

Chicago Conspiracy Act One

May, 1886

Fifth Estate Collective

1969

When revolution is in the air and extremist groups take to the streets, the Establishment smells a conspiracy to commit violence, usually led by outside agitators.

So it was in August, 1968, when 10,000 of us took to the streets of Chicago for six days of protest and eight of us were selected and are being tried for conspiracy to incite riot and crossing interstate lines with the intention to incite riot.

So it was too, in May, 1886, when thousands of laborers took to the streets in Chicago for four days and eight of their leaders were tried for conspiracy to commit murder.

There are many similarities between the Chicago 8 conspiracy trial and the Haymarket Square conspiracy trial.

The working class in the 1880s in Chicago lived in squalor. They were exploited by the robber barons, who paid very little for very long hours. And they were fed up, angry, ready for action.

The eight-hour day movement, like the movement to end the war in Viet Nam, was sweeping the country with little success. There were threats of national strikes if the eight-hour demand was not met.

By May 1 the Chicago labor movement was ready to explode.

May Day was a Saturday, the last working day of the week. And thousands of workers struck to march that May Day—which is the real Labor Day in America despite Establishment bullshit. Central to the workers' protest were a group of anarcho-communists—mostly European immigrants who had left Marx for Bakunin. Many had witnessed the Paris Commune of 1871 and followed Johann Most to America in 1882.

Chicago was the center of the anarchist movement in America. The "Alarm" was their underground paper, which ran articles like:

"Dynamite! Of all the good stuff this is the stuff. Stuff several pounds of this sublime stuff into an inch pipe, plug up both ends, insert a cap with a fuse attached, place this in the immediate neighborhood of a lot of rich loafers who live by the sweat of other people's brows, and light the fuse. A most cheerful and gratifying result will follow."

It was in this climate that the May Day labor march took place in 1886. Sunday, the workers' day of rest, was peaceful.

On Monday, strikers attacked scabs at Black Rd. near the McCormick reaper factory. The pigs joined the scabs with their clubs and guns. Six strikers were killed and many wounded.

One witness was August Spies, a writer for the daily *Arbeiter Zeitung*. His article that afternoon called for a mass rally at 8:30 pm on Tuesday, the next day, in Haymarket Square in the middle of Chicago's slums.

Rain threatened all day Tuesday. Despite handbills calling for "WORKINGMEN ARM YOURSELVES AND APPEAR IN FULL FORCE", only 1,200 workers, their wives and children appeared at 8:30.

August Spies was the first speaker. He denounced McCormick as the one "responsible for the murder of our brothers." The crowd responded with cries of "Hang him!"

Albert R. Parsons, another revolutionary journalist, spoke after Spies. Parsons shouted to the crowd, "It behooves you, as you love your wife and children, if you don't want to see them perish with hunger, killed or cut

down like dogs in the streets, Americans, in the interest of your liberty and your independence, to arms, to arm yourselves.”

Parsons was followed by veteran organizer Samuel Fielden, who spoke despite the rain which had driven 900 people away from Haymarket Square. One spectator who left because of the rain was Chicago Mayor Carter F. Harrison.

At 10:20 pm, in the middle of Fielden’s speech, 180 Chicago cops led by Inspector Bonfield and Captain Ward moved towards the square and ordered the crowd of 300 to disperse.

“We are peaceable,” said Fielden, then turned with Parsons and Spies and began climbing down off the wagon that was being used as a speaker’s platform.

Suddenly, out of the dark shadows of an alley, someone threw a dynamite bomb. It exploded in the front rank of cops, instantly killing Patrolman Degan and wounding 70 others. Six later died.

The pigs opened fire on the crowd, killing one spectator and injuring at least 60, as they fled for safety.

The pigs, with the help of Pinkerton agents (the FBI of that day), arrested all known anarchists within a few days, but Parsons could not be found.

On Wednesday, May 5, a coroner’s jury found that Patrolman Mathias J. Degan “had come to his death from a bomb thrown by a person or persons unknown, but acting in conspiracy with August Spies, Albert Parsons, Samuel Fielden and others unknown.”

The grand jury quickly returned conspiracy to murder indictments against Spies, Parsons, Fielden, Michael Schwab, Adolph Fisher, George Engel, Oscar Neebe, Louis Lingg, Rudolph Schnaubelt and William Seliger. Only Parsons, the “Alabama agitator”, was an American citizen.

Parsons wandered into court with defense lawyer William P. Black, a liberal corporation counsel, on the day the trial began. Schnaubelt remained underground throughout the trial and Seliger turned state’s witness. So, when the conspiracy trial began, there were eight defendants.

Public prejudice against the eight was so great that 757 prospective jurors were discharged before a jury was seated. Judge Joseph Easton Gary of Cook County Criminal Court, with 23 years on the bench, was regarded as the least objectionable (to the Establishment) judge around. During the trial, Gary chatted with several ladies that joined him on the bench.

The trial was over before it began. Even with Mayor Harrison testifying to the peaceful, unarmed nature of the meeting and his instructions to Inspector Bonfield not to move against the crowd, the defense didn’t have a chance. The Chicago Tribune led the public outcry for a speedy hanging of the murderers and that was that.

A defense witness testified that he had heard Bonfield say shortly before the pigs moved against the people, “I would like to get three thousand of them in a crowd without their women and children and I will make short work of them.”

The trial had begun June 19, just six weeks after the bombing. On August 20, the jury found all defendants guilty of conspiracy to commit murder and sentenced all but Oscar Neebe to hang.

