

## Haymarket Square Riot → May 4, 1886



### Anarchy in the U.S. 1886

The increasing economic polarization of the U.S. in the late 19th century burst into violence in Chicago's Haymarket Riot on May 4, 1886. Three days before, some 80,000 labor unionists had gone on strike, calling for an 8-hr. workday and marching down Michigan Avenue in one of the world's first May Day observances. On the fourth, workers were rallying near Haymarket Square when a bomb was set off, killing eight officers; policemen then opened fire, killing a number of civilians. Eight anarchists were tried and found guilty of murder; four were hanged in 1887. The affair intensified the divisions between U.S. workers and owners.

From *Time: An Illustrated History*

Words to Know & Some Context:

- Anarchy → “a situation in which there is no effective government in a country or no order in an organization or situation”; Medieval Latin *anarchia*, from Greek, from *anarchos* “having no ruler”, from *an-* “without” + *archos* “ruler”
- Anarchist → “someone who believes that governments, laws, etc. are not necessary”; “people who seek a free society with no government”
- This approach/mindset regarding government was growing in popularity in some areas and with some groups, and its radical approach/outlook was very concerning to those who felt this was a threat to democracy.

From *Gilder Lehrman*

The Haymarket Affair is considered a watershed moment for American labor history, at a time when fears about the loyalties and activities of immigrants, anarchists, and laborers became linked in the minds of many Americans.

On May 3, 1886, unarmed strikers clashed with police at Chicago's McCormick Reaper Works factory. The deaths of six workers became a call for direct action, and a public rally was called for the following day to be held in Haymarket Square. Again, the police and the strikers clashed, but this time a bomb was thrown, resulting in the death of seven policemen and many in the crowd were injured. The police, uncertain about the source of the bomb, fired into the crowd, killing four of the demonstrators.

The identity of the bomb thrower is still a mystery, but eight men were indicted on charges of conspiracy to commit the act. All eight were convicted of the conspiracy charge even though it was understood none had made or thrown the bomb. August Spies, a German anarchist, laborer, and activist, and Albert Parsons, a socialist laborer, activist, and former Confederate soldier from Texas, had been among the fiery and well-known speakers at the rally. Spies and Parsons, along with Adolph Fischer and George Engel, were executed by hanging. Louis Lingg, the fifth condemned to die, managed to commit suicide while awaiting his sentence by biting down on a blasting cap in his cell. Three other defendants, Samuel Fielden, Oscar Neebe, and Michael Schwab, were sentenced to prison terms, but were pardoned in 1893.

Dyer D. Lum, a close confidant of the strikers and a well-known author and editor of anarchist texts, compiled *A Concise History of the Great Trial of the Chicago Anarchists* in 1886, which carries his contemporary view that the eight men were victims of an inquisition to weed out and destroy labor activism:

“The eight social heretics of Chicago who dared to defend their beliefs when tried for an act, of which it was openly admitted they were not personally guilty, have challenged the attention of the world and the admiration of the oppressed of all lands.”

From *Defining Moments: The Gilded Age*

In May 1886, labor activists and anarchists organized a peaceful protest against police brutality in Chicago’s Haymarket Square. The rally was uneventful until an unknown agitator threw a bomb, killing several policemen and setting off panicky exchanges of gunfire. The people of Chicago were appalled by the so-called Haymarket Riot and demanded that those responsible be brought to justice. Authorities quickly responded by charging eight anarchist leaders with murder, including publisher August Spies and his typesetter, Adolph Fischer. Although Fischer had attended the rally, he had already left by the time the bomb was thrown. Nevertheless, he was convicted of murder and hanged in November 1887... This document below is Fischer’s final statement avowing his innocence but acknowledging his willingness to die for his principles.

“Your honor: You ask me why sentence of death should not be passed upon me. I will not talk much. I will only say that I protest against my being sentenced to death because I have committed no crime. I was tried here in this room for murder, and I was convicted of Anarchy. I protest against being sentenced to death because I have not been found guilty of murder... If death is the penalty for our love of the freedom of the human race, then I say openly I have forfeited my life; but a murderer I am not.

Although being one of the parties who arranged the Haymarket meeting, I had no more to do with the throwing of that bomb, I had no more connection with it... I do not deny that I was present at the Haymarket meeting but that meeting... was not called for the purpose of committing violence and crime... the meeting was called for the purpose of protesting against the outrages and crimes committed by the police the day previous, out at McCormick’s...

Well, I went to Haymarket about 8:15 o’clock and stayed there... until Parsons stepped up to the stand and said it looked like it was going to rain, and that the assembled better adjourn to Zepf’s Hall. At that moment, a friend of mine, who testified on the witness stand, went with me to Zepf’s Hall, and we sat down at a table and had a glass of beer. At the moment I was going to sit down, my friend Parsons came in with some other persons, and after I was sitting there about five minutes, the explosion occurred. I had no idea that anything of the kind would happen because... there was no agreement to defend ourselves that night. It was only a meeting called to protest.

Now, as I said before... I feel that I am sentenced, or that I will be sentenced, to death because of being an Anarchist, and not because I am a murderer. I have never been a murderer. I have never yet committed a crime in my life... You will find it impossible to kill a principle, although you may take the life of men who confess these principles... This verdict is a death-blow against free speech, free press, and free thought in this country, and the people will be conscious of it, too. This is all I care to say.”