Critical Thoughts on the Erasure of Anarchist History from May Day Celebrations and How this Relates to a Critique of "Left-Unity."

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This past International Workers Day, otherwise known as May Day, I attended my local rally. The same old May Day groups were in attendance, Party for Socialist Liberation (PSL), Communist Party USA (CPUSA), Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), and a couple other single issue labor groups. The endless tedium of speeches aside, something strange stood out to me. Every group called for left unity in some way or another. "Unite as workers to crush capitalism," was the exact quote from the young man in running shoes, jeans, and a bright red PSL shirt. I could have spoken up and made a scene, again, but I feel it is more effective to broadly address why this call for left unity is absurd especially considering the Marxist historical revisionism surrounding May Day. The success of May Day was directly because of the anarchist Haymarket Martyrs and the Marxist attempt to ignore this fact is one of the many reasons why left unity is never in the best interest of anarchists.

Before we begin, it is important to go over the events of the Haymarket uprising on May 4th, 1886. The first May Day was called for by the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions (FOTLU) as the official first day the eight-hour workday in 1886. On May 1st 1886, between 30,000 and 80,000 laborers in Chicago refused to work in support of the eight hour day, which shut down the industrial zones. August Spies, a German-born anarchist and leading contributor to the newspaper *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, was enthused by the unity and relative success of the eight-hour fight.[1] The McCormick Reaper Works' solution, instead of meeting the demands of the workers, was to hire scabs. On May 3rd, 1886, striking workers from the McCormick Plant asked Spies to come down to the Southwest side of Chicago and give a speech to bolster morale. Minutes into Spies speech, the scabs began filing out of the plant and the McCormick strikers rushed to the gates of the factory. To protect the business and scabs, 200 police officers rushed in and beat the strikers with clubs and shot them with pistols. According to Spies, 6 strikers were killed including those that were shot in the back as they fled. Spies knew that the battle had been lost and returned to his newspaper office with the sound of screams and pistol fire still ringing in his ear.

[1] August Spies, "The Dies are Cast!"*Arbeiter-Zeitung* (May 1, 1886)

That night, August Spies rushed into print several thousand leaflets urging workingmen to come to a meeting the next day, May 4th, at Haymarket Square.[2] The next day, the anarchists August Spies, Albert Parsons, and the Rev. Samuel Fielden spoke to a crowd estimated variously between 600 and 3,000. At around 10:30 PM as Fielden spoke, the police showed up despite the peaceful nature of the crowd. As they ordered the crowd to disperse, a bomb was thrown into the advancing officers, killing 6. The Police then opened fire on the anarchists killing 4 and some of the anarchists returned fire killing another police officer. The Police argued it was a conspiracy and eight influential anarchists were arrested, including Spies and Parsons, who were not present but had significant influence in the community. On November 11th 1887, 4 convicted anarchists including Spices, Parsons, Adolph Fischer, and George Engle were hanged. The state executions further enraged the broader community and would be the catalyst for the International Workers Day.

The Haymarket Uprising was internationally significant. During the funeral procession for the anarchists in Chicago, the historian Philip Foner estimates, between 150,000 and 500,000 people lined the streets in support. Both the American Federation of Labor and the Knights of Labor, although initially reluctant, supported the slain anarchists as heroes of labor. The Knights of Labor even published the autobiographies of Parsons, Spies, Fischer, Engle, and the anarchist who killed himself in prison, Oscar Neebe.[3] The London *Freedom* group argued "No event in the worldwide evolution of the struggle between socialism and the existing order of society has been so important, so significant, as the tragedy of Chicago."[4] According to the historian Paul Avrich, pamphlets and articles about the case and autobiographies of the martyrs appeared in every language across the world. In Europe, over twenty-four cities boasted sizeable protests in support of the Haymarket Martyrs.[5] Famous anarchists like Emma Goldman, Alexander Berkman, and Ricardo Flores Magón all attribute the Haymarket uprising to their radicalization. Moreover, it was not only Europe that celebrated the Haymarket Martyrs. *The Times* of London reported protests in Cuba, Peru, and Chile.[6] Mary Harris "Mother" Jones was in Mexico on May Day, 1921, and wrote that their May Day was expressly in honor of "the killing of the workers in Chicago for demanding the eight-hour day."[7] More to this point, during a trip to Mexico in 1939, Oscar Neebe's grandson was shown a mural by Diego Rivera in the Palace of Justice depicting the Haymarket Martyrs.[8] The international significance of the Haymarket Martyrs was undeniable in the hearts and imagination of all of the Left and is a significant element in the success of May Day.

