A Short History of the Anarchist-led Haymarket Strike

The workers at the McCormick Harvesting Machine Company walked off their jobs on May 1, 1886, because that date had been set two years earlier as a strict deadline for the universal adoption of the eight-hour workday. In October 1884, the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions (FOTLU) passed a resolution stating that “eight hours shall constitute a legal day’s labor from and after May 1, 1886.”

While the general strike began on May 1st, the situation at the McCormick Harvesting Machine Company was particularly volatile because workers there had already been involved in a long-simmering labor dispute. Many McCormick employees were already “locked out” or on strike before May 1st due to wage cuts and anti-union actions by Cyrus McCormick.

On the designated strike date, these localized grievances joined the massive national movement, with approximately 80,000 workers marching through Chicago. The strike at McCormick remained a flashpoint. On May 3, police fired into a crowd of strikers who were harassing "scabs" (strikebreakers) leaving the plant, killing at least two workers and injuring several. This specific violence at the McCormick plant directly led to the call for the protest at Haymarket Square the following evening.

In response to the police violence, anarchist and labor leaders, including August Spies and Albert Parsons, organized a protest meeting in Haymarket Square on the evening of May 4. Near the end of the peaceful rally, as heavily armed police advanced to disperse the remaining crowd of a few hundred, an unidentified person threw a homemade bomb into the police ranks. (In the press, this was attributed to an agent provocateur.) The blast killed one officer immediately, prompting the police to open fire on the crowd, resulting in the deaths of seven officers and

at least four civilians.

Following the incident, authorities arrested eight prominent labor activists. Despite a lack of evidence tying them to the bomb, the men were convicted of conspiracy, leading to four executions in 1887 and sparking the nation's first Red Scare.

The aftermath of the Haymarket trial shook the nation, resulting in questionable executions and a political backlash. Despite the initial blow to organizers, the event ultimately became a defining foundation for the modern global labor movement. While the bomb blast initially devastated organized labor, it forced a massive shift in how American workers organized.

The Knights of Labor, then the largest and most powerful union in the U.S., was falsely blamed by the public for the violence. Public panic, corporate backlash, and anti-immigrant hysteria caused its membership to

plummet, leading to its eventual demise. However, as the radical Knights of Labor faded, workers gravitated toward the newly formed American Federation of Labor (AFL). Led by Samuel Gompers, the AFL focused on practical, less revolutionary goals like wages, safety, and hours through collective bargaining rather than political upheaval.

Though employers temporarily forced workers back into 10-hour shifts after the riot, the Haymarket Affair galvanized decades of activism. The standard 8-hour workday and 40-hour workweek were eventually codified into federal U.S. law under the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938. Therefore, this was the long-term win for the workers.

The Haymarket trial (1886–1887) is widely considered one of the most significant miscarriages of justice in U.S. history. It turned May 1st into an international day of mourning and celebration by transforming the convicted

labor leaders into “martyrs” for the global working class.

The tragedy of the workers killed or injured by the police resonated globally, leading to the formal establishment of May Day as a workers’ holiday. In 1889, at the first congress of the Second International (a federation of socialist and labor parties that came to be known as the Paris Conference), delegates voted to organize a great international demonstration on May 1, 1890. The date was chosen specifically to commemorate the 1886 Chicago general strike and the “Haymarket Martyrs” who died defending the eight-hour day. While the U.S. government eventually moved its official Labor Day to September to distance it from the radicalism of the anarchists, May 1st became an official public holiday in over 80 countries.

Anarchists were a central and highly influential force in the 19th-century labor movement, often serving as the “radical” wing that pushed unions toward more aggressive tactics and total systemic change.

Anarchists in cities like Chicago developed the “Chicago Idea,” which argued that labor unions should not just fight for better wages but should be the actual vehicles for overthrowing capitalism. Unlike some socialists who wanted to use elections or the government to help workers, anarchists believed power must come from the bottom-up; from the workers themselves through mass organizations like the Central Labor Union (CLU). The anarchists believed that after the revolution, federations of these unions would naturally manage the economy without the need for a state; in other words, the union as the future society.

