

The International

Albert Parsons

4 April 1885

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Precursors of Syndicalism

The first instalment of *Precursors of Syndicalism* (ASR No. 75, Winter 2019) sketched the rise of syndicalist ideas within the First International. Championed by Bakunin, the idea of the International as a militant union for economic struggle was the majority trend within it and Marx preferred to destroy the organisation when it did not endorse his position of transforming it into parties pursuing political action.

Syndicalist ideas reappeared in America in 1883, with the creation of the International Working Peoples' Association (IWPA). Created by former Marxists who had come to reject political action in favour of direct action, its legacy was secured in the fight for the Eight Hour Day which started on the 1st of May 1886 and the bombing of a squad of policemen who were breaking up a peaceful IWPA rally on the 4th called to protest the killing of picketers the day before. After a red scare, eight anarchist militants were arrested and given a kangaroo trail, resulting in three imprisoned and five sentenced to death. Louis Lingg committed suicide in prison, while Albert Parsons, August Spies, Adolph Fischer and George Engel mounted the gallows in spite of international protest.

In 1893, Illinois Governor John Peter Altgeld signed pardons for the imprisoned anarchists – Samuel Fielden, Michael Schwab, Oscar Neebe – recognising them as victims of “hysteria, packed juries, and a biased judge” and noting that the state “has never discovered who it was that threw the bomb which killed the policeman, and the evidence does not show any connection whatsoever between the defendants and the man who threw it.” He also faulted the city of Chicago for failing to hold Pinkerton guards responsible for repeated use of lethal violence against striking workers.

The commemoration of the Chicago Martyrs on the anniversary of their judicial murder on November 11th became an International custom in anarchist circles. As Kropotkin put it at one such meeting: “Were not our Chicago Comrades right in despising politics, and saying the struggle against robbery must be carried on in the workshop and the street, by deeds not words?” (“The Chicago Anniversary,” *Freedom*, December 1891) Like Bakunin, the Chicago Anarchists held, to quote Lucy Parsons, “that the granges, trade-unions, Knights of Labor assemblies, etc., are the embryonic groups of the ideal anarchistic society.” (“Lucy E. Parsons on Anarchy”, Albert Parsons (ed.) *Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Scientific Basis* [Honolulu: University of the Pacific, 2003], 110)

As with the syndicalists, the Internationalists rejected the ballot-box and embraced direct economic struggle, arguing that the groupings workers formed in the fight against exploitation would be the basis for ending it by workers control of production. They summarised their position towards the end of the manifesto agreed at the IWPA Pittsburgh Congress in 1883:

“First: Destruction of the existing class rule, by all means, i.e., by energetic, relentless, revolutionary, and international action.

“Second: Establishment of a free society based upon co-operative organisation of production.

“Third: Free exchange of equivalent products by and between the productive organisations without commerce and profit-mongery.

“*Fourth*: Organisation of education on a secular, scientific, and equal basis for both sexes.

“*Fifth*: Equal rights for all without distinction to sex or race.

“*Sixth*: Regulation of all public affairs by free contracts between the autonomous (independent) communes and associations, resting on a federalistic basis.” (*Anarchism*, 78)

This free society would be based on “the decentralisation of power” with “no political parties, no capitalism, no rings, no kings, no statesmen and no rulers” for “[a]ll political power must necessarily become despotic, because all government tends to become centralised in the hands of the few, who breed corruption among themselves, and in a very short time disconnect themselves from the body of the people.” (Lucy Parsons, *Anarchism*, 110–1) In short, the federal socialism which has been the aim of anarchism since Proudhon using the tactics advocated by anarchists since Bakunin. As one historian correctly summarised:

“The ‘Chicago idea,’ in its essential outlines, anticipated by some twenty years the doctrine of anarcho-syndicalism, which, in a similar way, rejected centralized authority, disdained political action, and made the union the center of revolutionary struggle as well as the nucleus of the future society. [...] This is not to say, however, that anarcho-syndicalism originated with Parsons and his associates. As early as the 1860s and 1870s the followers of Proudhon and Bakunin were proposing the formation of workers’ councils designed both as a weapon of class struggle against the capitalists and as the structural basis for the libertarian millennium. A free federation of labor unions, Bakunin had written, would form ‘the living germs of the new social order, which is to replace the bourgeois world.’” (Paul Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984], 73)

