



Eight Hours, and What They Cost: Chicago 1886

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On '1 May 1886', several hundred thousand workers in the United States went on strike to force the introduction of the eight-hour working day. Three days later, a bomb at Haymarket in Chicago killed one police officer instantly; six further police officers and at least four members of the crowd died as a result. Four men were hanged — convicted not for the act itself, but for inciting it.

The events of spring 1886 in Chicago are a case in which a defeat achieved more than many a victory. Within a few days, the American labour movement experienced its greatest mobilisation success to date, a bomb attack and the start of a wave of persecution; the consequences of these events dragged on for years. What remained was a date that is now commemorated all over the world — and a question that has arisen anew in every labour dispute ever since: What happens to a movement when it is accused of violence?

The struggle over time

Why eight hours, of all things?

The number eight predates the movement of 1886. In 1817, Robert Owen formulated in Great Britain the tripartite division of 'eight hours' labour, eight hours' recreation, eight hours' rest' — work, recreation, rest.

The version that appeared on the banners in 1886 is more recent and American. It dates back to the poem Eight Hours by I. G. Blanchard from 1866, set to music in 1872 by Jesse H. Jones: eight hours' work, eight hours' rest, eight hours for what we will — for whatever we want. The shift from 'recreation' to 'what we will' makes all the difference. Recreation serves tomorrow's work. What one person wants serves no one.

The American eight-hour movement had its own roots, particularly in the writings of Ira Stewart and the Eight-Hour Leagues of the 1860s. The figure originated in Britain, but the movement did not.

In the industrial towns of the 1880s, ten to twelve hours were the norm, and in some trades even more. Reducing working hours was therefore never merely a question of rest. It was a question of who has control over one's lifetime.

The Federation of Organised Trades and Labour Unions sets a deadline

In October 1884, the Federation of Organised Trades and Labour Unions in Chicago — the forerunner of the later American Federation of Labour — resolved that the eight-hour day should come into effect from 1 May 1886. This was not a negotiating position, but a deadline. Anyone who did not give in by then would face a strike.

The deadline as a source of strength

One interpretation sees this as a stroke of genius in mobilisation. A date achieves what resolutions cannot: namely, a common point in time for many unconnected workforces. Without the 1884 deadline, the '1 May 1886' would not have come about.

The deadline as overreach

The opposing view considers the approach to have been excessive, because the organisations were too weak to sustain a nationwide strike. The deadline claimed a strength that did not exist — and those who were disappointed do not return.

The two interpretations cannot be definitively pitted against one another, as there is no comparable case. The only thing that can be stated with certainty is that the deadline brought about both outcomes.

Chicago as the focal point

During those years, Chicago grew faster than any other major American city: between 1880 and 1890, the population doubled from 503.165 to 1.099.850. The city was characterised by meat processing, agricultural machinery manufacturing and the railways, with a workforce consisting predominantly of German, Bohemian, Irish and Polish immigrants. Here existed something that was otherwise rarely found in such concentration: a German-language anarchist press, a militant trade union left and an employer class that deployed an armed private police force .

On '1 May 1886', an estimated 300.000 to 500.000 people across the country went on strike. In Chicago, the largest single stronghold, around 40.000 went on strike; some 80.000 marched down Michigan Avenue. A further 45.000 were granted shorter working hours to avert the strike. The day passed without incident.

Four days in May

3 May: McCormick

A lockout had been in place at the McCormick works since 16 February 1886. On 3 May, a clash broke out there between strikers and strike-breakers. The police opened fire. According to the prevailing account, two workers died; contemporary reports put the figure at up to six.

4 May: Haymarket

Anarchists had called for a protest rally at the Haymarket on the evening of 4 May. The rally proceeded peacefully; Mayor Carter Harrison had listened to the speeches and gone home, and as rain was threatening, the crowd was already dispersing. As a police unit attempted to disperse the remaining crowd, a bomb was thrown into their ranks.

Police officer Mathias Degan died instantly. Six further police officers died subsequently, mostly from gunshots fired in the ensuing chaos; an eighth died two years later from his injuries. Among those gathered, at least four people died.

It remains unclear to this day who threw the bomb. The indictment itself acknowledged this and referred to an unknown person.

The trial

Eight men were charged, mostly editors; six of them were immigrants, the majority of whom were German. The most prominent defendant, Albert Parsons, was born in Alabama and thus did not quite fit the picture painted by the press. The charge was not that of perpetration, but of incitement and aiding and abetting. Six of the eight were demonstrably not at the scene at the time of the throwing.

The assessment is controversial

The older and predominant account — as found, for example, in Paul Avrich (1984) and James Green (2006) — views the trial as a political process: the composition of the jury, the admission of evidence and the construction of the incitement charge were already criticised by contemporaries.

Timothy Messer-Kruse (2011) disagrees. He considers the trial to have been conducted in accordance with the standards of its time and argues that the prosecution presented a specific conspiracy with specific contributions to the offence, not merely liability based on shared intent. His work, for its part, has been criticised. Both positions are set out here without taking a definitive stance on them.

Judgements and courts

Seven defendants were sentenced to death; one was sentenced to fifteen years' imprisonment.

The judgements were reviewed on appeal and upheld. The Illinois Supreme Court dismissed the appeals on 14 September 1887; the Supreme Court of the United States unanimously dismissed the appeal on 2 November 1887 on grounds of lack of jurisdiction. The charges were therefore not only upheld by a jury, but also approved by the highest courts.

