The Chicago Haymarket Riot and its Influence in American Labor

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Paper

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The Chicago Haymarket Square Riot of 1886, was a radical event in American history that had a profound effect on the Labor Movement in America, and made labor unionism in America what it is today. The Haymarket affair resulted in the destruction of the Knights of Labor union, the largest labor union in America at the time. This devastation thus led to the growth of the American Federation of Labor, which arose as the largest and most powerful labor union in the nation and started a new modern era of labor in America. The riot that ensued after the Haymarket protest led to the conviction of eight anarchists, who were later seen as martyrs for the labor movement, inspiring passion for labor in others. Although the Haymarket Riot was seen as counterproductive to the labor movement in the 1800s, it served as a turning point in American labor because it led to the formation of the American Federation of Labor, thus reforming labor and unionism in America, and inspiring a passion for labor and leadership in the next generation.

American workingmen have struggled with labor since the colonial times, but the struggle rapidly intensified as industry began to grow in America, and it reached a peak after the Civil War. As the working class began to grow, with the large increase in immigration, the need for labor unions to protect workers’ rights rose greatly. Many immigrants that arrived in America at this time had left their countries to escape poverty and to pursue the many opportunities that America had to offer. Most of these immigrants were unskilled laborers, which had a negative effect on the labor union movement, because the immigrants would work for lower wages and longer hours. In response to this, the labor movement at this time heavily favored the skilled workers, while ignoring those who were unskilled. Many of the skilled laborers began to join unions at this time, and unionism began to grow in popularity.¹

As unions became more and more prevalent during the late 1800s, the Knights of Labor emerged as the main labor union in America. The Knights of Labor grew radically, and expanded from just nine members to 50,000 in a ten-year span of time. Throughout the 1880s, the Knights of Labor tried to improve the dismal and often dangerous conditions that their workers faced, which often led to strikes. During the 1800s laborers had very poor working conditions that frequently posed a danger to the workers, and they also had low wages and long workdays. At this time period in America, the public often had a negative view of unions and the labor movement, labeling all persons involved in the labor movement and unions as socialists, communists, and anarchists. Because of the negative view upon the unions and their lack of support, it was necessary to have strikes in order to get fair conditions for the workers. As time went on, strikes became increasingly common for the Knights of Labor.

In 1886, the labor movement in America was united in the fight for the eight-hour workday. The eight-hour workday was important to many Americans. Workers wanted shorter workdays in order to spend more time leisurely and with their families. All over the nation workers were rallying for the eight-hour workday. The movement led the Knights of Labor to call for a nationwide strike. As more workers rallied for the eight-hour workday, an increasing amount of the workers joined the Knights of Labor in support of the strike. The Knights of Labor had a solidarity that stretched across the entire nation. This shocked and frightened employers,

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who wanted the labor movement stopped. Word was then passed to the police to stop the demonstrations in the eight-hour workday movement.4

The strike started as a peaceful protest and a united front against unfair working conditions, but as the police became involved, the affair soon became disorderly and out of control. On May 3, 1886, hundreds of thousands of workers nationwide led a strike demanding the eight-hour workday, and Chicago alone had 65,000 workers protesting and participating in the strike.5 In response to employers’ wishes, police descended upon the protesters to break up the strike. The police enforcement presence made the strike riotous. During the protest the police opened fire on the crowd in Chicago and killed six union men.6 This act by the police greatly angered laborers, who organized a demonstration assembled in Haymarket Square to protest the shooting.7

The shooting in Chicago infuriated labor workers, fueling their hatred for the police involvement in the affair, leading to a mass meeting in Haymarket Square to denounce the appalling acts of the police. In the middle of the demonstration an unknown person threw a bomb into the crowd. The police then opened fire on the crowd point blank. The whole affair resulted in seven police officers and four demonstrators dead. The police and the press blamed the event

7 Attention Workingmen! (n.p., 1886), [Page #], accessed September 26, 2012, http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/uhic/PrimarySourcesDetailsPage/PrimarySourcesDetailsWindow?failOverType=&query=&prodId=UHIC>windowstate=normal&contentModules=&mode=view&displayGroupName=PrimarySources&limiter=&currPage=&disableHighlighting=true&source=&sortBy=&displayGroups=&action=e&catId=&activityType=&scanId=&documentId=GALE%7C CX2687500105&userGroupName=sacr80651&jsid=9d99e36738172dbcf36a1f360db714a.
on the anarchists present at the demonstration. As the press blamed the labor workers, and labeled them as communists, socialists, and radicals, the negative view the public held on unions increased.