It should be sufficient to leave it here, but sadly not. Since the 1970s there has been a tendency to suggest that the Chicago Anarchists were not, in fact, anarchists. This seems to have started in 1976 with Carolyn Ashbaugh’s biography *Lucy Parsons: American Revolutionary* (recently reprinted by Haymarket Books) which proclaimed that she, like the other Chicago Internationalists, were syndicalists rather than anarchists (that this simply expressed a shocking lack of understanding of anarchism has previously been shown in “Lucy Parsons: Anarchist Anarchist” [ASR No. 60, Summer 2013]). This was followed by Bruce Nelson’s *Beyond the Martyrs: a social history of Chicago’s anarchists, 1870–1900* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988) which suggested this “was not an evolution from socialism to anarchism but from republicanism, through electoral socialism, to revolutionary socialism.” (171) More recently, Staughton Lynd and Andrej Grubacic at least claimed they had created a “synthesis between anarchism and Marxism.” (*Wobblies and Zapatistas: Conversations on Anarchism, Marxism and Radical History* [Oakland: PM Press, 2008], 11)

The latter base their claims on the historian James Green who suggested that the Chicago Anarchists had “turned away from electoral competition and adopted Karl Marx’s strategy of organising workers [...] building class-conscious Trade Unions as a basis for future political action.” They “faithfully adhered to the lesson they had learned from Karl Marx: that socialism could be achieved only through the collective power of workers organised into aggressive Trade Unions.”

Thus the “Internationals of Chicago invented a peculiar, in some ways, American brand of revolutionary socialism they called anarchism.” (*Death in the Haymarket: A Story of Chicago, the First Labor Movement and the Bombing That Divided Gilded Age America* [Anchor Books, 2007], 50, 130, 131)

There are a few problems with this.

The first, and most obvious, problem is that Marx advocated no such thing. Yes, Marx supported unions but he did not think the workers movements should be limited to, or even based on, them. Instead, he argued for the creation of workers’ parties and the use of “political action” in the shape of standing for elections. Indeed, in 1870 he explicitly mocked Bakunin’s programme for advocating the ideas Green proclaims as Marx’s:

“The working class must not occupy itself with *politics*. They must only organise themselves by trade-unions. One fine day, by means of the *Internationale* they will supplant the place of all existing states.” (Marx, Engels, Lenin, *Anarchism, and Anarcho-Syndicalism* [Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974], 48)

Here are all the elements the historians use to proclaim the Chicago Anarchists anything other than anarchists – the dismissal of electioneering, the embrace of economic struggle, unions replacing the state – and all are rejected. Can we expect Green to have known that? Yes, for he is discussing anarchists and expressly comparing their ideas to Marx. Yet he was a historian, surely Marxists would know better? There is a long, long history of Marxist attacks on syndicalism – social-democratic and Leninist – which echo Marx’s attack on Bakunin, namely that it ignores the necessity for *political* organisation (workers’ parties) and *political* action (electioneering). Sadly, no:

“The ‘anarchism’ that Spies, Parsons, and their comrades espoused had little in common with the ‘anarchism’ of Karl Marx’s political opponent, Michael Bakunin, but was more akin to a revolutionary socialist vision of a new society that would replace capitalism.’ (Patrick M. Quinn, “James Green’s Death in the Haymarket,” *Against the Current*, November/December 2006)

This brings us to the second issue, namely that Green makes no attempt to define anarchism nor any real mention of the political ideas of the Chicago Internationalists. This makes evaluating his claims difficult for the average reader, which means they will draw their own conclusions on what constitutes anarchism and what anarchists believe. Given the popular image, almost all will agree with Green when he seems to imply it is throwing dynamite as the sole tactic for social change – a few violent actions and some violent rhetoric is remembered, unlike the much more violent rhetoric and actual violence of the business class and its state. That Bakunin never advocated individual terror is as irrelevant as his actual syndicalism. Equally, it would remiss not to note that the Chicago Anarchists killed no one, unlike the Pinkerton and state forces which regularly killed strikers – indeed, it was this need for self-defence which contributed to the dynamite rhetoric which so many equate to their anarchism.

Green does not even provide the six-point conclusion of the Pittsburgh Manifesto which, with its federalism, is hardly Marxist. Likewise, the IWPA was as decentralised and federalist as the socialist society it sought to create, a position much at odds with Marxist orthodoxy. A federal

militant union International was what Bakunin advocated and what Marx opposed in favour of a centralised International based on political parties. At least he quotes from Pittsburgh Manifesto, for he does not even mention Albert Parson's book *Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Scientific Basis*. Parsons included articles by Peter Kropotkin, Élisée Reclus and Dyer Lum on anarchism. This, in itself, suggests a clear awareness by Parsons of what the term meant and that his use of Anarchist was neither invented nor used in ignorance. Yes, Parson did include in his book an analysis of wage-labour by quoting Marx. However, this analysis was one most anarchists then – as now – would agree with: labour is exploited by capital, the surplus-value produced by the many is appropriated by the few. Bakunin praised Marx's economic analysis and attacked him not on the critique of capitalism nor the goal of a socialist society but rather the *means* advocated: political action and seizing state power.