The leadership in the Eight-Hour Movement were anarchists. They were the most vocal and militant organizers of the national strike for the eight-hour day in May 1886. In Chicago alone, anarchist leaders like August Spies helped mobilize over 65,000 workers for the May 1st demonstrations. They championed “direct action”—such

as strikes, pickets, and work stoppages—rather than lobbying politicians for new laws.

The involvement of anarchists significantly changed how the public and the government viewed labor struggles. This was a radicalization of public perception. Some factions advocated for “propaganda by the deed,” a militancy that included the use of force or armed self-defense against police suppression. Because the most prominent labor leaders in Chicago were self-identified anarchists, the Haymarket Affair resulted in a backlash that allowed the media and the state to paint the entire labor movement as a dangerous, violent conspiracy.

Ultimately, while their influence declined after the Haymarket trial executions and later government crackdowns on radical groups like the IWW, anarchists laid the groundwork for the modern idea of the “militant rank-and-file” unionism that bypasses official politics.

May Day in the United States Compared to the Rest of the World: the Suppression of May Day

The evolution of May Day is one of history's greatest ironies: a global worker's holiday inspired by an American labor strike was systematically erased, re-engineered, and suppressed within the United States.

While the rest of the world embraced May 1st as a massive celebration of the working class, the U.S. intentionally engineered a completely separate labor holiday to distance itself from radicalism.

Following the 1886 Haymarket Affair in Chicago, the international labor community moved to permanently honor the “Haymarket Martyrs” In 1889, the Second International met in Paris and declared May 1st

International Workers' Day. Today, more than 160 nations recognize it as an official public holiday. This is the global standard for May Day. Not so for the United States. As a strong anti-union backlash gripped the U.S. post-Haymarket, American business and political leaders grew fearful of May Day's revolutionary undertones. Seeking to appease workers without validating radical socialists or anarchists, President Grover Cleveland chose to bypass May 1st entirely. In 1894, he signed a bill making the first Monday in September the official national Labor Day. Because the holidays were split, the actual nature of the celebrations evolved down completely different paths.

Abroad, May Day retained its highly political, activist edge. In many countries, it is marked by massive union marches, general strikes, and speeches demanding policy changes regarding wages and worker protections.

By placing Labor Day in September, the U.S. effectively

decoupled the holiday from protest culture. Positioned on a three-day weekend at the end of summer, American Labor Day evolved into a commercialized, restful holiday characterized by backyard barbecues, beach trips, retail shopping sales, and a marker for the return to school.

During the mid-20th century Cold War, the geopolitical rift between the U.S. and the Soviet Union alienated America from May Day even further. The Soviet Union and other communist regimes adopted May 1st as a major state holiday, utilizing it for massive military parades, tank rollouts, and state-sponsored displays of industrial might. To combat the communist association, the U.S. government took active steps to overwrite the calendar. In 1955, President Dwight D. Eisenhower officially proclaimed May 1st as “Loyalty Day”—a day designated for reaffirming loyalty to the United States and observing American freedom. In 1958, Congress also designated May 1st as “Law Day.” Thus, “Loyalty Day” and “Law Day” amounted to a weaponization against “May Day.”

Despite decades of suppression, May Day has seen a major 21st-century resurgence in the United States, but with a unique American twist, a new Labor Coalition. Rather than traditional trade unions, the modern revitalization of May Day in the U.S. has been driven by immigrant communities. On May 1, 2006, millions of people marched in cities like Chicago and Los Angeles for the “Great American Boycott,” fighting against harsh anti-immigration legislation.

Today, May Day rallies in major American cities function as a unified platform where labor rights, immigrant justice, and civil rights activism intersect, returning the date to its historic grassroots roots.