total of 204,859 by 1880. At that point, they were 56% of the workforce. By far, the largest number, 163,482 workers, came from the German Empire. The overwhelming majority of these immigrants lacked any property aside from their personal effects, and came to the U.S. as laborers. In the 1880's, 40.5% of all residents in Cook County were migrants, and the majority were either first- or second-generation citizens. Well supplied by waves of poor freed persons and migrants, propertyless and desperate for work, and ripe for conversion into an industrial army of proletarians, the capitalists drank, and drank deep.

During the 1880–90 decade, Chicago doubled in size. Large factory complexes cleared land near the stockyards. The coal operators had established their own "company towns" or "planned communities." Advertised as philanthropic ventures, a sort of "caring capitalism" in which the workers would be well-looked after by their bosses, these were instead planned towns centered on a company-owned mines, to which workers were lured, debt-trapped by a combination of low wages and artificially high costs of living, and effectively imprisoned in an endless cycle of indentured servitude. The Pullman Company, which owned the captive town of Pullman (just outside of Chicago, the rail hub of the Empire) to house the workers who made the Pullman railway cars, would, less than a decade later, cut the low wages of its workers to near-starvation levels. This triggered the infamous Pullman Rail Strike, during which striking workers brought the U.S. Empire's railways to a halt from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The Coal Wars were on the horizon.

Socialists and the Working-Class Movement

We find ourselves at the end of the "long 19th Century," nine years after the revolutionary upsurge and Great Rail Strike that led to the formation and brutal repression of the proletarian St. Louis Commune. The Long Depression of 1873–1896 was in full swing. The period began with the "Panic of 1873," which saw the collapse and ruin of one of the U.S. Empire's largest banks, Jay Cooke and Co., a giant that had financed the Union during the Civil War and the Northern Pacific Railway thereafter, and the shut-down of the New York Stock Exchange for ten days. In the midst of the depression, socialist and anarchist labor agitators had found wide, sympathetic audiences among the increasingly impoverished, still-young U.S. proletariat, and labor mobilization across the country had reached a fever-pitch. Hymns for the martyrs of the defeated Paris and St. Louis Communes, the thousands of socialist workers mass-murdered by reactionary forces, were sung by demonstrators throughout the country. The clarions of socialism and political liberty had issued their call, and the people — the working-poor and oppressed — were answering in the millions.

This labor agitation came, however, with a patina of white-settler chauvinism. For instance, the 1877 "Great Uprising" in San Francisco, led by the Workingmen's Party of the United States, which nearly overturned the government in that city, was at the same time virulently Sinopho-

bic — violently hostile to recent Chinese migrants. The young, immature socialist movement in the U.S. would eventually fail to overcome the racist tendencies that predominated within it, and would collapse under the weight of its own internal contradictions. The St. Louis Commune itself had collapsed largely because the white socialists actively chose racist discrimination against their Black fellow workers over solidarity and a fighting alliance against the capitalists.

The Militants of Chicago

Socialist and anarchist veterans of the Great Railway Strike of 1877 and the St. Louis Commune moved to Chicago and, along with the existing socialists of the city, opened the *Chicagoer Arbeiter-Zeitung*, a German-language radical newspaper. Albert Parsons, Lucy Parsons' husband, founded *The Alarm* in Chicago at around the same time. The Knights of Labor, a non-socialist and fundamentally capitalist-reactionary organization, began agitating in the city in the 1880s as well. Chicago was the industrial heart of the U.S. state, and socialists of all stripes were seeded among its workers and rising from their ranks.

A battle raged inside the U.S. socialist movement, and raged with particular intensity in Chicago, over whether or not the proletariat should organize itself into militias, over whether or not it should be armed. They had all watched in 1871 as the Paris Commune was destroyed. Albert Parsons threatened that "if people try to break up our meetings... they will meet foes worthy of their steel."