While Nelson warned that this subject “should not be approached with twentieth-century labels,” (153) he like the others did so. All these historians show an unawareness of anarchism is a branch of socialism and as expressed by Kropotkin in the work Parsons included in his book. Thus anarchism is “the no-government system of socialism” and “private ownership of land, capital, and machinery has had its time; that it is condemned to disappear; and that all requisites for production must, and will, become the common property of society, and be managed in common by the producers of wealth” with “a complete negation of the wage-system.” (“The Scientific Basis of Anarchism,” *Anarchism*, 111) Like the Chicago Anarchists, Bakunin called himself a revolutionary socialist, as did Kropotkin who also happily used the term communist. The issue between the two schools of socialism was, as the Chicago Anarchists repeatedly explained, the State and in this they echoed Proudhon:

“Louis Blanc represents governmental socialism, revolution by power, as I represent democratic socialism, revolution by the people. An abyss exists between us.” (*Les Confessions d'un révolutionnaire* [Garnier: Paris 1851], 177)

The idea that “socialism” or “communism” referred purely to Marxism is of recent origin, one favoured and encouraged by Marxists themselves. Similarly, the notion that anarchism was – or is – solely concerned with the state is simply untenable once you move from the dictionary or general accounts of anarchism like the one Green utilised (James Joll's *The Anarchists*) to actual anarchist writings and movements. Thus Green's comments that the Chicago Internationalists “thought of themselves as socialists of the anarchist type – that is, as revolutionaries who believed in liberating society from all state control, whether capitalist or socialist” (129) – would apply to *all* anarchists, even those who eschewed insurrection and the violent rhetoric of the IWPA. As anarchists were and are socialists, aiming for an anti-state, federal, self-managed socialism, Green comments are confused, at best. As Adolph Fischer put it:

“A number of persons claim, that an anarchist cannot be a socialist, and a socialist not an anarchist. This is wrong [...] every anarchist is a socialist but every socialist is not necessarily an anarchist.” (*Anarchism*, 78)

So to suggest Parsons, Spies, etc. were Marxists when they had come to the same conclusions as that of his political opponent in the First International, Bakunin, which Marx had so furiously attacked and combatted is simply wrong. It should also be noted that while some Marxists claim the Chicago Anarchists as their own, Marxists at the time did not. Green makes no mention that

Marx's daughter Eleanor expressed the opinion "that we are not Anarchists, but are opposed to Anarchism [...] strengthens our position in asking justice for the condemned men." ("The Chicago Anarchists," *To-day*, November 1887) Engels said nothing about the events publically beyond signing a petition for clemency, a somewhat strange position to take if they were Marxists (in private letters, on the very few occasions he refers to them at all, he never suggests they were anything other than anarchists).

In short, someone can draw the exact same conclusions as Bakunin did and which Marx explicitly and repeatedly denounced yet be denied the anarchist label. Is it too much to ask historians writing on a subject to gain *some* understanding of the politics involved before putting pen to paper? As for the Marxists who make the claim, suffice to say it is a strange admiration which suggests the Martyrs had no idea what the word on their lips when they died meant.

The Chicago Internationalists called themselves anarchists for a reason. They underwent an evolution from political socialism to anti-political socialism, from Marxism to revolutionary Anarchism. This can be seen by the writings of later anarchists. Emma Goldman – regardless of what Ashbaugh and a host of Leninist regurgitators assert – advocated syndicalism and noted "that in this country five men had to pay with their lives because they advocated Syndicalist methods as the most effective, in the struggle of labor against capital" (*Syndicalism: the Modern Menace to Capitalism*). On the twenty-first anniversary of the Chicago events, her *Mother Earth* argued as follows:

"Bitter experience has gradually forced upon organized labor the realization that it is difficult, if not impossible, for isolated unions and trades to successfully wage war against organized capital; for capital is organized, into national as well as international bodies, co-operating in their exploitation and oppression of labor. To be successful, therefore, modern strikes must constantly assume ever larger proportions, involving the solidaric co-operation of all the branches of an affected industry – an idea gradually gaining recognition in the trades unions. This explains the occurrence of sympathetic strikes, in which men in related industries cease work in brotherly co-operation with their striking bothers – evidences of solidarity so terrifying to the capitalistic class.

"Solidaric strikes do not represent the battle of an isolated union or trade with an individual capitalist or group of capitalists; they are the war of the proletariat class with its organized enemy, the capitalist regime. The solidaric strike is the prologue of the General Strike.

