

Haymarket Centennial

Anarchy in Chicago

Dogbane Campion (David Watson)

1986

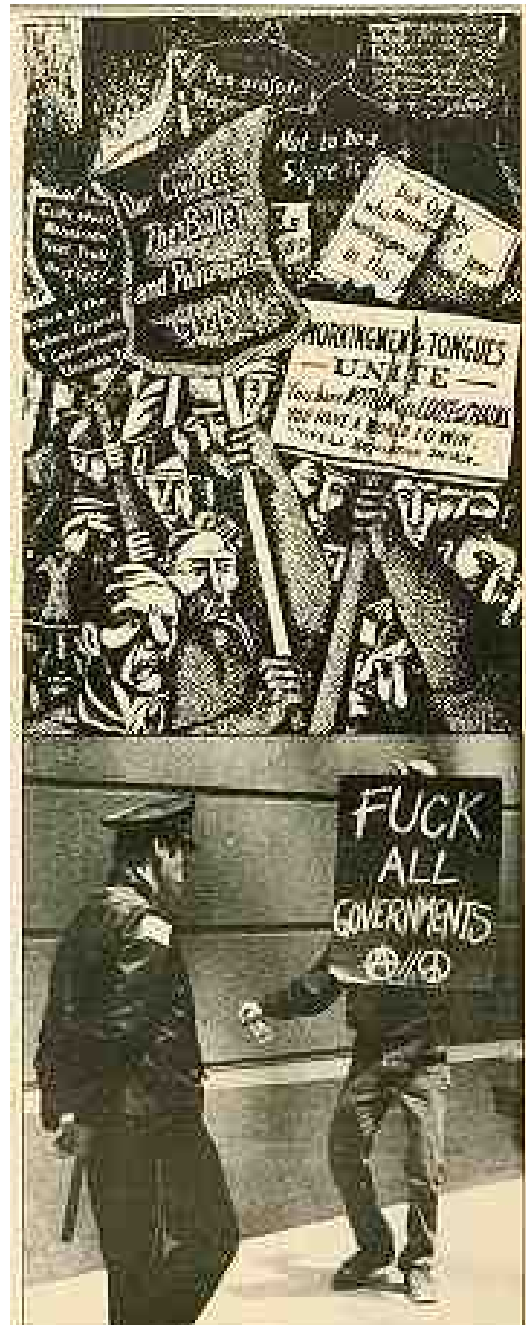
About 12 of us from Detroit made the trek to Chicago this May Day to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Haymarket riot and subsequent state murder by execution of five anarchists.

Hosted by the Chicago Anarchist Group, the gathering was attended by 300 to 400 people—about two-thirds male, mostly white, mostly young, with hardly any oldsters and only a few people over 40. Participants came from all over the U.S. and Canada, with a small number of visitors from outside North America.

The gathering consisted of workshops, theater, music, art shows, participation in a May Day march, an anarchist march of our own, a banquet and a memorial gathering at the gravesite of the Haymarket martyrs.

We were able to participate in only a few of the workshops held, but we found much of the discussion stimulating, if at times disjointed. Workshop topics included ecology; a weirdly formulated “tech vs. anti-tech” which none of us were able to attend as this workshop was held on the day); Spain 1936 (which unfortunately, but perhaps inevitably, turned into a discussion on Central America); building the anarchist movement (which according to one participant degenerated into the age-old hot air sessions about computer networks, a national federation and a national press); personal politics and anarchy; what is anarchy?; and anarchy and social revolution/why revolutions fail.

Of course there were many informal discussions as well, but despite meeting new friends and old, those of us from the Fifth Estate missed talking with many people from around the country, including FE sustainers and others with whom we would have liked to make contact. It was an exciting time, in spite of the craziness and chaos, and we wish we could have spent more time at it.



On Thursday, May 1, anarchists and other conferees participated in the traditionally marxist Pilsen march (an old German worker's district, now a Latino barrio), spontaneously leaving the march at one point and coming close soon afterwards to a major confrontation with Chicago's cops. During the standoff the marchers finally had to disperse but managed after some negotiation to free two people who had been arrested.

“Everything—and Nothing”

On Friday, conference participants had our own march, a tour with no permit to such monuments to Authority as the jail, city hall, the stock exchange (where toy money was thrown at businessmen, and brokers watching us from the windows above were urged to jump by the crowd), IBM, the South African Consulate, the struck *Chicago Tribune*, and a fancy shopping district where the proverbial shit hit the fan, and 38 people were arrested for disorderly conduct, “mob action against the state,” and one person for desecrating a U.S. flag (now a felony).

At an intersection near the stock exchange where we momentarily blocked traffic, a well-dressed older woman was overheard asking a cop, “What organization is this?” He replied, “They're not any organization, they're anarchists.”

And to her question, “What do they want?” he replied with astonishing perspicacity, “Everything—and nothing.”

