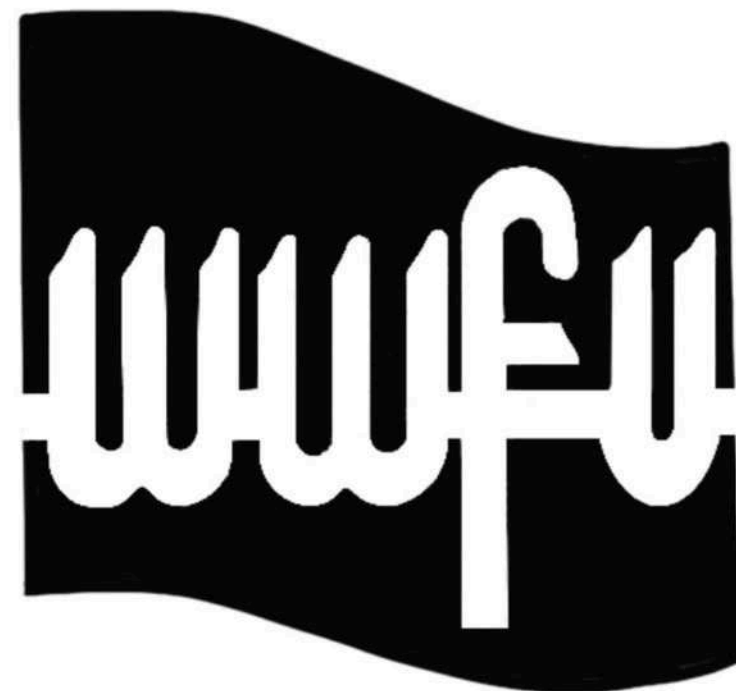
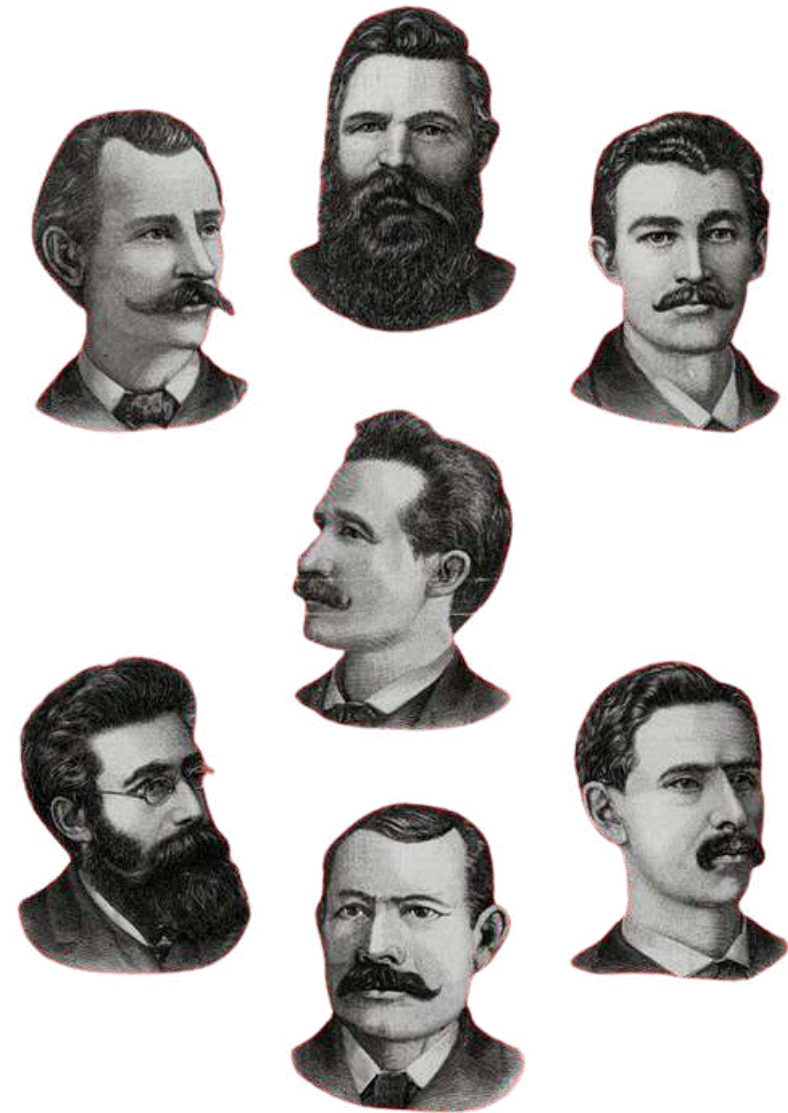
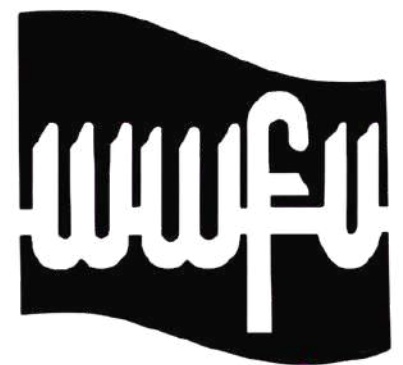


