

Falling off the Wagon

Chicago Memorializes Haymarket

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The Haymarket Tragedy of 1886 has been remembered by anarchists, workers, labor organizers, and historians as a seminal event in humanity's ongoing fight for free speech, free assembly, and the abolition of wage slavery. Around the world, major cities have erected monuments and named plazas in honor of the Haymarket martyrs and the importance of their trial, but until September 14, 2004, no substantial marker had ever been erected where the incident occurred, near the corner of Randolph and Des Plaines in Chicago.

The monument which today sits at the site ambiguously represents several figures involved in the de/construction of a wagon which doubles as a speakers' platform. The concrete base features plaques explaining the Haymarket tale, leaving bare two sides for the future addition of plaques sent in solidarity (or perhaps to commemorate future massacres). The design was subject to approval by a collaborative board of city and state officials, the Chicago Police Department (CPD), and union bureaucrats; unsurprisingly, no anarchists or radicals of any kind were invited to participate in the planning of the monument itself.

Even less surprising was the absence of these voices at the unveiling of the monument. The keynote speaker at the dedication was Douglas Gannon, president of the Chicago Federation of Labor, who mispronounced the names of each of the eight men falsely indicted for the bombing. The thrust of his speech seemed to be that we have the Haymarket martyrs to thank for weekends and the eight-hour workday, but we need not remember that this was for them a step toward the abolition of wage slavery. This seemed to be what the entire event pointed to: looking at labor history with pious gratitude rather than as a fountain of inspiration and strength in our own actions.

Present in the crowd were members of the Illinois Labor History Society, an organization which has worked for decades to preserve both working class history and to radicalize the contemporary labor movement, and one which has long been the major advocate of a proper Haymarket monument. Its founders, Les Orear and Molly West, could have provided some of the most critical and radical analyses of Haymarket and its significance today. Perhaps this is why they were excluded from the event—although Orear was given a token minute to make an impromptu speech after the ceremony had officially closed and many had left.

A small anarchist contingent was present and vocal that day on Des Plaines, but sadly, the anarchists seemed just as lost on the significance of Haymarket as the bureaucrats. This radical bloc was there to protest and remind the assembled that those names in bronze once belonged to anarchists. Flyers were distributed quoting the martyrs on anarchy and asking, "Is it not complete hypocrisy to love the martyrs and hate their anarchism?"

While we need not dispute that statement, we should ask ourselves if it is not just as hypocritical to love their anarchism and yet learn nothing from the work they did. Parsons, Lingg, Spies, Engel, Neebe, Fischer, Schwab, and Fielden didn't spend their lives trying to convert workers to anarchism as though it were a kind of religion: they actively fought to change the world. They were not killed because they were anarchists—they were killed because they were shockingly effective in mobilizing the disparate Chicagoans of their era to work together towards total liberation.

As anarchists, we must look at labor history to help shape our contemporary struggles, not simply to align ourselves with a radically fashionable cult of martyrdom. While we need not be grateful to the City of Chicago and the CPD for finally recognizing a site which should have been ritually marked many decades ago, we must not limit ourselves to playing the expected chorus of marginalized critique, trotted out as a free speech sideshow for the U\$ Freedom Circus. Instead let's ask ourselves how to best utilize this space and this story in our creative revitalization of the struggle which the Haymarket anarchists epitomized.

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Fifth Estate #367, Winter 2004-2005

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