One of those militants was August Vincent Theodore Spies. August left his home of Landeck, Germany in 1872. By the time he landed in New York he was well-read in German history — particularly what he saw as the social heroes of the Protestant Reformation, like Thomas Muntzer. Like many other German immigrants, Spies gravitated toward the capital of Teutonic life in the U.S.: Chicago. He settled in the North Side and began work as an upholsterer. By the end of 1875, when the city's small band of predominantly German socialists began organizing massive parades demanding bread and work, August had been introduced to the writings of Karl Marx

He watched as the city's businessmen formed a militia to defend their stores from the socialist marchers of '75. By 1877, the year of the Great Rail Strike, Spies was an avowed Marxist. He met Albert Parsons and the two worked together as union organizers and socialist agitators. When the Rail Strike broke out, it spread to Chicago. On July 25, 1877, strikers gathered to hold meetings; they were attacked by patrolmen. That night, a Burlington switchman was shot dead by the police for the crime of being a striking worker. On July 26, the following day, blue-coated police shot into a crowd of protestors at the viaduct where Halstead Street crossed 16th Street.

The police marched up Halsted Street to the Vorwärts Turner Hall at 12th Street. Inside, the members of a cabinetmaker's association were discussing the eight-hour-day question with their employers in German. Officers burst through the doors, clambered into the meeting hall, and clubbed cabinetmakers without mercy. Charles Tessman, a twenty-eight-year-old union cabinetmaker, was shot through the brain. Outside, a Chicago police sergeant fired his pistol at bystanders while his men beat cabinetmakers fleeing the hall in terror.

Having witnessed the "Battle of the Viaduct," many German workers joined the *Lehr und Wehr Verein* ("Education and Defense Society"), an armed organization of workingmen dedicated to community defense. August Spies was among them. From then on, he adhered absolutely to Marx's dictum that the proletariat must at all times be prepared for armed conflict

with the enemy state and its apparatus of oppression.

In 1881, the Supreme Court of Illinois upheld a state law banning the Lehr und Wehr Verein and all other proletarian militias. Parsons and Spies watched as the businessmen's First Regiment continued to arm itself in public and conduct drills, but the workers' self-defense groups were banned. The Bill of Rights, Parsons argued, did not protect the socialist; it protected only their sworn enemies. (It is this case, by the by, *Presser v. Illinois*, in which Herman Presser was fined \$10 for belonging to the Lehr und Wehr Verein, which formed the legal basis for all U.S. gun control until it was finally overruled in 2010. A century later, during the 1960's and 70's, the Illinois court's ruling would serve as the legal grounds for the State of California, headed by then-Governor Ronald Reagan, to disarm another Communist organization: the Black Panther Party.)

The militants within the Socialist Labor Party took control of the *Chicagoer Arbeiter-Zeitung*, a German-language socialist newspaper with a wide circulation among the organized workers, and hired August Spies as its editor. The militants held a conference in Chicago in 1881 and, tired of tepid trade-unionist reformism and its transitory, merely "paper" victories, staged a split within the SLP. The splitting faction called their new organization the Revolutionary Socialist Labor Party. Its founding principles urged the formation of communistic trade unions that would forsake the ballot and take up arms. It proclaimed it would lead "armed organizations of workingmen who stand ready with the gun to resist encroachment upon their rights."

Fight for the Eight-Hour Day

In 1886, most U.S. laborers worked 60–70 hours per week. Ten hours a day was the industry standard — and the capitalists wouldn't accept a minute less from their workers. Indeed, some firms forced their workers to maintain the grueling pace of 12- or 14-hour days for six days a week. The rallying cry of the U.S. socialist movement was the reduction of the working day to 8 hours, the working week to 40 hours, but with the same, 10-hour pay. The Eight Hour League had begun the long and bloody campaign to realize this demand in the 1860s, but had failed to secure real reforms. Although the State of Illinois passed an eight-hour law under pressure from organized labor and socialist organizations in 1866, which went into effect on May 1, 1867, the employers categorically refused to honor it, and the State refused to enforce it. The capitalists claimed this infringed on their "freedom of contract," and demanded the right to "freely contract" for longer hours. Through this "freedom of contract" "loophole," the capitalist courts saw to it that the law was reduced to a mere cipher. No firm would hire those who refused the longer hours, and the workers were forced to accept employment on the capitalists' terms. The reforms therefore represented only a paper victory for organized labor, and an inconvenience for the capitalists that was overcome with the stroke of a pen.

