

Haymarket and the Chicago Idea Resonate 125 Years Later

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Haymarket Riot Memorial, on the corner of Randolph and Desplaines, Chicago. (Photo: [avrenim_acceber](#) [3])

One hundred and twenty-five years ago today, [a bomb exploded in Chicago's Haymarket Square](#) [4]. The explosion, the culmination of more than a decade's worth of labor strife, came as Chicago police officers broke up a peaceful protest of union men and anarchists rallying for an eight-hour day and protesting the killing of striking workers the day before by police. In the bombing's aftermath, eight anarchists were arrested for the bombing that left eight police officers dead, even though six of the accused were not present when the bomb exploded. The first Red Scare had descended on America. By mid-November 1887, four Chicago anarchists - including its two foremost leaders, Albert Parsons and August Spies - swung from the gallows pole, while another would commit suicide.

To this day, no one knows who threw the bomb. But the bombing, known today as the Haymarket affair, and the unjust prosecution of the Chicago 8, who became martyrs, would eventually become an international sensation that would help inspire the worldwide labor holiday of May Day, America's true labor day. Yet, while the Haymarket affair is remembered for inspiring May Day and celebrating the dignity of working men and women, not much mention is made of what the Chicago 8, especially Parsons and Spies, stood for: the complete reorganization of society, where workers democratically owned and managed the companies they worked for.

These ideas, despite being more than a century old, still matter today as state governors like Wisconsin's Scott Walker try to strip the collective bargaining rights of public workers - the last

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economic sector protected by strong unions. This latest attack on working people occurs as [worker productivity increases](#) [5] and [real wages continue to stagnate](#) [6], continuing a trend begun in the 1970's. Nevertheless, antiunion politicians like Walker try to paint public workers as a privileged elite, pitting them against private sector workers without the benefits of unionization, even after Washington's bailout of Wall Street shows who the privileged are.

Yet Walker's gamble may have backfired, giving life to a moribund labor movement - a labor movement vitally in need of making Parsons' and Spies' vision of the United States their own. Indeed, Parsons and Spies would have seen a lot of similarities between 21st-century America and the United States during the aftermath of the Civil War. No doubt they would believe today's worker, like the worker of Gilded Age Chicago, still fervently desires a democratic workplace marked by voluntary association, living wages and agreed-upon working conditions.

Their philosophy, known as the [Chicago Idea](#) [7], opposed all top-down control of the economy and the workplace, believing working men and women had the necessary skills to run productive businesses without resorting to exploitation. Both Parsons and Spies believed that the rise of industrial capitalism produced "wage slaves," who weren't much different from African-American slaves, working long, exhausting hours for starvation pay with no method of redress. According to these anti-authoritarians, free people don't rent themselves to a boss who controls them for much of the day; rather, they work voluntarily and cooperatively to benefit themselves and their co-workers.

Yet, both men also opposed state socialism, or the belief that a central, controlling authority was necessary to produce a more just society. They were left libertarians who believed, much like many Americans today, that the government that governs least, governs best. Instead, they fought for an idea expressed by the Lowell Mill Girls in the 1840's: "Those who work in the mills ought to own them."

And they believed that unions were the means of liberation for powerless workers, the seed of a future "free society," according to Parsons. As historian James Green notes in "[Death in the Haymarke](#) [8]t," these ideas appealed to Chicago's largely immigrant workforce specifically because they were practical. "This concept of revolutionary unionism ... appealed to European artisans ... who were familiar with the watchmakers and other artisans in Europe who embraced Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's anarchist ideas about free association and mutual aid," Green wrote. "A few of them had even put these cooperative ideas into practice in their own shops and benefit societies. The notion of workshops controlled by intelligent craftsmen was not a utopian dream to them."

With American labor awakened since the Madison sit-ins, it's important to remember the radical and humane vision of men like Parsons and Spies, who believed correctly that the anchors of a truly democratic society are worker-owned cooperatives, where the fruits of labor are shared justly. There is no reason why such firms cannot exist within a market economy. In fact, they already do.

According to the [National Center for Employee Ownership](#) [9] (NCEO), there are currently 11,300 employee stock ownership plans (ESOPs), stock bonus plans and profit-sharing plans primarily invested in employer stock in the United States. Approximately 13 million people are invested in such plans, which are valued at \$901 billion. Such plans, rarely discussed in the media, have experienced tremendous growth since 1975, when 1,600 companies offered them to 250,000 participants.

Sometimes such profit-sharing comes as a gift, [as it did with Milwaukie, Oregon,-based Bob's Red Mill Natural Foods](#) [10]. On his 81st birthday last year, owner Bob Moore unveiled an ESOP, giving all his employees with three years' tenure a fully vested share of the company. "In some ways, I had a choice," Moore said of what he was going to do with the business before he retires. "But in my heart, I didn't. These people are far too good at their jobs for me to just sell it."

Even the business press has taken notice, albeit across the pond. Last week, The Financial Times devoted a long article to David Erdal, who decided [to sell his Fife, Scotland,-based company Tullis Russell to its employees.](#) [11] The gamble paid off, as the company "increased its productivity at an impressive rate." Its conclusion: employee ownership is an "alternative to conventional forms of capitalism and that, if managed well, it passes the market test."

Admittedly, ESOPs fall far short of Parsons' and Spies' idea of workplace democracy, where workers cooperatively decide what to produce and pay themselves. But it is a good start, and a firm foundation to build from as Republicans attack the safety net and Democrats allow them access to the shears without much protest.

One hundred and twenty-five years after Haymarket, America's reanimated labor movement should once again make the Chicago Idea its mission. Strong union agitation, combined with a renewed push for employee ownership, could help the United States crawl closer to balancing its often conflicting desire for freedom and equality for all. Profit and people don't have to conflict; indeed, they can work together to generate more wealth, more equitably shared among its producers.

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