

LOCAL 551 INFORMER

May Day is Our Day! It's Time We Took It Back

By Scott Houldieson

Growing up in the 1960's and 1970's May Day was always depicted as a Communist holiday. This was accentuated by TV footage from Moscow depicting parades of tanks, Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles and soldiers marching through Red Square while saluting the Communist Party leader of the day.

As you look past the Red Square parade and look around the world on May Day it becomes apparent that we've been duped. We've been fed a lie designed to make us fear Communism and keep the origins of May Day a state secret.

What are the origins of May Day?

The truth may surprise you. May Day also known as International Workers Day has its origins right here in Chicago. May 1st was chosen to commemorate the events of 1886 when workers took to the streets demanding the eight hour day and culminating in the Haymarket tragedy.

May 1, 2014 four Local 551 members, Elisa Calderon, Darius Shannon, Mike Siviwe Elliott and Scott Houldieson braved the rain and cool temperatures to attend the commemoration of a plaque on the Haymarket Memorial Statue. Each year a different labor union or workers group from around the world dedicates a plaque on the Haymarket Memorial Statue.



UAW Local 551 activists Mike Siviwe Elliott, Elisa Calderon, and Scott Houldieson strike a Solidarity pose in front of the Haymarket Monument in Chicago

In school I was taught that the Haymarket tragedy was a gathering of radical anarchists. When the police came to break them up a bomb was thrown into their midst. This narrative left plenty of facts out. Nowhere in the lesson was the fact that

workers were on strike for the eight hour day. Nowhere did the lesson say that the police moved in to break up the gathering against the orders of Chicago mayor, Carter Harrison, who issued a permit for the meeting and actually attended it.

At their convention in Chicago in 1884 the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions resolved that "eight hours shall constitute a legal day's labor from and after May 1, 1886, and that we recommend to labor organizations throughout this jurisdiction that they so direct their laws to conform to this resolution by the named time".

In Chicago, on May 1, 1886, Albert Parsons, head of the Chicago chapter of the Knights of Labor, along with his wife Lucy and two children **led 80,000 people down Michigan Avenue in support of the eight hour day.** This is widely considered to be the first ever May Day Parade.

In the days following the May 1, 1886 deadline for the eight hour day, more than **350,000 workers nationwide went on strike** at over 1,200 factories. In Chicago alone 70,000 workers were on strike in support of the eight hour day.

On May 3, 1886, August Spies, editor of the Arbeiter-Zeitung (German for Workers Newspaper), spoke to a meeting of 6,000 workers. After the meeting many of them moved down the street to confront strike-breakers at the McCormick Harvesting Machine Company's Chicago plant. The Chicago Police arrived and opened fire on the strikers, killing four and wounding scores more. The Chicago Times called the killings justified.

A protest meeting was called for the next day, May 4, 1886, at the Haymarket Square near the present day intersection of Randolph St. and DesPlaines Ave.. The protest was put together hastily. With little time to promote the meeting, there were still about 2,500 people that showed up, but the speakers were an hour late so many of the people left. The first speaker was August Spies. Spies sent a messenger to look for Parsons, Samuel Fielden, (who was Treasurer American Group faction of the International Working Person's Association and an eloquent speaker), or anyone that could help him address the meeting.

August Spies gave a brief opening presentation, then Albert Parsons spoke for over an hour. As the last speaker, Samuel Fielden, began his presentation Mayor

Harrison went to the DesPlaines Ave. Police station to tell Captain Bonfield to send his extra officers home because the meeting was about to end. Instead, Bonfield waited until he was sure the Mayor had gone home and sent the officers to disburse the meeting.

When the police arrived at the meeting there were only about 200 left in attendance. Bonfield sent the police into the crowd in a new military formation. As they advanced someone threw a dynamite bomb into the police formation. One officer was killed instantly by the bomb. The police began indiscriminately firing their weapons, and in the process killed eight more police, injuring 60. An unknown number of the crowd were killed and injured.