May Day, Haymarket, and the Erasure of Anarchist History



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Most people know May Day as “International Workers’ Day.” Fewer know why it exists at all.

Today, it’s often reduced to a vague celebration of labor. Parades, speeches, symbolic gestures. A holiday without teeth. But May Day was not born from abstract ideals or bureaucratic declarations. It was forged in open class conflict, through strikes, state violence, and the execution of anarchists.

To understand May Day, you have to start in Chicago, 1886.

The Conditions That Made Revolt Inevitable

Following the Civil War, particularly after the Long Depression, industrial production expanded rapidly across the United States. Chicago became one of its central hubs, powered largely by immigrant labor. Tens of thousands of immigrant workers filled factories, often as little as \$1–\$2 a day, with workweeks commonly exceeding 60 hours. (see Library of Congress labor archives).

Conditions were brutal and unstable. Workers faced constant injury, poverty wages, and the ever-present threat of being replaced. Employers enforced control through blacklisting, lockouts, strikebreakers, and the use of private security forces and spies. They also deliberately stoked ethnic divisions between workers, weaponizing anti-immigrant sentiment to fracture organizing efforts.

Mainstream newspapers aligned themselves with business interests, while labor and immigrant presses became key sites of resistance. Chicago didn’t just become a center of industry, it became a battleground over who would control it.

The Eight-Hour Movement

In the late 19th century, workers across the United States were engaged in a mass struggle for the eight-hour workday. At the time, 10–16 hour shifts were standard. The demand for “eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will” was not reformist, it was explosive.

The Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions declared that May 1st, 1886 would mark the beginning of a new standard: “Eight hours shall constitute a legal day’s labour.”

Workers took that seriously.

Figures like August Spies, editor of the anarchist newspaper *Arbeiter-Zeitung* (Workers’ Newspaper), helped organize mass meetings, print agitation materials, and turn demands into coordinated action. For them, the eight-hour fight wasn’t the end goal, it was a step toward dismantling wage labor itself. Albert Parsons, Spies, and other organizers toured factories and mass meetings, building toward a coordinated strike.

Between April 25 and May 4, workers attended a wave of marches and mass meetings across the city. On May 1st, around half a million workers struck nationwide. In Chicago alone, between 35,000 and 60,000 workers walked off the job to go on strike, while tens of thousands more flooded the streets in solidarity.

Samuel Fielden, 1847 – 1922 (pardoned)

Fielden, an English immigrant and a self-employed teamster, was shot in the knee by police during the Haymarket Massacre. The next day he was arrested and charged with conspiracy. Although he was sentenced to die, he chose to write to the governor, requesting clemency, which was granted, and he served 6 years of his life sentence before eventually being pardoned by the new governor.

During his address to the court, he recited a poem, “Revolution” by the German poet Freilegrath. He said that every intelligent German in the world had a copy of that poem on their shelf, and that: “It is not generally considered a crime among intellectual people to be a Revolutionist, but it may be made a crime if the Revolutionist happens to be poor.”