Neebe was sentenced to 15 years, which was very strange since the only evidence introduced against Neebe was a copy of a leaflet calling for revenge, some guns and a red flag he had in his home.

Judge Gary denied a motion for a new trial and asked the defendants if they had any reasons why sentence should not be pronounced. The answers of four of the Haymarket 8 will live as long as criminal courts are used to repress political dissent and militant action for change.

ALBERT PARSONS

“You ask me why sentence of death should not be pronounced upon me, or what is tantamount to the same thing, you ask me why you should give me a new trial in order that I might establish my innocence and the ends of justice be subserved.

“I answer you and say, that this verdict is the verdict of passion, born in passion, nurtured in passion, and is the sum total of the organized passion of the city of Chicago. For this reason I ask your suspension of the sentence, and a new trial. This is one among the many reasons which I hope to present before I conclude. Now, what is passion?”

“Passion is the suspension of reason; in a mob upon the streets, in the broils of the saloon, in the quarrel on the sidewalk, where men throw aside their reason and resort to feelings of exasperation, we have passion. There is a suspension of the elements of judgement, of calmness, of discrimination requisite to arrive at the truth and the establishment of justice.

“I hold that you cannot dispute the charge which I make, that this trial has been submerged, immersed in passion from its inception to its close, and even to this hour, standing here upon the scaffold as I do, with the hangman awaiting me with his halter, there are those who claim to represent public sentiment in this city and I now speak of the capitalistic press, that vile and infamous organ of monopoly, of hired liars, the people’s oppressor—even to this day these papers, standing where I do, with my seven condemned colleagues, are clamoring for our blood in the heat and violence of passion. Who can deny this? Certainly not this Court. The court is fully aware of these facts.”

OSCAR NEEBE

“They found a revolver in my house, and a red flag there. I organized trades unions. I was for reduction of the hours of labor, and the education of laboring men, and the re-establishment of the Arbeiter-Zeitung—the workingman’s newspaper. There is no evidence to show that I was connected with the bomb-throwing, or that I was near it, or anything of that kind.

“So I am only sorry, your Honor—that is, if you can stop it or help it, I will ask you to do it—that is to hang me, too; for I think it is more honorable to die suddenly than to be killed by inches. I have a family and children; and if they know their father is dead, they will bury him. They can go to the grave, and kneel down by the side of it; but they can’t go to the penitentiary and see their father, who was convicted for a crime he hasn’t had anything to do with. That is all I have got to say. Your honor, I am sorry I am not to be hung with the rest of the men.”

LOUIS LINGG

“I tell you frankly and openly, I am for force. I have already told Captain Schaack, “If they use cannon against us, we shall use dynamite against them.” I repeat that I am the enemy of the “order” of today, and, I repeat that, with all my powers so long as breath remains in me, I shall combat it. I declare again, frankly and openly, that I am in favor of using force.

“You laugh! Perhaps you think, “You’ll throw no more bombs,” but let me assure you that I die happy on the gallows, so confident am I that the hundreds and thousands to whom I have spoken will remember my words; and when you shall have hanged us, then, mark my words, they will do the bomb-throwing.

“In this hope do I say to you, “I despise you. I despise your order, your laws, your force-propped authority.” Hang me for it!”

AUGUST SPIES

“If you think that by hanging us you can stamp out the labor movement—the movement from which the down-trodden millions, the millions who toil and live in want and misery—the wage slaves expect salvation—if this is your opinion, then hang us!

“Here you will tread upon a spark, but there, and there, and behind you and in front of you, and everywhere, flames will blaze up. It is a subterranean fire. You cannot put it out. The ground is on fire upon which you stand. You can’t understand it.

“You don’t believe in magical arts, as your grandfathers did, who burned witches at the stake, but you do believe in conspiracies; you believe that all these occurrences of late are the work of conspirators! You resemble the child that is looking for his picture behind the mirror. What you see and what you try to grasp is nothing but the deceptive reflex of the strings of your bad conscience. You want to ‘stamp out the conspirators’—the agitators?”

“Ah! stamp out every factory lord who has grown wealthy upon the unpaid labor of his employees. Stamp out every landlord who has amassed fortunes from the rent of over-burdened workingmen and farmers. Stamp out every machine that is revolutionizing industry and agriculture, that intensifies the production, ruins the producer, that increases the national wealth, while the creator of all these things stands amidst them tantalized with hunger!

“Stamp out the railroads, the telegraph, the telephone, steam and yourselves—for everything breathes the revolutionary spirit. You, gentlemen, are the revolutionists. You rebel against the effects of social conditions which have tossed you, by the fair hand of fortune, into a magnificent paradise.

“Without inquiring, you imagine that no one else has a right to that place. You insist that you are the chosen ones, the sole proprietors. The forces that tossed you into the paradise, the industrial forces, are still at work. They are growing more active and intense from day to day. Their tendency is to elevate all mankind to the same level, to have all humanity share in the paradise you now monopolize.

“You, in your blindness, think you can stop the tidal wave of civilization and human emancipation by placing a few policemen, a few Gatling guns, and some regiments of militia on the shore—you think you can frighten the rising waves back into the unfathomable depths whence they have arisen, by erecting a few gallows in the perspective. You, who oppose the natural course of things, you are the real revolutionists. You and you alone are the conspirators and destructionists!

“Call your hangman! Truth crucified in Socrates, in Christ, in Giordano Bruno, in Huss, in Galileo, still lives—they and others whose number is legion have preceded us on this path. We are ready to follow.”

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Chicago Conspiracy Act One
May, 1886
1969

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Fifth Estate #92, November 13-26, 1969

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