

“ATTENTION WORKINGMEN!” HAYMARKET MASS MEETING FLYER

AUTHOR

Adolph Fischer, August Spies

DATE

1886

TYPE

FLYER

SIGNIFICANCE

Example of the “mass communication” method of promoting nineteenth-century community meetings, in this case one associated with the tragic Haymarket Square Bombing

Overview



This document is an example of an American broadside. Broadside were used during the 18th and 19th centuries for mass communication. Printed on a single sheet of paper, broadsides were posted in public places and handed out to people as forms of advertisement for merchandise for sale, notification about public events, such as entertainment productions or speeches, or to advocate religious or political positions. In a nation where the population was growing rapidly, but technology was limited, these posters or flyers were the primary form of reaching large numbers of people, particularly in urban areas.

This particular flyer is an announcement to draw people to Haymarket Square, the site of an important event in United States labor history. The late 1800s was a period of significant labor unrest in America as rapid industrialization resulted in long work hours and dangerous working conditions for many industries. As workers unionized, they found ways to fight back against these conditions—most often using the work stoppage, or strike. There were many strikes in the United States in this era, and many of them involved

violence. The Great Railroad Strike of 1877 brought the country’s transportation system to a halt and resulted in bloody clashes between troops and strikers in many major cities across the United States. The McCormick Reaper plant in Chicago was a flash point for union action and strikes often attracted anarchists and other radicals. The event advertised by this document was a public protest against police action at the McCormick Reaper plant the previous day, where the Chicago police killed two workers and injured many more. At the Haymarket Square protest on May 4, 1886, an unknown person threw a homemade bomb at the police who were on guard. The resulting panic and violence at Haymarket marked a milestone moment in American labor history, where unions and the labor movement became associated with anarchism and bombs in the mind of the public. This document is thus an important piece that allows us to reflect on how a particular event in history can represent larger historical issues such as industrialization, power imbalances in gender and class, and attitudes about immigrants and immigration. Visual documents such as the Haymarket broadside reveal not just specifics about one event in history, but also social and cultural attitudes of the time.

Attention Workingmen!

MASS-MEETING

TO-NIGHT, at 7.30 o'clock,

HAYMARKET, Randolph St., Bet. Desplaines and Halsted.

Good Speakers will be present to denounce the latest
atrocious act of the police, the shooting of our
fellow-workmen yesterday afternoon.

CHICAGO
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY

THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE.

Achtung Arbeiter!

Große

Massen-Versammlung

Heute Abend, halb 8 Uhr, auf dem

Heumarkt, Randolph-Straße, zwischen

Desplaines- u. Halsted-Str.

Gute Redner werden den neuesten Schurkenstreich der Polizei,
indem sie gestern Nachmittag unsere Brüder erschoss, geißeln.

Das Executiv-Comite.

Haymarket Flyer
(Library of Congress)

About the Artist

This document was written by local anarchists in Chicago (the Executive Committee). The primary author was Adolph Fischer. Fischer was born in Germany in 1858 and immigrated to the United States in 1873. In 1883 he moved his family to Chicago, where he worked as a typesetter for the German-language newspaper *Arbeiter-Zeitung*. Fischer became a member of the International Working People's Association and a radical splinter group, *Lehr-und-Wehr Verein*.

The leader of the Chicago anarchist movement was August Spies, and he played an important role in the creation of this document. Spies was born in Germany in 1855 and immigrated to Chicago after his father died suddenly in 1871. Spies had relatives in the burgeoning and successful German community that settled in Illinois in the late 1800s, so he became part of the German working class in Chicago, working as an upholsterer. Attracted to socialist politics, he joined the Socialist Labour Party in 1877, and rose to a leadership position. As part of Chicago's more radical socialist wing, Spies helped form the International Working People's Association in 1883 as an alternative to the Socialist Labour Party. He became the editor of the pro-labor newspaper *Arbeiter-Zeitung* in 1884.

Spies was one of several speakers at labor events on May 3rd, 1886. After workers were killed and injured at the riot at the McCormick Reaper Plant, Fischer attended a meeting during which he and others formulated a plan to respond. The attendees decided to hold a mass meeting at Haymarket Square the next evening, and Fischer was asked to create a flyer to publicize the event. The original flyer contained the words "Workingmen Arm Yourselves and Appear in Full Force!" Spies, who was scheduled to be one of the "good speakers" at the Haymarket meeting, feared that that such inflammatory language would turn away potential attendees. He refused to speak at the rally unless this sentence was removed from the document. Most of the original flyers were destroyed, and some 20,000 copies of the new broadside were distributed.