He spoke well and at great length, also mentioning that: “If my life is to be taken for advocating the principles of Socialism and Anarchy, as I have understood them and honestly believe them to be in the interests of humanity, I say to you that I gladly give it up; and the price is very small for the result that is gained.” After being released from prison, he lived quietly on a ranch with his wife for the rest of his years.

Michael Schwab, 1853 – 1898 (pardoned)

Schwab was a German immigrant, bookbinder, and helped run the anarchist newspaper Arbeiter-Zeitung. Schwab exposed the violence of wage labor itself. After being arrested and sentenced to death, he spoke his final address:

“We contend for communism and Anarchy—why? If we had kept silent, stones would have cried out. Murder was committed day by day. Children were slain, women worked to death, men killed inch by inch, and these crimes are never punished by law. The great principle underlying the present system is unpaid labor. Those who amass fortunes, build palaces, and live in luxury, are doing that by virtue of unpaid labor. Being directly or indirectly the possessors of land and machinery, they dictate their terms to the workingman. He is compelled to sell his labor cheap, or to starve. The price paid him is always far below the real value. He acts under compulsion, and they call it a free contract. This infernal state of affairs keeps him poor and ignorant; an easy prey for exploitation.” And that: “It is entirely wrong to use the word Anarchy as synonymous with violence. Violence is one thing and Anarchy another. In the present state of society violence is used on all sides, and therefore we advocated the use of violence against violence, but against violence only, as a necessary means of defense.”

Schwab wrote to the governor and his sentence was commuted to life in prison. Six years later, a new governor stepped in and pardoned him. Schwab opened a shoestore where he sold socialist books alongside the other wares, but his health never recovered from his six years in jail and he died of respiratory failure.

The massive march proceeded, led by anarchist Albert Parsons (editor of *The Alarm*, the most prominent anarchist newspaper in English at the time), his wife and fellow organizer Lucy Parsons, and their children.

Chicago became the epicenter of this movement, and anarchists were at its forefront.

Much of that anarchist movement was made up of immigrant workers, including many Germans who brought with them radical political traditions shaped by repression in Europe. Their organizing was not abstract theory, it was rooted in lived experience.

At the same time, anti-labor hysteria was inseparable from anti-immigrant racism. Anarchists were routinely depicted as foreign agitators, dangerous outsiders bringing violence and instability to American soil. This framing would become central to how the events of Haymarket were understood and weaponized.

May 3rd: The McCormick Massacre

The turning point came on May 3rd at the McCormick Harvester factory in Chicago. Rather than concede to workers' demands, the company hired scabs. That day, striking workers asked Spies to speak at a nearby meeting.

As Spies urged workers to unite and not give in to the bosses, scabs began leaving the factory. Workers then moved towards the factory gates, forcing the scabs back inside the factory. At that moment, approximately 200 police officers rushed in to protect the factory and scabs. Without warning, police attacked the crowd, beating workers with clubs and opening fire with pistols.

At least two workers were killed, some were reportedly shot in the back as they fled, and many more were wounded. Some newspapers reported the number of those killed being as high as six.

It was a message: the state would enforce the bosses' terms with violence.

The response in the press was immediate and coordinated. Newspapers cast striking workers as a violent “mob,” often placing the term “workingmen” in quotation marks to undermine their legitimacy. One New York paper described anarchism as a “villainous teaching” whose influence had led directly to bloodshed.

This marked the early formation of what would become known as the Red Scare: a moral panic in which radical labor movements were framed not as political actors, but as existential threats requiring suppression.

Shaken and enraged, Spies returned to his office to print thousands of leaflets calling on workers for a protest meeting the next day at Haymarket Square. The anarchist newspaper put out emergency leaflets and a call to action in both German and English:

“They killed the poor wretches because they, like you, had the courage to disobey the supreme will of your bosses. They killed them to show you ‘Free American Citizens’ that you must be satisfied with whatever your bosses condescend to allow you, or you will get killed. If you are men, if you are the sons of your grand sires, who have shed their blood to free you, then you will

REVENGE!