Chicago, the heart of the labor movement at that time, erupted into spontaneous marches and protests. The capitalists deployed the police to club them into submission. The eight-hour movement was devastated.

In October of 1884, the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions, led by Marxists and other revolutionary socialists, set May 1, 1886, as the day by which the eight-hour work day would become the standard — whether the bosses agreed or not. This time, things would be done correctly; the victory would come not from a capitalist-owned state government, but from the organized workers themselves. All across the U.S., marches would be coordinated;

there would be no spontaneous protests exposed to the batons of the urban cohorts of the capitalist police and National Guard. The U.S. labor unions began to prepare. The *Arbeiter-Zeitung* demanded the eight-hour day. "Eight hours work, eight hours rest, eight hours for what we will," was the call.

Strike!

On Saturday, May 1, 1886, nearly half a million workers across the U.S. went on strike. They called it "Emancipation Day." In Chicago herself, it was estimated that 40,000 workers left their workplaces to march, and twice as many people took to the streets to join them. The city was quiescent. Her vast skyline of smokestacks was nearly still. Factory power plants were silent, the coal slumbering peacefully in its stalls or barrels. Steamships rode at anchor, unable to take on supplies.

The workers were on strike — and not only in Chicago. All over the country, workers marched in solidarity. In New York City, they were on strike. In Detroit and in Milwaukee, they were on strike. The machines stopped whirring. The looms waited. In factories and plants all over the republic, the productive forces of Capital were frozen. The spindles and lathes, scythes and scissors, hammers and presses, that day-in and day-out had produced a continuous rattle, and continuous clink of coin for their capitalist owners, and a continuous exhaustion for their worker-operators, were now gathering dust where they stood. They were wasting away, and so was the potential for profits they contained, useless without the workers to set them into motion. If you listened closely, you could just about hear the soft sizzle of money burning.

But not at the McCormick Harvesting Machine Plant in Chicago. The Reaper Works was not idle. Its 360 foot, four-story brick face was alive with motion. The nine-room woodworking department was filled with sound. The nine-thousand square-foot blacksmith shop thundered with the labor of hammers. The foundries and the engine house: thumping away at their tasks.

Cyrus McCormick, Jr., president of the McCormick Harvester Company, was not about to be cheated out of his day's profit by any socialist balderdash. No, he would keep his factory open while all the rest were luxuriating in the cool May air. And how? Cyrus McCormick had hired scabs. This came as no surprise, since McCormick had hired Pinkerton agency mercenaries in 1885 to beat trade unionists demonstrating in Chicago's downtown streets.

In fact, at the Reaper Works there was a labor dispute still bubbling over from earlier in the year. After locking out striking molders, plant managers had sought replacements all over the midwest and issued revolvers to 82 loyal employees. They built kitchens to serve the 400 Chicago police sent to protect strikebreakers. Cyrus McCormick was ready on May 1, because he had been fighting this battle since April. As the rest of Chicago held its breath, the armed battalions at the McCormick Harvester Company simply went about another day, prepared to see the crowds gathered by the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* and the discharged unionized workforce howling on the street just outside the compound.

Nevertheless, fully half of McCormick's scabs defected to the strike, leaving their posts in the works. The strike at McCormick, begun as an isolated dispute over pay, ran right up into the general strike of Emancipation Day. As the whole city, the whole country, joined the strike, even the McCormick strikebreakers left their posts. Management, now desperate, promised an eight-hour day to the strikebreakers if they returned. They made no concessions to the locked-out strikers.