The success of May Day internationally is thanks to the slain anarchists yet Marxist leadership intentionally omitted the significance of the Haymarket Martyrs to further purge anarchism from the historical record. In 1889, just a few years after the execution, the Marxist International Socialist Congress, who would later form the "Second International," chose May 1st to celebrate international workers. However, nowhere in the Second International's proclamation was the

[2] August Spies, "Revenge," *Arbeiter-Zeitung* (May 3, 1886)

[3] Philip Foner, "Editor's Intro" in *The Haymarket Autobiographies* ed. Philip Foner (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 12.

[4] Paul Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 436.

[5] Philip Foner, *May Day* (New York, NY: International Publishers, 1986), 45-46.

[6] Foner, *May Day*, 45-46.

[7] Dave Roediger, "Mother Jones & Haymarket", in *Haymarket Scrapbook* ed. Franklin Rosemont, David Roediger (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2011), 213.

[8] Paul Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 436.

slightest mention of anarchism or the Haymarket Martyrs' sacrifice for the eight-hour workday. The historian Philip Foner in 1969 therefore needed to write an entire book to remind the reader that other than pushing for the eight-hour workday, the secondary purpose of the establishment of International Workers Day on May 1st was to honor the Haymarket Martyrs. He argues "there is little doubt that everyone associated with the resolution passed by the Paris Congress knew of the May 1st demonstrations and strikes for the eight-hour day in 1886 in the United States … and the events associated with the Haymarket tragedy."[9]

This slight against anarchists should come as no surprise considering the Second International broke with the First International Workingmen's Association to exclude anarchists. The few anarchist members that refused to leave the Second International were barred from contributing. Member William Morris reveals, "expressions of anarchist ideas were often shouted down, and in one incident Francesco Saverio Merlino faced violence from the other delegates."[10] The later Soviets were no stranger to historical revisionism either. Whether it is Stalin painting himself into pictures alongside Lenin or more typically painting out figures, like Trotsky, from the historical narrative. Famous member of the Communist Party USA's central committee and founder of International Publishing, Alexander Trachtenberg, published the definitive "History of May Day" in 1932 and did not mention the word anarchism once.[11] Therefore, the Marxists of the Second international developed the May Day holiday to appropriate the international success of the anarchist Haymarket martyrs, while actively excluding anarchist thought from their sphere of influence.

Rosa Luxemburg also actively excluded mentioning the Haymarket Martyrs, which prominent Social Democrat publications like *Jacobin* choose to publish to further marginalize anarchist ideas. In 2016, *Jacobin* magazine published Luxemburg's "What are the Origins of May Day." In this article, Luxemburg argued that in 1856, the Australian workers call for complete work stoppages in support for the 8-hour workday influenced the American and then International development of May Day.[12] She claims that the Australians call to action was the primary source of inspiration for The International Workers Congress in 1890. While this is most likely true, she does not mention anarchists at all in her story. Not only did Luxemburg choose to ignore the impact of the Haymarket anarchists, but *Jacobin*'s intentional publication of her work in 2016 illustrated this same interest in erasure. Therefore, it becomes clear that both the Communists and the contemporary Social Democrats reinterpret history in order to ignore the global impact of anarchism on the working-class.

This active historical revisionism from popular Marxists is what makes May Day speeches calling for "left unity" ridiculous. Let us, for a moment, ignore the legacy of anarchist oppression from the Soviet Union to Cuba. The fact that both the Second International to contemporary Marxists willfully ignore the centrality of anarchism to organized labor and the establishment of the eight-hour workday is ahistorical. The fact that they suppress anarchist history and call for unity on the day that anarchist ancestors gave their lives for labor's cause is bullshit. The

[9] Phillip Foner, *May Day*, 42.

[10] William Morris, "Impressions of the Paris Congress: II," Marxists.org (Retrieved May 4, 2022) https://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1889/commonweal/08-paris-congress.html

[11] Alexander Thrachtenberg, "The History of May Day" Marxist.org (accessed May 5, 2022) https://www.marxists.org/subject/mayday/articles/tracht.html

[12] Rosa Luxemburg, "What are the Origins of May Day?" *Jacobin*, May 1, 2016 (Accessed May 2, 2022) https://jacobinmag.com/2016/05/may-day-rosa-luxemburg-haymarket

eight-hour work day was a compromise for the abolition of waged labor. Let us not compromise our principles again by unifying with Marxists that work to undermine us at every opportunity.

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