Following the violence at the Haymarket meeting, both Fischer and Spies were arrested along with six others accused of participating in the bombing and violence. Although Fischer and Spies attended the meeting (Spies was the primary speaker of the evening), both men left before the bombing and violence began. Fischer and Spies were convicted and sentenced to death by hanging. Both men were hanged on November 11, 1887.

Context

During the late 1800s, the United States rapidly expanded its manufacturing capacity. Whereas earlier manufac-

turing, such as textile production, was driven by steam technology, this Industrial Revolution included heavy manufacturing, including steel production and equipment. Most of these new factory jobs were filled with immigrants who came in large numbers to the United States, seeking economic opportunity and escape from poverty, political violence, and religious persecution.

As these workers grew in number, they began to organize to fight back against what in many cases were dangerous and grueling work conditions. In industrial centers such as Chicago, workers typically worked six days a week, often for more than ten hours a day. Workers formed unions to have some bargaining power with management for better wages and conditions. Founded in 1869, The Knights of Labor grew from 70,000 members in 1884 to over 700,000 by 1886, primarily because of its advocacy for an eight-hour workday, a position supported by most workers regardless of gender, ethnicity, or skill level. However, as socialists and others embracing more radical leftist politics joined the labor movement, Samuel Gompers organized The Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions (FOTLU, later known as the American Federation of Labor) in 1881 with the goal of divorcing labor interests from politics. In October of 1884, the FOTLU called for federal legislation mandating an eight-hour workday and set a deadline for May 1, 1886. If the federal government failed to pass such legislation, workers would call a general strike (where all workers regardless of industry refuse to report to their jobs). Although the FOTLU and the Knights of Labor were at odds with each other, the members of the Knights of Labor overwhelmingly agreed to support the May Day strike.

Labor activists in Chicago were particularly organized and motivated. Illinois's rapid transformation from agriculture to industry spawned a working class that did not shy away from demands for reform. The state formed the nation's first coal miner's union in 1861, and by 1867, Illinois' legislature passed an eight-hour workday law. Because the law was not enforced, Chicago workers were particularly irritated when subjected to ten-hour days and grueling work conditions. When the May Day strike deadline approached, labor activists in Chicago had years of experience with organizing strikes and other actions; in 1884, the Illinois State Federation of Labor expressed solidarity with the FOTLU, calling for May Day, 1886 as the day to finally win the eight-hour day goal.

As the May Day deadline came and no federal legislation was passed, strikes erupted throughout industrial centers, including Chicago. Some 80,000 workers marched up Michigan Avenue on May 1st, 1886. The labor actions attracted supporters who were not necessarily peaceful. Radical anarchists and others who had previously promoted violence joined in, prompting law enforcement concern for public safety. The peaceful protests ended in violence at a particularly hot flashpoint: the McCormick Reaper Plant. Striking workers had been replaced by non-union workers, and,

on Monday, May 3rd, union workers began to physically attack their non-union replacements. The Chicago police, aided by the private Pinkerton Security Agency of hired law enforcement, were on duty, anticipating trouble. As violence broke out, the police and Pinkertons moved in, killing two workers and injuring many more. Angered by the police's actions, Chicago leaders called for a meeting at Haymarket Square, a busy commercial center in the city, to protest not just labor conditions but also police brutality.

Inclement weather prevented a massive turnout for the May 4th, 1886 Haymarket event, and it started much later than the time indicated on the document. A couple of thousand people attended, and by the end of the evening, the crowd had dwindled to some 200. Expecting a much larger crowd and trouble, the Chicago police sent a contingent of 176 officers to the scene. In one of the most unexplainable incidents in American history, an unknown person launched a homemade bomb into the police squad, setting off a frenzy of panicked response. Police shot indiscriminately, killing six of their own (one died from the bomb blast). Four workers also died.

The Haymarket incident marked a turning point for the American labor movement. The violence associated with the bombing of police officers turned public sentiment away from supporting labor causes, such as the eight-hour day. The diverse nature of Chicago's labor activists, including immigrants, women, socialists, unskilled laborers, and anarchists as well as native-born Americans, skilled workers, and more established immigrants, fueled an increasing fear of disorder. Anti-labor laws and sentiment increased after this event; union newspapers were shut down and leaders rounded up. The trial of the eight men supposedly responsible for the Haymarket bombing is the source of much historical discussion, but it is clear that it was politically driven; the man accused of throwing the bomb had witnesses proving he was a mile away from the scene at the time. The Haymarket meeting shows us how immigration, industrialization, power imbalances, and social action converged in one particular event – represented by one important document.

