

# More stuff you missed in history class: The Haymarket Affair



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**I**n the United States, we celebrate Labor Day in September, but most of the world celebrates on May 1. Your history teacher probably didn't tell you why this is so, but I will.

In the decades following the Civil War, there was a rapid expansion of industrial production. This was the so-called "Gilded Age," an era of abject poverty and inequality as millions of immigrants poured into the United States and wealth became highly concentrated in the hands of a few men with names such as Carnegie, Rockefeller, Morgan, Vanderbilt and Stanford.

During this time, American workers averaged 60-plus hours working six-day weeks. This wealth disparity, along with precarious working and living conditions for the working classes, prompted the rise of populist movements, including the labor movement.

Employers responded with anti-union measures, such as firing and blacklisting union members; locking out workers; recruiting strikebreakers; employing spies, thugs and private security forces; and exacerbating ethnic tensions to divide the workers. Even so, membership in the Knights of Labor, which supported the eight-hour work day, grew from 70,000 in 1884 to more than 700,000 by 1886.

In October 1884, a convention held by the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions unanimously set May 1, 1886, as the date by which the eight-hour work day would become standard. As the date approached, labor unions prepared for a general strike in support of the eight-hour day.

On Saturday, May 1, 1886, hundreds of thousands of workers went on strike and rallies were held throughout the United States, with the cry, "Eight-hour day with no cut in pay." In Chicago, an estimated 40,000 workers had gone on strike, and there were perhaps twice as many people out on the streets participating in various demonstrations and marches. Tensions were high, and at a rally on May 3, striking workers were fired upon by the police; six workers were killed. Outraged by this act of police violence, local strikers called for a rally the following day at Haymarket Square, which was then a bustling commercial center near the corner of Randolph and Desplaines Streets.

**The rally began peacefully under a light rain on the evening of May 4.** Local labor leaders Albert Spies, George Engel and Albert Parsons spoke to a crowd of about 2,500 while standing in an open wagon adjacent to Haymarket Square as several hundred police officers stood nearby keeping a close watch on the strikers. As the rain fell and it became dark, the crowd dwindled.

As the last speaker was finishing, the police marched in formation toward the remaining crowd to break it up. As they advanced, a small homemade bomb was thrown toward the

police and exploded, killing one officer and wounding several others. Panic ensued on both sides and there was an exchange of gunfire between police and demonstrators.

Accounts vary widely as to who fired first and whether any of the crowd fired at the police. What is not disputed is that in less than five minutes, the square was empty except for the casualties. In his report on the incident, a police officer told 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 shots away, the rest emptied their revolvers, mainly into each other."

In all, eight policemen were killed and about 60 were wounded in the incident. The *Chicago Herald* described a scene of "wild carnage" and estimated at least 50 dead or wounded demonstrators lay in the streets.

The next day, martial law was declared, houses were entered without search warrants, labor leaders were rounded up, and union newspapers were closed down. Eventually, eight men representing a cross-section of the labor movement were selected to be tried. Among them were the speakers that day, Spies, Engel and Parsons. The two-month-long trial ranks as one of the most notorious in American history. The *Chicago Tribune* even offered to pay the jury if it found the eight men guilty.

On Aug. 20, 1886, the jury found all of the defendants guilty—seven received the death penalty; the eighth was sentenced to 15 years of hard labor. National and worldwide pressure forced the governor to change the sentences of two defendants to life imprisonment. On Nov. 11, 1887, Engel, Parsons and Spies were hanged.

The Haymarket Affair took on a worldwide dimension in July 1889 at a labor conference in Paris when May 1 was adopted as International Labor Day in memory of the Haymarket martyrs and the injustice of the Haymarket Affair. For that reason, nearly every major industrial nation recognizes May 1 as Labor Day. Ironically, in America, President Grover Cleveland was concerned that observance of Labor Day on May 1 would encourage Haymarket-style protests, so our date was set in September.

**Today, the site of Haymarket Square is a gravel parking lot.** All that commemorates this important event in labor history is a sculpture depicting the wagon used as the speakers' platform during the rally, marking the precise location where the wagon stood.



A sculpture in Chicago commemorates the Haymarket Affair.