"The modern worker has ceased to be the slave of the individual capitalist; to-day, the capitalist *class* is his master. However great his occasional victories on the economic field, he still remains a wage slave. It is, therefore, not sufficient for labor unions to strive to merely lessen the pressure of the capitalistic heel; progressive workingmen's organizations can have but one worthy object – to achieve their full economic stature by complete emancipation from wage slavery.

"That is the true mission of trades unions. They bear the germs of a potential social revolution; aye, more – they are the factors that will fashion the system of production and distribution in the coming free society." ("The First May and the General Strike," *Mother Earth*, May 1907)

Given the all-too-common Marxist myth that Goldman was some kind of “lifestylist” libertarian who was unaware of the class nature of society and the need for class struggle, it is worth noting that her actual position was well-known at the time as can be seen by leading British Syndicalist Tom Mann’s comments that her journal had “[f]or nine years [...] voiced in clear terms the necessity for ‘working class solidarity,’ ‘direct action in all industrial affairs’ and ‘free association.’ I subscribe to each of these with heart and mind [...] I am the more grateful to the editor and conductors of *Mother Earth* for labouring so thoroughly to popularise principles calculated, as I believe, to emancipate mankind, intellectually and economically.” (“*Mother Earth* and Labour’s Revolt,” *Mother Earth*, March 1915)

Once we know the actual politics of revolutionary anarchism, we see how wrong Nelson was to suggest that if Kropotkin and Bakunin “epitomized nineteenth century anarchism” and “immigrant anarchism [is identified] with Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, then the membership of Chicago’s IWPA was not anarchist” (171, 153) His account, like that of Ashbaugh and Green, may contain useful research but sadly within a context so flawed that many, even most, of the conclusions have to be dismissed or, at best, taken with copious caveats and corrections. Otherwise we would have to conclude that Emma Goldman, Alexander Berkman and Peter Kropotkin along with Lucy Parsons and the Chicago Martyrs did not understand what anarchism is...

We end with Albert Parsons’ article on the IWPA’s position on unions from the English-language IWPA paper *The Alarm* on 4th of April 1885. While extracts have been included by many writers, including Dave Roediger in an article entitled “Albert R. Parsons: The Anarchist as Trade Unionist” in *Haymarket Scrapbook* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1986), this is the first time as far as we are aware that it has appeared in full since originally published.

The International

The Alarm, 4 April 1885

If it be true as lately asserted by many, that the communist anarchists known as the (Black) International, have decided upon a vigorous warfare against Trades Unions as an important branch of their tactics, it is much to be regretted. Such a course of action would not only be economically unsound but is suicidal as well – *Labor Enquirer*

The ALARM takes pleasure in setting its contemporary, from whose columns the above extract is taken, right on the attitude of the International Working Peoples’ Association towards Trades unions. We have ourselves observed paragraphs of a similar nature floating around through the labour press, and we gladly avail ourselves of this opportunity to answer the charge. The Communist Anarchists or Internationalists, as our organisation is alternatively called, have on some occasions found it necessary to criticise adversely the tactics, propaganda and aims of some Trades unions. In Chicago, not long since, the Trades assembly was challenged to a “joint debate” upon the subject of the relations of capital and labour, and the most practical method to achieve labour’s economic emancipation, the International holding adverse views to those of the Trades assembly. These facts taken together have, with the aid of ignorant or designing leaders, who seem to be actuated in the matter by a desire for “place and fame,” been taken up and an attempt made to create a false impression with regard to the International.

However, in order to place the matter fairly before our contemporaries of the Trades Unions it will be necessary to publish in this connection the action of the Pittsburgh Congress held in October 1883, where the following resolution was adopted as the official declaration of the International upon that subject, viz:

WHEREAS. We view in Trades Unions based upon progressive principles, the abolition of the wages system, the cornerstone of a better societal structure than the present one, and

WHEREAS. Furthermore, these Trades Unions are an army of despoiled and disinherited brothers, who are destined to overthrow the present economic system for the purpose of free universal co-operation, be it

Resolved. That we, the International Working Peoples' Association, extend to them our brotherhood and our aid in their struggle against the ever-growing despotism of private capital, and

Resolved. That while we are in full sympathy with such progressive unions, we will attack and seek to destroy all those organisations who stand upon reactionary principles, since they are the enemies of the cause of labour's emancipation and a detriment to humanity and progress.

The International recognises in the Trades Unions the embryonic group of the future "free society." Every Trades Union is, *nolens volens* [whether willing or not], an autonomous commune in the process of incubation. The Trades Union is a necessity of capitalistic production, and will yet take its place by superseding it under the system of universal free co-operation. No, friends, it is not the unions but the methods which some of them employ, with which the International finds fault, and as indifferently as it may be considered by some, the development of capitalism is hastening the day when all Trades Unions and Anarchists will of necessity become one and the same.

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