Workingmen, to Arms!!!

Your masters sent out their bloodhounds — the police — they killed six of your brothers at McCormicks this afternoon. They killed the poor wretches, because they, like you, had the courage to disobey the supreme will of your bosses. They killed them, because they dared ask for the shortening of the hours of toil. They killed them to show you, "Free American Citizens!", that you must be satisfied and contented with whatever your bosses condescend to allow you, or you will get killed!

You have for years endured the most abject humiliations; you have for years suffered unmeasurable iniquities; you have worked yourself to death; you have endured the pangs of want and hunger; your Children you have sacrificed to the factory-lords — in short: You have been miserable and obedient slave all these years: Why? To satisfy the insatiable greed, to fill the coffers of your lazy thieving master? When you ask them now to lessen your burden, he sends his bloodhounds out to shoot you, kill you!

If you are men, if you are the sons of your 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!

Your Brothers.

Rache! Rache! Arbeiter, zu den Waffen!

Arbeitendes Volk, heute Nachmittag mordeten die Bluthunde Eurer Kapitulanten 6 Eurer Brüder draussen bei McCormick's. Warum mordeten sie dieselben? Weil sie den Rath hatten, mit dem Voss unzufrieden zu sein, welches Eurer Kapitulanten ihnen befohlen haben. Sie forderten Brod, man antwortete ihnen mit Blei, eingedenk der Thatsache, daß man damit das Volk am wirksamsten zum Schweigen bringen kann! Diese, viele Jahre habt Ihr alle Demüthigungen ohne Widerspruch ertragen, habt Euch vom frühen Morgen bis zum späten Abend geschunden, habt Einbedrungen jeder Art ertragen, habt Euer Knie selbst geklopft — Alles, um die Schnitten Eurer Herren zu füllen, Alles für sie! Und jetzt, wo Ihr vor sie trittet, und sie ersucht, Euer Thun etwas zu erleichtern, da haben sie zum Dank für Euer Opfer ihre Bluthunde, die Polizei, auf Euch, um Euch mit Bleikugeln von der Unzufriedenheit zu kurtiren lassen, wir fragen und beschwören Euch bei Allem, was Euch heilig und werth ist, tödt diesen schändlichen Mord, den man heute an Euren Brüdern beging, und vielleicht morgen schon an Euch begen wird. Arbeitendes Volk, Hercules, Du bist am Scheideweg angelangt. Wofür entscheidest Du Dich? Für Sklaverei und Hunger, oder für Freiheit und Brod? Entscheidest Du Dich für das Letztere, dann stürme keinen Augenblick; dann, Volk, zu den Waffen! Vernichtung den menschlichen Bestien, die sich Deine Herrscher nennen! Rücksichtslose Vernichtung ihnen — das muß Deine Lösung sein! Denkt der Helden, deren Blut den Weg zum Fortschritt, zur Freiheit und zur Menschlichkeit gebahnt — und strebt, ihre Mühen zu werben!

Eure Brüder.

Oscar Neebe, 1850 – 1916 (pardoned)

Neebe was a German immigrant and worked with Spies as the office manager of the anarchist newspaper Arbeiter-Zeitung. He was not even present at Haymarket, and didn't learn of it until the next day when the editors of the paper were arrested.

He said that "as long as I stand I shall publish that paper," and continued publishing for several days until he himself was arrested.

Although he had the weakest evidence of all the defendants, he was sentenced to 15 years in prison anyways. In his final address to the court, he declared:

"Hang me, too; for I think it is more honorable to die suddenly than to be killed by inches. I have a family and children; and if they know their father is dead, they will bury him. They can go to the grave, and kneel down by the side of it; but they can't go to the penitentiary and see their father, who was convicted for a crime that he hasn't had anything to do with. That is all I have got to say. Your honor, I am sorry I am not to be hung with the rest of the men."

He was not hanged, and served 6 years before being pardoned by the new governor. After he was released he continued to agitate, and was instrumental in forming the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).