The Chicago Haymarket riot caused great chaos, and in the aftermath the anarchists were blamed, causing the public to have a negative view of the labor unions and of the labor movement in America. In the aftermath of the Haymarket affair, eight anarchists were arrested and charged with committing murder and inciting to murder by speech and writing. The eight anarchists—August Spies, Albert Parsons, Adolph Fischer, George Engel, Louis Lingg, Samuel Fieldon, Oscar Neebe, and Michael Schwab—were arrested with no proof connecting them to the affair, and with evidence showing that only two of them were actually present when the bomb exploded. Although there was no sound evidence against them, all eight anarchists were found guilty by a jury. At August Spies’ execution Spies said, “Our silence will be more powerful than the voices they are going to strangle today.” Spies’ quote would be proven true eventually in the years to come, but at the time many Americans looked down upon the laborers. With the guilty verdict placed upon the anarchists, the negative public view upon the labor movement was further heightened, and labor unions and the labor movement began to be viewed as communistic. This eventually led to the destruction of the Knights of Labor.

The disbandment of the Knights of Labor was originally seen as a setback for the labor movement, but it gave way for the American Federation of Labor to rise from the rubble of the Haymarket affair. The Knights of Labor union, the strongest labor union in America at the time,

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fell victim to the Haymarket affair. Because the anarchists and the strike were associated with the
Knights of Labor, the Knights of Labor was therefore blamed for the riot that had occurred. The
Knights of Labor began to steadily lose membership from workers who feared an association
with the negatively viewed union. The once mighty Knights of Labor was devastated
singlehandedly by the Haymarket affair, and eventually collapsed completely. Although the
collapse was a set back to laborers at the time, the American Federation of Labor came to power
almost immediately after the Haymarket affair.\textsuperscript{12} The collapse of the Knights of Labor served as
turning point, allowing the American Federation of Labor to rise up and start a new era of
unionism.

The AFL started a new era of unionism, in which Samuel Gompers led the AFL and
changed the way unions worked. The American Federation of Labor was formed on different
principals than the Knights of Labor. Unlike the Knights of Labor, the AFL was not open to all
workers. The AFL only allowed skilled workers to be members, because Gompers felt that those
were the workers that needed protection.\textsuperscript{13} Samuel Gompers was the first president of the AFL,
and led the federation in a very focused way, unlike the visionaries of the Knights of Labor.
Gompers took unionism in a new direction, at a crucial time in American history in which unions
were looked down upon. Gompers led the AFL in a way that made the members of the union
appear respectable to businesses and the public, through his good financial management and
avoiding involvement with politics.\textsuperscript{14} Samuel Gompers’ leadership of the American Federation

\textsuperscript{12} Irving Werstein, \textit{The Great Struggle} (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), [114-116]
\textsuperscript{13} Richard B. Freeman and Joel Rogers, "A Proposal to American Labor," \textit{The Nation}, accessed
September 26, 2012, \url{http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort}
\textsuperscript{14} Irving Werstein, \textit{The Great Struggle} (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), [115]
of Labor revitalized the labor movement in America and redirected it into a new modernized path.

