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The International Working People's Association

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The International Working People's Association came to prominence in 1886 when August Spies, Albert Parsons, and six other leaders stood trial for the murder of policemen at Chicago's Haymarket. Until then the IWPA was hardly known outside the German-speaking districts of Chicago, Cincinnati, and other large cities, but it took a leading role in the campaign for the eight-hour day, alongside the infant American Federation of Labor and local assemblies of the Knights of Labor, the most renowned labor organization of its day.

Unlike these rivals, the IWPA wasted no time either with AFL-style union rules or with the Knights' ballot-box reforms. It made no secret of its wish to abolish the capitalist system by means of radical education and revolutionary organization, supplemented with the new "science of dynamite." Its doctrine was a patchwork of Marxist economics, Bakuninist anarchism, and the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity drawn from the French and American revolutions.

These ideas found fertile soil in the America of the Robber Barons. Boss Tweed of New York's infamous Tammany Hall set the pace in auctioning political favors to the highest bidder. National party politics became a spoils system, which reform movements like the Greenback-Labor Party were powerless to overturn. Meanwhile, unscrupulous industrialists like Jay Gould put down worker discontent by giving their striking workers a "rifle diet" while bragging they could "hire half the working class to shoot the other half."

Frustrated with the meager results of reform politics and outraged at the violent repression of the railroad strikes of 1877, small sections of the Socialistic Labor Party began to debate the Bewaffnungsftage (arming question) and to organise rifle clubs on the model of the German Lehr-und Wehr-Vereine (learning and fighting unions). While the top leadership of the SLP held fast to an electoral alliance with the Greenback-Labor Party and ordered its members out of these clubs, an infusion of German immigrants seeking refuge from Bismarck's anti-socialist laws gave an added push to the dissident SLP sections who favored arming and rejected the ballot as anything more than a forum for propaganda.

Meanwhile, a semi-secret congress of anarchists convened in London in 1881 to found the International Working People's Association, an anarchist revival of the defunct First International. This new "Black International" proved attractive to those American socialists who began calling themselves Social Revolutionaries as a sign of their rejection of capitalism and the government that supported it. With the arrival of Johann Most and his Freiheit in New York, the Social Revolutionaries got a gifted propagandist whose international fame and incendiary ideas enabled him to overshadow the parlor anarchist Benjamin Tucker, editor of Liberty, a Boston journal espousing extreme individualism. Since Most had scarcely any more influence outside the parlor, the IWPA would have re-

She was right. The vengeful Chicago businessmen like Marshall Field who insisted on carrying out the executions were never forgiven, while their victims, after the fashion of John Brown, were venerated in death as they had not been in life. Although the teachings of the anarchists on the ballot and violent revolution were rejected by most workers, their martyrdom came as a result of the class-conscious movement they had helped create. Through their prominent participation in the general strike, the anarchists won a position of undeniable importance, and when the officialdom that had opposed the strike saw to it that they were put to death, that was enough for most labor activists to conclude that the execution of a militant minority was an attack on the larger movement.

What made the Haymarket anarchists key leaders of the American movement in the 1880s is the same thing that made them heroes in the decades to come: self-sacrificing devotion to the cause of the working people. So it is only fitting that their martyrdom became one of the unifying myths that gave American workers their collective identity.

The fate of the IWPA itself was sealed by the Haymarket affair. There was a general round-up of anarchists conducted with such wanton disregard for the civilized forms of law that the Mayor of Chicago said such an operation in England would have made Victoria's throne tremble. Although The Alarm reappeared for a time, the top leadership of the organization languished in prison, sympathizers were scared off, funds were hard to come by, and by November many anarchists abandoned principle to participate in the United Labor Party campaign.

The last significant action of the IWPA was a national lecture tour by Lucy Parsons. Although small circles around Most, Tucker and others survived, anarchism lost its mass base and retreated to the company of literati and the strategy of propaganda of the deed. It was a long way from the mass strike to the brilliant speechmaking of Emma Goldman and and the lone attentat of Alexander Berkman.

The campaign to save the the Chicago anarchists drew significant support from trade unionists around the country. Unionists in New York called for mass demonstrations to prevent the executions, the American Federation of Labor resolved in favor of mercy, and Samuel Gompers joined a delegation to Illinois Governor Oglesby to make a last-minute appeal. But the main task of organizing the defense was taken up by socialists. Careful to distinguish their doctrines from the anarchists, Socialistic Labor Party sections sponsored rallies and agitated in central labor unions. They sponsored an American tour of Wilhelm Liebknecht, Eleanor Marx, and her husband Edward Aveling in the fall of 1886. In their report of this tour, The Working-Class Movement in America, Eleanor Marx wrote, "Should these men be murdered, we may say of their executioners what my father said of those who massacred the people of Paris, 'They are already nailed to that eternal pillory from which all the prayers of their priests will not avail to redeem them."'

mained an isolated anarchist sect were it not for labor agitators like Parsons and Spies.