May 4th: The Haymarket Meeting

On May 4th, a crowd gathered at Haymarket Square. Estimates ranged from 600 to 3,000 people. The meeting was peaceful. Speakers included anarchists August Spies, Albert Parsons, and Reverend Samuel Fielden.

Chicago's mayor Carter Harrison attended and concluded that "nothing looked likely to happen to require police interference." He advised the notoriously violent police captain John Bonfield of this and suggested that the large force of police reservists waiting at the station house be sent home.

George Engel, 1836 – 1887 (hanged)

Born poor in Germany and orphaned as an early teen, Engel traveled to America and worked as a shoemaker before opening a toyshop.

50 years old at the time of his arrest, Engel, an active anarchist) wasn't even present at the Haymarket rally; he was at home playing cards.

After being sentenced to die, Engel wrote the governor refusing clemency. In the letter he wrote: “I took part in politics with the earnestness of a good citizen; but I was soon to find that the teachings of a ‘free ballot box’ are a myth and that I had again been duped. I came to the opinion that as long as workingmen are economically enslaved they cannot be politically free. It became clear to me that the working classes would never bring about a form of society guaranteeing work, bread, and a happy life by means of the ballot.” He warned the governor that by making open agitation for anarchism impossible, anarchists would turn towards bombs, that “no power on earth can rob the workingman of his knowledge of how to make bombs.”

As the noose went about his neck, George Engel cried out simply: Hoch die anarchie! (“Hurrah for Anarchy!” in German).

As the evening wore on and rain fell, the crowd dwindled. By the time Fielden was finishing his speech, only a few hundred remained.

Then, at around 10:30 PM, approximately 180 police officers, led by Captain Bonfield, marched into the square and ordered the crowd to disperse. Fielden contested: “We are peaceable.”

Moments later, a bomb was thrown into the ranks of the police, instantly killing one officer.

What followed was brutal chaos. Police opened fire into the crowd. Witnesses maintained that immediately after the bomb blast, there was an exchange of gunfire between police and demonstrators, though it remains unclear who fired first. However, many accounts, including historian Paul Avrich's, conclude that police opened fire into the crowd, reloaded, and fired again, killing at least four people and wounding dozens more.

An anonymous police official later admitted to the Chicago Tribune: “A very large number of the police were wounded by each other's revolvers. ... It was every man for himself, and while some got two or three squares away, the rest emptied their revolvers, mainly into each other.”

At least 60 officers were injured and eight were killed, some evidence suggests many by friendly fire, though it is believed that the crowd returned fire as well.

The official death toll listed four workers killed, but the real number was almost certainly higher. Many wounded civilians avoided seeking medical attention out of fear of arrest, finding aid where they could or not at all.

Repression and the Trial

In the aftermath, Chicago was placed under what amounted to a state of siege. Meeting halls, union offices, printing presses, and homes were raided. Known anarchists and socialists were rounded up. Hundreds were arrested, with reports of severe abuse and coercive interrogation, many without a connection to the events at Haymarket or even to anarchism at all.

State's Attorney Julius Grinnell openly declared:

“Make the raids first and look up the law afterwards.”

The headlines that followed revealed the beginning of the “Red scare” campaign in the US. The Chicago Tribune asked for the hanging of the strike leaders in public view.

Eight anarchists, which included prominent speakers and writers, were ultimately charged, not with throwing the bomb, but with conspiracy.

They were:

- George Engel
- Samuel Fielden
- Adolph Fischer
- Louis Lingg
- Oscar Neebe
- Albert Parsons
- Michael Schwab
- August Spies

The trial, which was widely recognized as unjust, opened on June 21st 1886 in the criminal court of Cooke County. The partisan Judge Joseph E. Gary conducted the trial, and all 12 jurors acknowledged prejudice against the defendants. At the time, jurors were typically chosen by names being drawn randomly from a box. For this trial, the state's attorney nominated a special bailiff who was appointed by the court to select the candidates. The defense was not allowed to present evidence that the special bailiff had publicly claimed: "I am managing this case and I know what I am about. These fellows are going to be hanged as certain as death".

The jury that was intentionally selected consisted largely of businessmen and their associates, along with a relative of one of the dead police officers.

