

Case Study: American Economic Development

LABOR CHANGE: THE HAYMARKET CONFRONTATION

Haymarket is a place in Chicago that stands for an important struggle: the fight by workers for better working conditions. In 1886, striking workers and police battled at Haymarket Square. The fighting at Haymarket was part of a struggle to get an 8-hour working day. And that change was one of many changes that labor unions have tried to bring about.

This time line traces some of the events in the Haymarket history.

1884 The American Federation of Labor, headed by Samuel Gompers, meets in Chicago and declares that May 1, 1886, will be the day for workers all over America to demand the 8-hour workday.

1885 In July, there is a Street Car Strike in Chicago. Workers are clubbed and killed by the police and Pinkerton detectives.

1886 On May 1st, Albert and Lucy Parsons and their two children lead 80,000 workers up Michigan Avenue in Chicago to support the 8-hour day movement. Some 30,000 of those workers were on strike in Chicago at that time.

May 3rd: August Spies speaks to striking lumber workers and sees police attack workers at nearby McCormick Reaper plant. Some workers are killed. Spies suggests a mass meeting to protest police brutality to be held at Haymarket Square the next evening. The Knights of Labor—a radical union that seeks to get the workers control of the businesses they work for—is involved in organizing the meeting.

May 4th: The Haymarket Protest Meeting—at 8:30 pm, August Spies opens the meeting of 2,500 people. Albert Parsons speaks to the group. By 10:25 pm, with only 200 people left, the meeting is ending when 176 police attack the audience and someone throws a bomb. Seven policemen and four workmen die, and 70 policemen are wounded.

May 5th: Police do not find the bomb-thrower—they never do. They arrest eight union leaders, including Albert Parsons, close all union newspapers, and declare martial law in Chicago.

June 21: The Haymarket trial begins; on August 20th, the jury brings in guilty verdicts with the death penalty by hanging for 7 of the 8 defendants; the 8th gets a sentence of 15 years of hard labor.

November 10th: Two of the men have sentences commuted to life in prison. Another is found in his prison cell with his hand half blown off, and he dies that day. On November 11th, Parson, Spies, and two other labor leaders are hanged at noon.

1887 Workers leave the Knights of Labor to join the A F of L instead because it works for change more peacefully than the Knights do.

1889 The Chicago Times newspaper exposes police corruption in the city, and police inspector Bonfield, who led the attack on Haymarket, is removed from the police force.

1893 The Governor of Illinois pardons the three remaining Haymarket defendants.

Points of View

What did the Haymarket Riot accomplish? What did the trial accomplish? At the time, your answer depended on your point of view. It still does. Here are statements by people concerned with the Haymarket trial.

--At his trial, Albert Parsons reported of his speech at Haymarket: "I spoke of the compulsory idleness and starvation wages, and how these things drove the working men to desperation...under this system the workingmen of the United States were really doing ten hours' work for two hours' pay."

--The State's Attorney at the trial said that "Law is on trial. Anarchy is on trial...Convict these men, make examples of them, hang them and you save our institutions, our society."

--August Spies told the judge at the trial: "You may pronounce the sentence upon me, honorable judge, but let the world know that in A.D. 1886 in the State of Illinois, eight men were sentenced to death because they believed in a better future..."

--A Chicago business man commented after the trial, "No, I don't consider these people to have been found guilty of any offense, but they must be hanged...The labor movement must be crushed. The Knights of Labor will not dare to create discontent again if these men are hanged."

Did the Haymarket Riot accomplish any union goals? The Knights of Labor believed that the worker should take control of the key industries. This event did not help to accomplish that goal. Because it increased fear of unions to some people, it hurt some unions. In a way, it also helped them. Some workers left the Knights of Labor and chose instead to join Samuel Gompers' union. And the Haymarket event focused attention on labor.

Samuel Gompers was an innovator in that he introduced a new idea in response to changing conditions. Parsons and Spies supported radical ideas that other leaders had proposed, so while they are heroes of the labor movement, they were not innovators. Samuel Gompers' new idea was that the worker should have a share of the profits, not control of the industries. In time, the A F of L would become the largest group of labor unions in the United States, realizing Samuel Gompers' vision of a new kind of union.

Questions to discuss:

1. Unions got the 8-hour working day. How else are working conditions now different from the conditions that Parsons and others protested in the 1880s?
2. Every change has good and bad sides. There are many different views of the changes labor unions have brought. What are some of the good and some of the bad aspects of unions?
3. Collect news about labor issues from the newspaper. Then identify the different points of view on those current issues. What is your view?