Explanation and Analysis of the Document

One of the first aspects of this document that likely strikes a modern reader is the gendered language used to describe the target audience. The headline screams in bold type "Attention Workingmen!" The reality of history is that many women worked in industrial factory jobs. They also played an important role in labor activism during the nineteenth century, particularly in Chicago. The Knights of Labor voted to admit women as members in 1881. Its emphasis on equal pay and the eight-hour day,

regardless of gender, ethnicity, or skill level, helped the organization grow its ranks and influence. The Knights of Labor used charismatic women to draw in new members. One notable speaker was Mary Harris Jones, known as Mother Jones. Jones was a Chicago seamstress who became a self-proclaimed "hell-raiser" intent on fighting wealth inequality in the Gilded Age of the late 1800s.

One of the most prominent activists in the Chicago labor movement was Lucy Parsons. Parsons was born in Texas to enslaved parents and married a Confederate soldier. Their advocacy for former slaves' rights and mixed-race marriage resulted in violent threats against them in Texas, and they relocated to Chicago. Lucy became an advocate for women of color in Chicago labor unions, and she and her husband, Albert, founded the anarchist newspaper *The Alarm*, with Albert as editor and Lucy as contributing writer. Lucy and Albert supported the events at the McCormick Reaper Plant and Haymarket Square. Ultimately, Albert Parsons was hung along side Fischer and Spies for conspiracy. Lucy continued her work as a labor activist. Although the document called on "Workingmen" to appear, working women were an important force in the nineteenth-century labor movement.

Another interesting feature of this document is the use of a language other than English. Many contemporary critics of 21st-century immigrants claim that earlier immigrants from the 19th century were much more amenable to learning English and blending into American culture. It is true that immigrants from 1800s, particularly the latter half of the century, were mocked if they did not speak English correctly, which pressured immigrants to learn the new language rather than retain their old culture. However, not every immigrant to the United States simply learned English and gave up any remnant of his or her home culture. The very existence of the *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, Spies' pro-labor newspaper, proves that there was a considerable population of workers in Chicago for whom German remained their language of choice. Germans immigrated in droves to Chicago in the mid- to late 1800s. From 1850 to 1890, Chicago's population doubled almost every year, and the single reason was German immigration. By 1884, they accounted for over 24 percent of the city's population. Unlike Germans who immigrated in the early part of the 19th century, these Germans were less educated, less rural, and more rooted in craftsman trades and radical politics. They brought with them their traditions of the *Arbeiter-Vereine*, or workers' associations that allowed working-class men to gather socially. What started as social activities became more political in the late 1800s. In Chicago and elsewhere, these meetings became places for recruiting activists, not just perpetuating German culture through food, dance, and song. The document's use of the German language shows the persistence of culture in early immigrant groups despite the often-used narrative of early assimilation. In fact, early immigrants, even Western Europeans, clung to their culture, traditions, and language.

—Commentary by Karen Linkletter

Questions for Further Study

1. What does this document tell us about the nature and function of public urban spaces in the 19th century? Why might the organizers have selected Haymarket, a busy commercial center in the city, for the protest site? What is Haymarket Square used for today?
2. As the urban population in America grew in the 1800s, so did the need for mass communication. Why would this flyer have been an effective way to reach a large number of working-class people in Chicago? What other forms of mass communication were used in the late 1800s? How else might the organizers have notified workers of the Haymarket meeting?
3. The document states that “good speakers” would appear at the Haymarket meeting. Why would the authors have chosen to add that specific text to the flyer? How do organizers today use “star” speakers to draw people to mass meetings and protests?

Further Reading

Books

Eric L. Hirsch. *Urban Revolt: Ethnic Politics in the Nineteenth-Century Chicago Labor Movement*. University of California Press, 1990.

Websites

Karla Kelling Sclater. “The Labor and Radical Press, 1820 to the Present: An Overview and Bibliography.” University of Washington, Labor Press Project, Pacific Northwest Labor and Radical Newspapers. 2001. <https://depts.washington.edu/labhist/laborpress/Kelling.shtml>

“The Haymarket Affair.” Illinois Labor History Society website, <http://www.illinoislaborhistory.org/the-haymarket-affair>

“The Popularity of Broad­sides.” Library of Congress, Printed Ephemera, Three Centuries of Broad­sides and Other Printed Ephemera. <https://www.loc.gov/collections/broadsides-and-other-printed-ephemera/articles-and-essays/introduction-to-printed-ephemera-collection/the-popularity-of-broadsides/>

Documentaries

Haymarket: The Bomb, The Anarchists, The Labor Struggle. Adrian Prawica, Director. Documentary Film. Filmadria. 2021.