By Monday, May 3, many of Chicago's employers, reeling from a few days' lost profits, started to cave. The breweries agreed to employ only union members, limit Sunday work to three hours, and set five break periods each day. The pork and beef packers agreed to the demand to cut the working-day from ten to eight hours, but with the same day's pay.

In the morning, August Spies rushed to his printing office to put together a special strike edition of the *Arbeiter-Zeitung*. He rushed all over the city to speak to strikers. In the early afternoon, a Czech-migrant lumber leader asked him to come down to the Southwest Side to give a speech, and the obliging Spies rushed there, too. When he got there, the crowd was large but uninterested. Just behind him and down the street stood "Fort McCormick," the heavily armored and fortified Reaper Works. He was not there to rally the workers at McCormick's. While he was still speaking, the bells at the works clanged, signaling the end of the strikebreakers' workday. The McCormick strikers in the crowd wheeled away and surged toward the factory gates. Gunfire cracked and boomed from the heavily defended plant: the police had opened fire on the strikers. 200 armed officers boiled out of the Reaper Works, clubbing strikers with truncheons and shooting them at point blank range with pistols.

Spies escaped and sprinted back to the newspaper offices, where he grabbed handfuls of agitational leaflets before sprinting back into the fray.

REVENGE! Workingmen, to Arms!!! Your masters sent out their bloodhounds — the police — they killed six of your brothers at McCormick's this afternoon.... You have for years endured the most abject humiliations; you have endured the pangs of hunger and want; you have worked yourself to death; your children you have sacrificed to the factory lords... [the master sends] his bloodhounds out to shoot and kill you! ... If you are men, if you are the sons of grand sires who have shed their blood to free you, then you will rise in your might, Hercules, and destroy the hideous monster that seeks to destroy you. To arms, we call you. To arms!

Meetings of union workers and socialists were held that night to decide a response. Rather than gather the next day on Market Street, in their usual meeting place (because, as one socialist argued, this would serve as a "mouse trap" if the police attacked), the socialists decided to gather in a larger space — Haymarket Square.

4 May: Haymarket

On May 4, the strikes redoubled. Acts of rebellion erupted across Chicago. A dozen laundry girls employed at the Clifton House Hotel informed their foreman that they'd be running things. When he refused, they quit on the spot. Young women left clothing shops for the eight hour strike; at one shop, strikers removed the belt from an engine, rendering it useless. Ships were prevented from offloading at the queues by lumber shovers who refused to work unless they got their ten-hours' pay for eight hours of work.

In the Pullman company town, union workers elected a committee to present their demands to Mr. Pullman himself. The delegation was made up of cabinetmakers, tanners, finishers, carpenters, wood turners, car builders, wheelwrights, upholsterers, and common laborers. Pullman, of course, refused to receive the delegation. In response, at 7 p.m. that day, the strike committee met with all 3,000 Pullman employees in the company baseball park, and they voted to strike.

Employers across the city demanded their still-legal shopowners' militias be deployed

against the workers. At noon on the 4th, Colonel E. B. Knox, commander of the First Infantry, was warned of 6,000 strikers in the lumber district. Knox called up the National Guard and armed them. The mob never arrived — the scare was a capitalist fabrication.

The *Arbeiter-Zeitung* compositor, Adolph Fischer, added the words "Working men, arm yourselves and appear in full force," to a leaflet calling for the Haymarket meeting, even though the socialist planning committee had not suggested that workers bring guns to the rally at Haymarket. Spies demanded Fischer redraft the leaflet for fear that the words would provoke a police attack.

The rally began in the dark. The street stank of manure and rotting vegetables. A single gaslight on a lamppost guttered over the Haymarket. August Spies began the meeting saying it should be peaceable. For twenty years, he declared, workingmen had asked in vain for two hours less work each day; they'd trusted the "democratic" process, only to be betrayed by legislator "representatives" and treated with contempt by their employers. "I see Mr. Parsons is here," he said, as Albert made his way through the crowd. "He is a much abler speaker in your tongue than I am, therefore I will conclude by introducing him." Parsons climbed up on the wagons near Crane's Alley and looked out on a street that was packed with 3,000 workers.