As the American Federation of Labor grew in popularity, it became more powerful, due to its effort to peacefully obtain better working conditions for its members. The American Federation of Labor worked to obtain basic rights and stability for their members. This included seeking higher wages and safer working conditions for the workers. Along with that, the American Federation of Labor picked up the issue of the eight-hour workday that the Knights of Labor had failed to achieve, as well as working for a shorter workweek. Because of the American Federation of Labor’s honest efforts in improving working conditions for their members, their membership greatly increased as time went on. In 1886, the year of the Haymarket riot, the AFL only had one hundred and fifty thousand, but by 1918 the federation had 3.3 million members.15 With increased membership directly helping the federation progress, the AFL quickly became the most powerful union in the country. The AFL was successful in bringing together, organizing, and coordinating several unions and improving the public view of unions. Also, the AFL worked in courts to support the union’s causes and lobbied politicians on behalf of the workingmen. In time, the AFL began advocating for Women’s rights and in 1903 the Women’s Trade Union League was founded at an AFL convention.16 The AFL saved the labor movement in America, redirecting the labor movement to a reformed path, which led to labor unions of the modern era.

Although the Haymarket affair was viewed as a hindrance for the labor movement in the 1880s because of its negative consequences, it gradually became a rallying point for the

15 Tim McNeese, The Labor Movement (New York, NY: Infobase, 2008), [90,118]
workingmen. In 1893 the Governor of Chicago, Peter Atgeld, gave a public speech granting an official pardon to the three remaining anarchists, Samuel Fielden, Oscar Neebe, and Michael Schwab. Atgeld argued his reasons for pardoning the anarchists by saying they were not given a fair trial. Atgeld stated that the jury had been “packed” and “selected to convict”, and argued that their was no authentic evidence in the case against the anarchists, thus making the trial not a legal trial. Atgeld’s pardon was very controversial at the time, but eventually aided in the movement of the public viewing the anarchists as innocent. As the public began to sway towards viewing the anarchists as innocent, they started viewing the dead anarchists as martyrs for the cause and the labor movement as a whole. Fischer, who was one of the convicted anarchists, said before his execution, “The more the believers in just causes are persecuted, the quicker will their ideas be realized.” Fischer’s words proved to be true as the people began to view the anarchists as martyrs. The newly confirmed innocence of the convicted anarchists fueled many laborers anger towards the unfair handling of the Haymarket affair. This served as a tuning point, as the workingmen began to use this martyrdom for a just cause as a point to rally behind and as motivation to keep the labor movement going strong.

The sense of martyrdom and injustice surrounding the Haymarket affair particularly had an influence on the younger generation emerging into society. The anger and inspiration the younger generation obtained from the Haymarket affair encouraged them to join the labor movement in America and contribute in movements towards other revolutionary causes.

William “Big Bill” Haywood, one of the founders of the Industrial Workers of the World,

committed to anarchism because of inspiration from the Haymarket martyrs. Haywood formed the radical Industrial Workers of the World labor organization, which arose as a major organization that competed with the AFL.20 The Haymarket martyrs were a source of inspiration for many of those in the labor movement, leading people to a career in labor leadership, although it can never be known how many people the martyrs inspired.

Among the revolutionary supporters of the next generation that were inspired by the Haymarket martyrs were Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman. Emma Goldman was able to identify strongly with the anarchists convicted at the Haymarket trial. The unfair trial and execution enraged her and motivated her to join the cause of the anarchists. She stated that the Haymarket martyrs were the most decisive influence in her existence. Goldman began adopting anarchist ideas and formed her own ideas on how to revolutionize society. Later Goldman started to work with Berkman who had also identified with the anarchists.21 The public viewed both anarchist leaders as very controversial due to their extreme ideas and actions. Although Goldman and Berkman were very radical, they had a profound effect on the labor movement in America. Goldman was a very powerful woman, who greatly advocated for women’s suffrage and equality in labor and society for all. She worked for equality for women, through advocating for the liberation of women from the influence of public opinion. Emma Goldman also wrote a paper “Anarchism: What it really stands for”, in which she defines anarchism as the liberation of the individual, and she traveled the United States speaking publicly about anarchism.22 Both Goldman and Berkman were involved in the attempted assassination of Henry Clay Frick, the

manager of the steel plant in Homestead, Pennsylvania. Also, the assassin of President McKinley claimed that Goldman inspired him to act.\textsuperscript{23} Although both the attempted assassination of Frick, and the assassination of McKinley were extreme, they left a lasting impact upon America. The Haymarket martyrs inspired the careers and led to the political awakening of Berkman and Goldman, and both had a profound affect on the labor movement in America, leaving a legacy that still stirs people’s emotions today.