No evidence was presented that any of the defendants had thrown the bomb or conspired to do so. In fact, not all of the defendants had even been present when the bomb exploded at Haymarket Square. With this in mind, the prosecutors focused on their writings and speeches, even though Mayor Harrison himself described the speeches as "tame." Parsons had even brought his two young children to the meeting in question, and still the prosecution made its position clear.

In his closing argument, Grinnell declared:

"Law is on trial. Anarchy is on trial... convict these men, make examples of them, hang them and you save our institutions, our society."

On August 19th, seven were sentenced to death. Neebe received fifteen years in prison.

This was not a trial about an act, it was a trial about an ideology.

At least 114 of 136 exhibits presented at the subsequent trial were taken from the various publications the defendants were involved with.

Execution and Aftermath

Lucy Parsons, a Mexican and possibly African anarchist organizer, and one of the most powerful revolutionary voices of her era, refused to let the state write the ending. She traveled across the country organizing, speaking, and demanding that the condemned be spared. Long after Haymarket, she would go on to help found the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), continuing her fight for militant, worker-led struggle.

Adolph Fischer, 1858 – 1887 (hanged)

Fischer was a typographer and compositor who worked on the anarchist newspaper Arbeiter-Zeitung in Chicago. He was sentenced to die by hanging.

During his last testimony in court, he said: "If I am to die on account of being an Anarchist, on account of my love for liberty, fraternity and equality, then I will not remonstrate. If death is the penalty for our love of the freedom of the human race, then I say openly I have forfeited my life; but a murderer I am not ... if the ruling class thinks that by hanging us, hanging a few Anarchists, they can crush out Anarchy, they will be badly mistaken, because the Anarchist loves his principles more than his life. An Anarchist is always ready to die for his principles; but in this case I have been charged with murder, and I am not a murderer. You will find it impossible to kill a principle, although you may take the life of men who confess these principles. The more the believers in just causes are persecuted, the quicker will their ideas be realized. For instance, in rendering such an unjust and barbarous verdict, the twelve 'honorable men' in the jury-box have done more for the furtherance of Anarchism than the convicted could have accomplished in a generation. This verdict is a death-blow against free speech, free press, and free thought in this country, and the people will be conscious of it, too."

As he was hanged, he said: "Hurrah for Anarchy! This is the happiest moment of my life!"

Louis Lingg, 1864 – 1887 (suicide)

Lingg, a German immigrant and carpenter, was only 23 when he died in his jail cell.

Lingg was not easy to arrest: when they came for him, he drew a gun and struggled against the police.

In court, he was unrepentant, admitting that he did indeed make bombs, although he had nothing to do with the Haymarket bombing. He was sentenced to die.

As part of his final statement to the court, he said: “Anarchy means no domination or authority of one man over another, yet you call that ‘disorder.’ A system which advocates no such ‘order’ as shall require the services of rogues and thieves [the police and courts] to defend it you call ‘disorder.’” He mocked the hypocrisy and perjury and irony of the court openly, and he said: “if you cannonade us, we shall dynamite you. You laugh! Perhaps you think, ‘you’ll throw no more bombs’; but let me assure you I die happy on the gallows, so confident am I that the hundreds and thousands to whom I have spoken will remember my words; and when you shall have hanged us, then—mark my words—they will do the bombthrowing! In this hope do I say to you: I despise you. I despise your order, your laws, your force-propped authority. Hang me for it!”

Later, while awaiting his death, he somehow acquired a large number of bombs, most likely for the purpose of escape for himself and the other anarchists, but these were confiscated. He was thrown into solitary, but had smuggled enough explosive to take his own life, denying the State their chance to hang him.

Even as the state closed in, the condemned continued to speak. In a letter from his cell, waiting to be hanged, Parsons wrote:

“And now to all I say: Falter not. Lay bare the inequities of capitalism; expose the slavery of law; proclaim the tyranny of government; denounce the greed, cruelty, abominations of the privileged class who riot and revel on the labor of their wage-slaves. Farewell”

After international protests and mass campaigns for their release, the death sentences of Fielden and Schwab were commuted to life in prison.