Parsons reminded the listeners of 1877 and the words of the railroad baron Tom Scott, who said of the striking trainmen in that year: "Give them a rifle diet and see how they like that bread." He condemned the police for the outrage at the McCormick plant.

After Parsons, Samuel Fielden addressed the crowd. He warned of danger everywhere. He brought his speech to a fiery close, invoking the workers martyred in McCormick's massacre the day before. "Keep your eye on the law," he cried. "Throttle it. Kill it. Stop it. Do everything you can to wound it — to impede its progress."

A storm was blowing up. Albert Parsons suggested adjourning. Fielden said this wasn't necessary because he was about to conclude. Parsons left anyway, and so did some in the crowd. Even Fischer departed. By 10:20 p.m. only about 500 people remained at the Haymarket. Fielden finished his speech: "The Socialists are not going to declare war; but I tell you, war has been declared upon us; and I ask you to get hold of anything that will help you resist the onslaught of the enemy."

Murmurs rippled through the gathered workers. Through the gaslight, it was clear that there was a column of blue tunics and brass buttons making its way across the entire width of Desplaines Street toward the Haymarket. George Brown, a Yorkshire-born shoemaker, said that he saw "a great company of police with their revolvers drawn, rushing into the crowd which parted to make way for them." The police had decided to strike.

Their captain, William Ward, stopped his men. He shouted up to Fielden, "I command you in the name of the people of the State of Illinois to immediately and peaceably disperse."

From Fielden: "But we are peaceable." Then, after silence, "All right, we will go." He started to climb down from the wagon.

There was hissing in the air. A Union navy veteran recognized the thing now passing overhead. He shouted, "Look out. Boys, for God's sake, there is a shell!" A few men looked up. An orange flash ignited overhead, and the device detonated in the street.

The police reacted, without a second thought, by unloading a hailstorm of bullets. Although officers would later testify that the crowd had thrown the bomb and opened fire on the police, Captain Ward thought the bomb came from behind police lines. Two businessmen who later testified in the criminal trials likewise swore that no one in the crowd fired.

"Goaded by madness," the *Chicago Tribune* wrote, "the police were in the condition of mind

that permitted no resistance, and in a measure they were as dangerous as any mob of Communists, for they were blinded by passion and unable to distinguish between peaceful citizen and Nihilist assassin." According to witnesses, patrolmen "emptied their revolvers, mainly into each other."

The numbers of workers and of socialist and anarchist leaders killed went uncounted. The capitalist papers didn't care. We know that the deployed police killed seven of their fellow officers by friendly fire. We can only guess at what these rabid dogs of the capitalists inflicted on the demonstrating workers and their socialist leaders.

The state reacted to the Haymarket massacre, committed by their own shock troops — with at least seven, according to police reports, and probably far more, workingmen slain by police bullets — by arresting the editorial staff of the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* and several associated socialists and anarchists. Chicago city officials were determined from the outset to hang them; they had only to convince a stacked jury. The city coroner's inquest listed the causes of death of the officers as bomb shrapnel "aided, abetted, and encouraged" by Spies, Parsons, and Fielden. For days, detectives flushed anarchists and Marxists from cellars, conveniently "discovering" caches of weapons and dynamite as they went.

Eight men — socialist and anarchist leaders — stood accused. The trial, *Illinois v. Spies et al.*, started on June 21, 1886, and went on until August 11. The judge was openly hostile to the defendants. No union members or anyone with socialist sympathies was permitted to be seated on the jury. The jury returned eight guilty verdicts. The judge sentenced all but one man to be hanged.