The scene at IBM was exhilarating—one of the wildest scenes I can remember in many years of demonstrations. Amid war whoops, screams and chants of “IBM out of South Africa, South America,” etc. until every continent got covered, people blockaded the building and closed it, and many proceeded to pound on the plate glass windows and the metal coverings on the pillars, creating a great din. (I saw one anarchist @ drawn on the window while the geeks in suits gaped incredulously from the other side.) Money and a flag were burned, which almost caused a brawl with the cops, but they still did not attack, which we found amazing at the time. Remember, this is the force that massacred workers a hundred years ago, that massacred workers during the Republic Steel strike in 1937, and perhaps many of the same cops who attacked peace demonstrators in 1968 and who slaughtered the Black Panthers in their beds in 1969, and who brutalize people every day in Chicago's poorer neighborhoods.

The cops had been following us all along in large numbers, hissing that the march was a “cattle drive” and that at the end they would all have their own Haymarket commemoration, each “take his own anarchist to lunch,” as someone later reported being told. The mob was meandering, and for those of us not from Chicago, we felt a little powerless to control events. By IBM, things were threatening to go beyond the point of no return, so some of us decided to make our own way to the cop monument to Haymarket, where the march was supposed to end.

(This is the base of the statue built in 1889, funded by Chicago capitalists after a public “popular subscription fund” promoted by the *Chicago Tribune* raised only \$150 in ten months. This statue has had an interesting history of its own, including bombings and vandalism. In 1927, on the 41st anniversary of the Haymarket meeting, a streetcar driver drove his car full speed and jumped the track, knocking the statue off its base. In 1968, the statue was defaced with black paint, and in 1969 and 1970 it was blown up. In February 1972 the statue was removed from the base and moved to Police Headquarters, before finally going to the Police Academy, in an area not accessible to the public. On Mayday 1972 anarchists and Wobblies tried to place a paper mache statue of anarchist Haymarket martyr Louis Lingg on the base but the cops turned out in force to prevent it.)

We finally found the statue base after taking a few wrong turns, but no one else showed, though there were plenty of anarchist circle-As spray-painted nearby. The statue inscription read, "From the City of Chicago in honor of her heroes who defended her against the riot." A friend etched out "heroes" as best he could and wrote "murderers" in its place.

Dancing in the Nude

We learned later that after IBM, a similar scene had ensued at the South African Consulate and the *Chicago Tribune* (where marchers fraternized with striking workers), and approaching a bourgeois shopping area, some people had begun running in and out of stores, and a window was broken in a hotel. There the cops began arresting people who had started to disperse, grabbing those who looked nonconformist or who carried flags, who ran too slow or ran too fast; or who tried to investigate the arrests of others.

That night there was a lengthy discussion about the demonstration while a small group worked frenetically to get people out of jail. There was much heated discussion on responsibility, how to do demonstrations, decision-making, tactics, and the rest, which was all very interesting but inconclusive.

On Saturday night after a day of workshops and prisoner support, there was a banquet, conversation and dancing. (Some folks danced in various states of undress, which prompted an old-timer to remark that he was surprised that so much fun could be had with so little liquor, but, frankly, "In 1936 we were dancing in the nude.") By this time everyone had gotten out of jail, and the air was festive. We had made our points here and there, and everyone felt enthusiastic about rubbing shoulders with other strange people like ourselves.

On Sunday we went to Waldheim Cemetery where the Haymarket victims are buried (along with Voltairine de Cleyre and others). There was a brief scuffle with liberals and stalinists over a black flag hung on the monument, but in the end it stayed. People drank Champaign and took snapshots of each other, finally gathering at the grave in a linking of arms to shout some spirited hurrahs for anarchy. I may be a sentimental fool, but I loved it. And we made our point—the Haymarket victims were not liberals, labor reformists, or historians. They were unrelenting rebels who had the courage and the vision to demand the impossible in an impossible society. That is why they were hung—as the state's attorney declared, it was anarchy that was on trial—and that is why the last words of George Engel and Louis Lingg were "Long live anarchy."

In spite of any criticisms, it was exciting to be there with so many people who, even if their interpretations varied widely, were drawn to an event based on those last defiant words. Let no one be mistaken: anarchy cannot be stamped out. Anarchy lives.

FE note: Space limitations kept us from printing a series of reactions from others, including a letter from the eight Torontoans who were arrested. We plan to print them in our next issue along with letters from readers who were there (please be brief). Other reports of the gathering appeared in the June *Northwest Passage* (1107-B East Pike St., Seattle WA 98122) and the *BTB Newsletter* (1369 Haight, SF CA 94117).

fifth Estate

Dogbane Champion (David Watson)
Haymarket Centennial
Anarchy in Chicago
1986

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/323-summer-1986/haymarket-centennial>
Fifth Estate #323, Summer, 1986

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net