Four of the convicted men were hanged on 11 November 1887. According to all reliable accounts, one took his own life in his cell beforehand. Two sentences were commuted to life imprisonment.

The Pardon of 1893

Governor John Peter Altgeld pardoned the three remaining prisoners on 26 June 1893. His reasoning was not based on clemency, but on flaws in the proceedings: he described the jury as having been hand-picked, the judge as biased, and stated that the state had never investigated who had thrown the bomb, and that the evidence showed no connection whatsoever between the defendants and the bomber. For two of the three, he stated that no case had been brought against them at all.

The pardon took a heavy political toll on Altgeld. In 1896, he lost his re-election bid — aside from the pardon, his opposition to the deployment of federal troops during the Pullman strike of 1894 and his advocacy of the silver standard also played a part.

The consequences

For the movement: the slump

In 1886, the Knights of Labour had over 700.000 members; by 1890, this figure had fallen to no more than 100.000.

The causes are disputed and are regularly cited by researchers as equally significant : the defeat in the Great Southwest Railroad Strike against Jay Gould, the ended in early May 1886; the conflict between the rank and file, who were keen to strike, and the leadership, which was sceptical of strike action; the employers' offensive; and the leadership's distancing itself from the accused. The Haymarket affair alone does not explain the decline.

As for the organisational structure

The American Federation of Labour emerged in December 1886 from the Federation of Organised Trades and Labour Unions. Its orientation under Samuel Gompers — skilled workers, collective agreements, and a distinction from political objectives — was already laid down in the predecessor organisation. Whether Haymarket caused this course or merely accelerated it is a matter of interpretation, not fact.

On the date: 1 May

The commonly held account here is inaccurate, and it is worth setting the record straight.

In July 1889, the International Socialist Workers' Congress in Paris resolved to hold **a one-off** international rally for '1 May 1890', not a recurring day of action. It was not until the Brussels Congress of 1891 that the decision was taken to repeat it annually.

The reasoning behind the date was also different from what is usually claimed. The text of the resolution states that the American Federation of Labour, at its congress in St Louis in December 1888, had already set a rally for 1 May 1890 ; this date was therefore adopted. Haymarket and the year 1886 do not appear in the resolution.

The notion that 1 May was chosen in memory of Chicago is a widespread, but disputed account — Eric Hobsbawm expressly contradicts it. The connection arose in later commemorative practice, not in the resolution.

To this day, the United States does not observe 1 May as a labour holiday. Labour Day in September has been observed since 1882 and was enshrined in federal law in 1894 — according to a widely held interpretation, partly to outdo 1 May in importance; alongside this is the view that it was an electoral concession following the Pullman strike.

What can be learnt from this, and what is being debated

The legal question: when words become deeds

Regardless of how one assesses the proceedings, the case raises a question that remains relevant to this day: when does a political statement constitute incitement to a criminal offence?

The legal argument and the controversy

According to the prevailing account, the prosecution argued that anyone who condones violence in written works is liable for the violence that subsequently occurs — even without any connection to the specific perpetrator. This legal construction separates incitement from the act itself and turns it into a matter of attitude. Messer-Kruse disputes precisely this and sees it as an allegation of a specific conspiracy.

If this broad interpretation is accepted, any radical journalism can be turned into a criminal case as soon as something happens anywhere.

Subsequent clarification

Since *Brandenburg v. Ohio* (1969), American case law has required, for inciting speech to be criminal, that it be directed at imminently impending unlawful acts and be capable of bringing them about. Eighty-three years elapsed between the 1886 case and this clarification.

The social question: Who is considered to belong?

Six of the eight defendants were immigrants, and the press constantly highlighted this. Alongside the bomb, the trial always addressed the question of whether these people belonged here at all.

This pattern is not a thing of the past. It resurfaces whenever industrial disputes are waged by workers whose sense of belonging appears disputable — on the basis of origin, residence status or type of contract. Those whose sense of belonging can be disputed do not have to respond to the demand.

The philosophical question: time as property

Behind the eight-hour day lies a claim that goes further than any collective bargaining round: that one's lifetime is not entirely for sale.

From this perspective, whoever buys labour is not buying the person, nor their day, but a defined part of it. This boundary is not negotiable like a price, because it determines whether there is any

life at all outside of work. This is precisely why, in the eyes of employers, the demand was not a cost issue, but an attack on their right of disposal.

What remains

The eight-hour day came about, but not in 1886 and not as a result of this strike.

In the United States, it initially applied only to specific groups: federal employees from 1868 and 1892, the interstate railways under the Adamson Act of 1916, and federal contractors under the Walsh-Healey Act of 1936. The Fair Labour Standards Act of 1938 did not stipulate an eight-hour day, but rather a maximum weekly working time with overtime pay, phased in from 44 hours in 1938 to 40 hours from October 1940.

In Germany, the eight-hour working day was agreed on 15 November 1918 in the Stinnes-Legien Agreement between employers' associations and workers unions and enshrined in law by the Ordinance on the Regulation of Working Hours for Industrial Workers of 23 November 1918. It did not last long: the Working Hours Regulation of 21 December 1923 allowed for ten-hour days once again under certain exceptional circumstances.

That is the real conclusion to this story, and it is less uplifting than the usual one. A hard-won boundary remains vulnerable. The movement of 1886 did not achieve the eight-hour day; it framed the issue in such a way that it never disappeared — and every subsequent generation has had to address it anew.

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