In the following days, the police arrested hundreds of people, but never determined the identity of the bomb thrower. The Chicago newspapers published unsubstantiated police theories of anarchist conspiracies, and published xenophobic attacks on foreign born workers. Many of the inflammatory articles called for revenge against anarchists and unionists.

Amid the calls for revenge eight prominent speakers and writers were arrested and tried for murder. They were: Adolph Fisher, who distributed fliers advertising the Haymarket Meeting, he worked for a German newspaper print shop; Albert Parsons, who gave a lengthy speech at the meeting, & was the head of the Chicago chapter of the Knights of Labor; August Spies, George Engel, who was a factory worker and union activist but he did not attend the Haymarket Meeting.

These were the four that were eventually executed on November 11, 1887. Louis Lingg was also scheduled to hang with Fisher, Parsons, Spies and Engel. Lingg escaped the gallows by taking his own life the day before the executions. He lit a blasting cap in his mouth. Lingg, a carpenter by trade, was not present at the Haymarket Meeting, but was still convicted.

These five men were considered martyrs to the workers they devoted their lives struggles to. The funeral procession began at noon on Sunday, November 13, 1887. Thousands of workers marched from home to home picking up the bodies of the martyrs.

The funeral procession went along Milwaukee Ave. to the train station with

half a million people watching. Burial was at the German Waldheim Cemetery west of Chicago in Forrest Park, Illinois.

At the cemetery their defense attorney said: "We do not stand here by the bodies of felons. There is nothing disgraceful about their deaths. They died for liberty, for the sacred right of untrammelled speech and for humanity. We are proud to have been their friends."



The monument to the Haymarket Martyrs at their final resting place in the Waldheim Cemetery in Forrest Park, IL. Today only the United States and Canada celebrate Labor Day in September, the rest of the world recognizes May 1st as Labor Day in honor of the strike for the eight hour day and martyrs Engel, Fischer, Parsons, Lingg, & Spies,

Meanwhile three men remained in prison, two on death row. Oscar Neebe was sentenced to fifteen years in prison. Neebe was the office manager for the Arbeiter-Zeitung (German for Workers Newspaper) this was the same newspaper that August Spies and Michael Schwab were editors of. Neebe was convicted despite the fact that he was not at the Haymarket Meeting. When he heard that Spies and Schwab had been arrested he took over editing duties until his arrest a couple of days later.

Michael Schwab co-editor of the Arbeiter-Zeitung, was sentenced to death along with six other Haymarket defendants. Schwab said he stopped by the Haymarket Meeting to look for Spies, when he didn't find Spies he left. He went to speak at a meeting of workers at the Deering Reaper Works at the corner of Fullerton and Clybourn Streets.

Schwab's sentence was commuted to life in prison by Illinois Governor Richard Oglesby on November 10, 1887, the day before he was to be executed. Along with Neebe and Fielden he served six years at Joliet Penitentiary before being pardoned by Illinois Governor John Peter Altgeld on June 26, 1893.

Samuel Fielden was the last speaker at the Haymarket

Meeting. He was interrupted by the police advancing. Fielden was reluctant to make a speech, but was eventually persuaded to.

Toward the end of his speech Fielden was interrupted by Chicago police who arrived headed by police captain John Bonfield who ordered the meeting to disperse. Fielden briefly protested before he stepped down from the wagon where he had spoke. That's when, someone threw a bomb which exploded in the crowd.

The presiding judge, Joseph Gray, was far from impartial. Before the trial began all twelve jurors admitted to be prejudice. Since they didn't have evidence that the defendants threw the bomb the prosecutors offered and the judge instructed the jury to adopt a conspiracy theory with no legal precedent. All were convicted, and seven of the eight were sentenced to death.

After being criticized and eventually removed from the bench for his roll in the trial Judge Gray wrote an article for the *Century* magazine. In it he proclaimed that the eight were rightfully punished. He also attacked the defense attorneys motives and said unions were agents of violence and revolution.

Sources, Encyclopedia of Chicago online, Wikipedia, Haymarket Revisited by William Adelman,