Haymarket Square Riot (response)

Peter Rachleff

1976

Response to:

A Bicentennial moment: Haymarket Square Riot by Bob Nirkind, *Fifth Estate* #272, May, 1976, Vol. 11, No. 8, page 10

To the Fifth Estate:

A brief note concerning Bob Nirkind's treatment of the Knights of Labor in the May issue of the *Fifth Estate*.

Most historians have seen the Knights of Labor as a backward-looking organization grounded in the craftsman's rejection of the development of wage-slavery and the destruction of his skills—and privileges. There is a certain grain of truth in this, especially as far as the early years of the organization are concerned (1879 through 1884), and the leadership itself. However, in my own work (which meant looking at the Knights in great detail on both the local and national level) I found a more useful framework.

By 1885 through 1886, the knights were a mass movement with an organizational form. This latter form was superimposed over the variety of forms of organization which already existed within the working-class. In these years (when craftsmen came to make up a minority within the organization as a whole), the key unit was a mixed local—groups which were based on a variety of factors, the least of which was a specific trade.

Different mixed locals were held together by different forces—for example, in Richmond, I found mixed locals which grew out of fraternal and benefit organizations, lodges, neighborhood units, churches, work-places (including skilled and unskilled).

In short, the K of L grew out of pre-existing forms of self-organization. By mid-1886, in a number of localities (and to a less clear extent on a national level), the Knights became an offensive organization, posing a challenge to the existing social order. This was largely done through local elections (e.g., they swept the city council of Richmond in May, 1886).

Now, the Knights did not have a clear conception of the kind of society they wanted to see. Rather, the whole movement was grounded in—and expressed—a system of values (mutualism, cooperation, independence, justice, equality) which ran counter to the development and power of American capitalism which was entering its truly powerful and destructive phase (a series of deep depressions in the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s, culminating in WWI). The Knights expressed offensive articulation of working-class culture and experience, posed against the capitalist system.

However, the Knights fell short. If anything, they fell apart from the inside, rather than being destroyed by repression. Why? First of all, and most fundamentally, the strength of the Knights was simultaneously its weakness—it grew so rapidly because it grew out of working-class culture and organizations, but it could never transcend those limits.

This became apparent in Richmond, where the questions of relations between races (blacks and a number of whites felt the need for relations on a basis of equality, in keeping with the principles of the order) tore the organization apart. From 1865 through 1886, black and white workers had little to do with each other.

When the Knights developed, taking in both blacks and whites, they were organized autonomously, and remained essentially independent of each other. Thus, no links between the two communities and cultures were ever forged. When it became apparent that the only path forward was to unite those two communities, the vast majority of white workers simply dropped out. I believe that similar problems arose elsewhere—problems where the Knights ran up against their own limits, and proved incapable of transcending them.

Following the collapse of the Knights, the "labor movement" turned to craft unionism. While it still had some of the Knights, it expressed no more than the experiences of specific groups of craftsmen. By the turn of the century, the very working-class culture which had posed a challenge to capital in the 1880's was in the process of being dismantled and reshaped by capital itself.

Many workers found that they could still protect some of their interests through AFL organization—but strictly their interests as expressed within capital, especially within the backwaters of capital, where little damage had as yet been done to their status and control over their work. These unions became nothing more than brokers for labor-power, which in part explains their exclusionary practices (i.e., banning blacks), which became the source of their power.

One more challenge on the basis of working-class culture remained—the IWW. But note which workers were involved—migrant farm and timber workers in the West, miners in the West, immigrants in the textile and silk mills of the East. In short, all workers whose daily culture had not yet been appropriated by capital.

Thus, in many ways, the IWW was but a repetition of the K of L experience (though more "advanced ideologically"), a generation later, but with an entirely 'different type and group of workers providing the movement.

Never since has there been such a fundamental challenge to capital in America. But its limits must be seen—neither organization represented a break with daily life. Rather, their very strength came out of their rootedness in that daily life. Any future movement must find a path breaking with daily life, affirming new social relationships at its very core. This is simultaneously harder but more possible of genuine success than earlier movements such as the K of L and IWW.

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