The day before Louis Lingg was set to be hanged, Lingg committed suicide in his cell, denying the State its execution.

On November 11th, 1887, Spies, Parsons, Engel, and Fischer were hanged.

Their deaths sparked massive outrage. Hundreds of thousands lined the streets for their funeral procession in Chicago. Protests erupted around the globe. The Haymarket case became an international symbol of state repression and class struggle. Figures like Emma Goldman cited it as central to their political awakening. She later described the Haymarket affair as “the events that had inspired my spiritual birth and growth.”

Six years later, Illinois Governor John Altgeld reviewed the case and issued pardons for the surviving defendants, condemning the trial as a product of “hysteria, packed juries, and a biased judge.”

The state had made martyrs, and in doing so, it transformed a local struggle into a global one.

Who Threw the Bomb?

The question has never been definitively answered, and the prosecution never needed it to be. The goal was broader: to destroy a political current that threatened the existing order.

In the years that followed, evidence and testimony raised serious questions about the origins of the bombing. Evidence later came to light that the bomb may have been thrown by a police agent working for Captain Bonfield as part of a conspiracy involving certain steel bosses to discredit the labour movement, but there was no definitive proof.

Workers at the time understood that the forces aligned against them were willing to manufacture crises to justify repression. Private security firms like the Pinkerton Detective Agency were deeply embedded in labor struggles, routinely hired to infiltrate unions, gather intelligence, and disrupt organizing, often through violence.

Albert Parsons himself argued: "The charge made by the labor papers that the monopolists were at the bottom of the Haymarket tragedy, and that the Pinkertons were employed to carry it out, supplies the key to the solution of the mystery as to who did throw that bomb."

While others within the movement rejected this theory and were confident an angry worker was responsible for the bomb, the suspicion itself reflected a broader reality: workers understood that the forces aligned against them were willing to manufacture crises to justify repression.

The Voices of the Condemned

The defendants understood exactly what was happening to them. They were not being punished for an act. They were being made into a warning.

After being sentenced to die, August Spies declared:

"If you think that by hanging us you can stamp out the labour movement... the movement from which the downtrodden millions, the millions who toil in misery and want, expect salvation — if this is your opinion, then hang us! Here you will tread on a spark, but there and there, behind you — and in front of you, and everywhere, flames blaze up. It is a subterranean fire. You cannot put it out."

His final words:

"The day will come when our silence will be more powerful than the voices you are throttling today."

And Louis Lingg, defiant to the end:

"I die happy on the gallows... so confident am I that the hundreds and thousands to whom I have spoken will remember my words... I despise your order, your laws, your force-propped authority. Hang me for it!"

They were not pleading for mercy. They were documenting repression and predicting what would come next.

From Martyrs to Holiday and Erasure

In 1889, May 1st was declared a global workers' holiday in honor of the Chicago struggle. But in the retelling, something was lost.

The official narratives that followed stripped out the anarchists who made Haymarket possible. The event was remembered, but its political edge was dulled. The martyrs were acknowledged, but their ideas were sidelined or omitted entirely. Their militancy was softened. This wasn't accidental.

By the late 19th century, anarchists had already been pushed out of many socialist organizations. Their role in mass movements, especially militant ones, was increasingly downplayed in favor of more controlled, institutional narratives. Even later historical accounts of May Day frequently erased anarchism altogether, reducing the holiday to a generalized labor commemoration rather than what it actually was: a direct product of anarchist-led struggle and state repression.

Albert Parsons, 1848 — 1887 (hanged)

Albert Parsons, American born and the son of a factory-owner but orphaned young, fought for the confederacy during the Civil War. He regretted his defense of slavery for the rest of his life, and later married Lucy Parsons (a famous anarchist in her own right). He went on to become an anti-slavery republican before eventually settling in Chicago and discovering anarchism. He worked as an orator and writer for several years and was editor of The Alarm, the most prominent anarchist newspaper in English at the time.

At first, he fled Chicago to escape capture, but later turned himself in to stand in solidarity with his comrades.