Fielden received a governor's commutation to a life sentence. One man blew his own face off with a blasting cap in his cell, lingering on for six hours in brutal agony, rather than face the shame of a public hanging. On November 11, 1887, four defendants — Engel, Fischer, Parsons, and Spies — were taken to the gallows. They sang the Marseillaise — a French Republican hymn. As he stood with the noose around his neck, Spies shouted, "The time will come when our silence will be more powerful than the voices you strangle today."

May Day: International Remembrance

Solidarity with the Haymarket Massacre martyrs poured into Chicago from around the globe. In 1890, the Marxist Second International decreed May 1 "International Workers Day" in honor of the Haymarket martyrs. The 1904 sixth conference of the Second International asked all Social-Democratic parties and all labor unions in all countries to agitate for the eight-hour day on May 1. Today, International Workers Day is celebrated in some form in almost every country on earth.

Since it was established, May Day demonstrations have played a pivotal role in revolutionary history.

Bloody May 1929 marked the high point of Communist labor agitation against the corrupt bourgeois Weimar German republic. The German Communist Party, at the height of its popularity numbering over 350,000 members and millions of supporters, marched in defiance of the Social-Democratic Party government on May 1 in 1929 — and, as at Haymarket nearly fifty years before, the government unleashed its shock-troop police, and ordered them to open fire on unarmed marchers. The reformist, capitalist-captured Social-Democratic Party's repeated betrayals of the workers caused its base of support to shrink and the socialist movement to be-

come disorganized. The Nazi Party would soon use this instability to its own advantage. After the Nazis swept the German elections in 1933, the Social-Democrats capitulated and accepted fascist rule, leaving the Communists the country's lone anti-fascist party.

For the international socialist movement, May Day has been a holiday held sacred since that fateful night in 1886. Recognized by all socialist states, it has been the subject of a thousand paeans and celebrations. In the Soviet Union, May Day was a celebration of the triumphs and accomplishments of workers the world over, but particularly those working toward socialist construction.

Our monopoly-capitalist rulers in the U.S. Empire and their loyal servant politicians in its appurtenant state machinery, of course, have done their best to suppress public celebrations and public awareness of the history of May Day in this country. In the U.S. Empire, labor is "celebrated" in September, not in May — an international idiosyncrasy meant to keep us from getting any funny ideas about belonging to a global working-class movement! Officials in this country discourage marches, and there are no laws giving laborers the day off, either on May Day or on the U.S.-specific Labor Day in September. Why would there be? Our rulers won't abide May Day celebrations taking off in the same country where the tradition first took hold; their aim is, and always has been, to force us back to work, from the first May Day until this one.

But the workers of the world know that May 1 is the day of labor's emancipation. As our movement for Communism within and against the U.S. Constitutional Empire recovers from its nadir, we must all remember the socialist martyrs lost on May 1, 1886. More importantly, we must look ahead. We know, along with all the conscious workers of the world, that the victories of Capital are fleeting, while ours is the grand historical march of emancipation, the inevitable tide of total social revolution. That is what we celebrate. The sacrifices made by the brave socialist martyrs of the past, their deaths at the hands of our oppressors, are the links in the great revolutionary chain, by which we wend our way to the ultimate victory.

About Unity-Struggle-Unity Press

We are a Marxist-Leninist press based in the U.S. Empire. We are currently focused on publishing the *Red Clarion*, our mass political newspaper.

The *Clarion* can be read for free at www.clarion.unity-struggle-unity.org.

The *Clarion* will go to print for the first time in May. If your local organization is interested in partnering with our press to distribute the paper and other Communist literature, *free of charge*, to working-poor and oppressed people in your locality, then please contact us at USUEditorial@protonmail.com.

We are always looking for correspondence from comrades and readers for the *Clarion*. We welcome both articles, intended for direct publication, and letters, not intended for publication, but rather to inform our journalists of the social conditions of working-poor and oppressed communities. Please, if you have the time, write to us! Your correspondence will help to build a truly *mass* Communist paper in the U.S. and Canada.

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