The Haymarket riot had started out simply as a demonstration with the goal of achieving the very much sought after eight-hour work day, but it soon escalated into something that changed American labor permanently. The unknown person who threw that bomb into the crowd set off a chain of events leading to the reform of the labor movement. In the aftermath of the Haymarket affair the largest and most powerful union was demolished, while a new union arose and changed the landscape of American labor. The controversial trial and convictions of the anarchists that accompanied the Haymarket affair left a legacy that inspired passion in many. The Haymarket Riot of 1886 was seen as a setback for the labor movement in America at the time, but latter proved to keep the labor movement alive, through its inspiration to future labor leaders and giving way for the American Federation of Labor to rise, thus serving as a turning point in American history.

Primary sources:


   This speech, “Reasons for Pardoning the Haymarket Rioters”, given by Peter Altgeld is a primary source. The author of this speech is Peter Altgeld, who was the governor of Chicago and offered pardons for the anarchists of the Haymarket affair in 1893. This speech contains Peter Altgeld’s reasons for pardoning the Haymarket anarchists. In his argument, Altgeld states that the trial for the anarchists was unfair and not legal. Altgeld also states in his argument that there was no sound evidence against the anarchists. The official pardon Altgeld gave to the anarchists swayed the public to view the anarchists as innocent, thus leading to the anarchists to be viewed as martyrs for the labor movement in America.


   Attention Workingmen! is a primary source pamphlet from the Haymarket riot. Attention Workingmen! was made by an unknown author, who was calling for a gathering in the Haymarket Square to denounce the acts of the police shooting his fellow workingmen. This pamphlet is asking for the workingmen of the city to come together and protest the atrocious acts of the police. Attention Workingmen! captures the anger the labor workers had for the police, and portrays the workers as victims of the police. This pamphlet shows how the victimized workers were used as a rallying point for the workingmen and inspired them to take a stand.


   The essay “Anarchism: What it Really Stands For”, is a primary source document from the collection of Emma Goldman’s papers. Emma Goldman, the author of this paper, was a radical anarchist and revolutionary who became inspired to become an anarchist because of the Haymarket martyrs. Emma Goldman wrote this paper defining and defending anarchism and its importance in America. Although very controversial, this paper was significant to politics in America at the time. “Anarchism: What It Really Stands For” clearly exhibits Goldman’s influence and importance in America’s politics during the time period.

This passage from *The Chicago Haymarket Riot*, is primary source collection of documents from the trials of the eight anarchists of the Haymarket Riot. Bernard R. Kogan, the editor of this work, was a professor at the University of Illinois in Chicago, who compiled the articles and court proceedings from the Haymarket affair into this work. This source gives the views and accounts of jury, the public, and the anarchists on trial. It also gives the last words and statements of the anarchists before they were executed. In several accounts the anarchists say as their last words that their silence and persecution will only cause their ideas to be realized more quickly and have more power. Those words would later be proven correct, as the martyred anarchists became a rallying point for the labor leaders and inspired passion in others.


*Albert R. Parsons Autobiography* is a primary source journal. Albert R. Parsons was one of the anarchists on trial in the Haymarket affair and a leader in the labor movement. His autobiography gives his account of his experience with Labor unions and socialist and anarchist organizations. This also includes Parsons’ connection to the Haymarket affair and his views on who was responsible for that tragedy. Parsons’ account describes the dynamics of the labor scene in America and how the labor movement grew over time. His account provides information to prove that the labor movement in America was different before the Haymarket affair had its impact on the movement.