These Chicago radicals were as much at home addressing a crowd of strikers outside Cyrus McCormick's factory gates as they were drafting a revolutionary manifesto. They joined forces with Most at the Pittsburgh Congress of the IWPA in 1883, putting the organization on a solid footing and giving it a revolutionary program, the "Pittsburgh Manifesto."

However, to Most's consternation, the Chicago radicals set about organizing trade unions. Meeting success among skilled workers hard-pressed by mechanization, they helped organize unions of cigarmakers, cabinetmakers, and metalworkers, among others, and brought them one by one into a new Chicago Central Labor Union, which soon surpassed the older Amalgamated Trades and Labor Assembly. They believed in unionism as both the means to the future socialist society and the living example of what a truly co-operative commonwealth would be like. In this, they anticipated syndicalist philosophy and the revolutionary unionism of the Industrial Workers of the World.

Whatever their differences over trade unionism, all elements of the IWPA were united in their contempt for the limited results of electoral politics. Through the columns of The Alarm, Freiheit, and the Arbeiter-Zeitung, they rarely lost an opportunity to shower scorn on civil service reform, tariff reduction, and other piecemeal changes, mocking the ballot as "that sum total of all humbugs!" This undeniably kept them free of middle-class manipulation and temptations of the spoils system, but it also undoubtedly cost them the support of many workers who regarded the ballot as nothing less than a sacred trust.

The same is true of their unflinching acceptance of the tactic of physical force. Although the individual right to bear arms and vigilantism were time-honored American traditions, armed resistance to legal authority did not strike so responsive a chord. Thus the social revolutionaries put themselves out on a limb with rhetorical

provocations like Lucy Parsons' notorious advice to tramps-"learn the use of dynamite!" In a similar vein, The Alarm drew the lesson from a violent miners' strike in Ohio's Hocking Valley that workers would no longer rely upon passive resistance: "Force, and force only, can liberate them from the despotic rule of a lot of miserable, fiendish loafers, and they are going to use it!" In their defense, Social Revolutionaries believed they were only giving as good as they got. Pinkertons, Coal and Iron Police, and the state militias proved on numerous occasions that they did, indeed, know how to dish out a "rifle diet."

Recognizing the unpopularity of their views serves to make their prominence in the struggles of the 1880s all the more significant. For they assuredly made a contribution second to none to the great Eight-Hour strike, particularly in the storm center of Chicago. Initially, the IWPA was as strongly opposed to the eight-hour agitation as Terence Powderly, reform-minded head of the Knights of Labor (though, of course, for the opposite reason). At the onset of depression in 1884, the IWPA solution to the problem of unemployment was to organize the unemployed, supplemented by Lucy Parsons' celebrated advice to tramps. Chicago anarchists used their influence in trade unions to detach them from hours and wages demands, and as late as October, 1885, referred to eighthour devotees as "our more backward brethren." Not surprisingly, New Yorkers behind Most were unswerving in their denunciation of palliative measures.

But as the eight-hour fire spread some sections had second thoughts, and after further work with the unemployed, including a mock Thanksgiving Day parade of tramps, the circle around Lucy and Albert Parsons decided to try and catch up to the mass movement. Trade union anarchists in Cincinnati and St. Louis were embarking on the same course.

This change of heart among the Social Revolutionaries was vital to the cause. They contributed their considerable propaganda and agitation skills, not insignificant in a movement whose energy

came from a torrent of handbills, newspaper articles, mass rallies, inspiring speeches, and angry marches. These tactics produced a rally of some 25,000 people in Chicago the week before May 1, at which Albert Parsons set the eight-hours question in the context of class struggle. Repeating a formula popularized by the Eight Hour League, he divided the working day into two parts: one when the worker created value equivalent to his cost of living, the other when he created the boss's profits. Therefore, Parsons went on, "Reduced hours would melt the wages or profit system out of existence and usher in the cooperative or free-labor system." Of course he hastened to add that the change was not going to be peaceful: "The capitalists of the world will force the workers into armed rebellion."

The fruit of these agitations ripened the first week in May. Contemporary estimates made by Bradstreet's and subsequent investigations conducted by the Bureau of Labor concur that something on the order of 200,000 workers struck for a shorter day. While most intense in the fast-growing industrial cities of the middle west-Chicago contributed the largest contingent (80,000) and Cincinnati, Milwaukee and St. Louis were quite active-the strikes also hit the Mid-Atlantic coast. A generation of German and Irish immigrants just coming into its own combined forces with Yankee supporters. Red and black flags mingled with red, white and blue. And the sum of these was the general strike, the single most important American contribution to the international workers' movement in the decade.

It is in the nature of the insurrectionary temper that it can not long sustain itself. When it fails to achieve immediate revolutionary objectives, disappointed hopes quickly turn to bitterness and cynicism. It blazes forth brilliantly, and then is gone. Such was the meteoric course followed by the IWPA. As the general strike disintegrated into a collection of local skirmishes, the conditions that enabled a handful of militants to play a vanguard role vanished, affected in some measure by the rise in employment levels.