In his last letter to his wife before he was hanged, Albert wrote: "My children—well, their father had better die in the endeavor to secure their liberty and happiness than live contented in a society which condemns nine-tenths of its children to a life of wage-slavery and poverty. Bless them; I love them unspeakably, my poor helpless little ones. Ah, wife, living or dead, we are as one. For you my affection is everlasting. For the people, humanity. I cry out again and again in the doomed victim's cell: Liberty! Justice! Equality!" On the scaffold, his last words were cut short by the hangman, and he was not permitted to speak.

August Spies, 1855 - 1887 (hanged)

August Spies, a German immigrant, was an upholsterer and an editor of an anarchist daily paper, *Arbeiter-Zeitung* (“Workers’ Newspaper”).

In court, during his final address, he spoke: “I am an Anarchist. I believe with Buckle, with Paine, Jefferson, Emerson, and Spencer, and many other great thinkers of this century, that the state of castes and classes—the state where one class dominates over and lives upon the labor of another class, and calls this order—yes; I believe that this barbaric form of social organization, with its legalized plunder and murder, is doomed to die, and make room for a free society, voluntary association, or universal brotherhood, if you like. You may pronounce the sentence upon me, honorable judge, 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.” And he said: “If you think that by hanging us, you can stamp out the labor movement—the movement from which the downtrodden millions, the millions who toil and live in want and misery—the wage slaves—expect salvation—if this is your opinion, then hang us! Here you will tread upon a spark, but there, and there, and behind you and in front of you, and everywhere, flames will blaze up. It is a subterranean fire. You cannot put it out.” His last words, as he stood upon the gallows, were: “The day will come when our silence will be more powerful than the voices you strangle today!”

The result is the version of May Day most people encounter today, detached from its origins, stripped of its antagonism, made easier to absorb.

When history is sanitized, its lessons disappear with it.

The Template That Remains

The Haymarket trial helped establish a framework that has been repeated for more than a century. Movements are defined as threats. Media narratives amplify fear. Individuals are collapsed into conspiracies. Beliefs and associations become evidence. The goal is not simply conviction, it is disruption.

That framework is still in use.

In recent federal prosecutions tied to protests, including the case widely known as the Prairieland 19, prosecutors have advanced sweeping conspiracy theories that extend far beyond individual actions. Defendants who were not present at alleged acts of violence have still faced serious charges, with the government arguing that association, shared political identity, or proximity is enough to establish culpability. As in Haymarket, the focus shifts away from what any one person did and toward what a group represents.

The language has changed, but the structure has not. Where anarchists were once labeled foreign agitators, movements today are framed as extremist or terror-linked. Journalists still get blamed for inciting violence. Digital communication, group chats, social media, encrypted messaging, and even literature are introduced as evidence of conspiracy.

Surveillance has expanded accordingly. Law enforcement agencies increasingly rely on digital monitoring, facial recognition, and data aggregation to map networks of activists. The technology may be new, but the intent is not.

A Living Tradition

For anarchists especially, May Day remains a day of remembrance: a day when the state put anarchism itself on trial; when the limits of “free speech” were violently enforced; when the relationship between capital and state power was exposed without apology.

It is also a living tradition, connected to ongoing struggles, from labor organizing to migrant justice movements.

The Haymarket martyrs believed they would be remembered. They were right. Their execution did not end the movement. It helped define it.

Authorities believed the repression would crush the eight-hour struggle. Instead, it exposed the willingness of the state to criminalize dissent itself, and in doing so, gave that dissent a date, a name, and a reason to endure.

May Day was never just about labor reforms. The eight-hour demand was part of a broader challenge to wage labor and class domination. It was not a polite negotiation.

It was a confrontation. And Haymarket made one thing clear above all: the state was willing to execute people not for what they did, but for what they believed, and the movements they helped build.

Every May Day is a return to that moment. Not as nostalgia, but as a reminder of struggle, repression, and resistance. A reminder that the forces they tried to destroy did not disappear. They adapted. They spread.

And they are still here.

THE DEFENDANTS

From “Hurrah for Anarchy”