Secondary sources:

1. Freeman, Richard B., and Joel Rogers. “A Proposal to American Labor.” *The Nation*, 18. Accessed September 26, 2012. [http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DA-SORT&inPS=true&prodId=GPS&userGroupName=sacr80651&tabID=T003&searchId=R6&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=1&contentSet=GALE%7CA87089645&&docId=GALE|A87089645&docType=GALE&role=ITOF](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=DA-SORT&inPS=true&prodId=GPS&userGroupName=sacr80651&tabID=T003&searchId=R6&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=1&contentSet=GALE%7CA87089645&&docId=GALE|A87089645&docType=GALE&role=ITOF).

“A Proposal to American Labor” is a secondary source document. Richard B. Freeman, one of the authors of this document, is an economics professor at Harvard University. The other author of this document, Joel Rogers, attended Yale, got his Ph.D. at Princeton, and is now a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. This document gives an account of the formation of the American Federation of Labor. In this account, the principles and goals upon which the union was founded are stated and explained. This document also gives the account of how the American Federation of Labor was able to arise and prosper after the Haymarket riot and the subsequent destruction of the Knights of Labor union.

“Goldman, Emma” is a secondary source biography about the life of anarchist Emma Goldman. The author of this work, Neil A. Hamilton, received his Ph.D. from the University of Tennessee, and teaches classes on early American history. Hamilton had written many articles for historical journals and magazines, and is also the author of several books. This source is a biography of Emma Goldman’s life, giving the account of how she became inspired to become an anarchist because of the Haymarket martyrs. It also includes Goldman’s impact on American politics of the time. This biography proves that Emma Goldman’s political awakening was due to her inspiration from the Haymarket anarchists.


The passage “Haymarket 1886” from the book American Violence, a Documentary History is a secondary account of the Haymarket riot and the events that ensued. One author of this book is Richard Hofstadter, who was a professor at Columbia University and also at Cambridge University. Hofstadter is also the author of many books about American history. The other author of this book is Michael Wallace, who attended Columbia University and is the author of “The Uses of Violence in America”. This passage gives a full account of the events that occurred at the Haymarket riot, including a collection of eyewitness testimonies. These eyewitness accounts defend the protesters, and claim that the police officers were very violent towards the crowd, not hesitating to shoot into the crowd. The eyewitness accounts defending the protesters portray the truth that the protesting anarchists and workers were the victims in the Haymarket ordeal. These victims would later be used to rally the labor workers to continue the labor movement in America.


The book The Labor Movement, is a secondary source account of labor in America. The author of this book, Tim McNeese, has published over 90 educational materials and books, and he is also a history professor at York College in York, Nebraska. This book provides a complete account of labor in America, starting at the birth of the country ending with the late 1900s. In this account the events of the Haymarket riot are included, along with the formation and reign of the American Federation of Labor. This source provides the reader with an account of how the labor movement in America was leading up to the Haymarket riot, and shows how the labor movement had been changed by the Haymarket riot.


The book The Great Struggle, is a secondary source document about the struggle for labor in America. Irving Werstein, the author, attended New York University, and has written over fifty books about American history, and in those books he accurately recreates history to uncover knowledge of past events and safeguard for the future. In this work Werstein describes the struggle that Americans have been going through with labor since its colonial times. The Haymarket riot was a crucial part of this riot, and Werstein details the events leading up to the Haymarket riot and also the actions that ensued after the affair. Among the events described, is an account of how the Knights of Labor union rose, and then
was subsequently destroyed in the aftermath of the Haymarket riot. With the destruction described, came the rising of the American Federation of Labor, permanently changing the labor movement in America.


   The web article “Haymarket Martyrs” is a secondary source document. Howard Zinn, who was an American historian, social activist, and a political science professor at Boston University, wrote this document. This article gives a brief account of the era leading up to the Haymarket riot, along with a brief account of the riot, followed by an account of the immediate and long term affects of the Haymarket riot. Among the short and long term affects provided are the names of political leaders who were inspired to become anarchists because of the Haymarket martyrs, including Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman. These anarchists had their political awakening because of the martyred anarchists, and later rose up and attempted to lead America to political reform.