

On Trial: Haymarket Square, 1886

A role play for high school, college and university classrooms, and union education settings

It is mid-May in 1886, and the City of Chicago has commissioned a Special Grand Jury Investigation into the extreme violence that occurred on May 4 in Chicago's Haymarket Square.

Background:

In 1886, the American Federation of Labor called for workers all over the country to strike on May 1, wherever employers refused to reduce the workday to 8 hours. In Chicago on May 1, eighty thousand workers and their families joined nationwide demonstrations of more than 340,000 workers for an 8-hour workday. Despite Chicago press predictions of violence, there was no bloodshed as thousands and thousands of workers and their families paraded to Chicago's Lake Front to hear speeches from labor and community leaders in many different languages. Many industries were shut down, including all the railroads and stockyards, and thousands of workers in Chicago won the shorter workday from their employers to prevent them from striking.

However, within days, this situation reversed completely. Chicago police killed 4 striking workers at the McCormick Harvester factory on May 3, and then a bomb exploded at the Haymarket Square rally called by union leaders to protest the police violence against the strikers. As the protest rally was ending and the crowd dwindled to several hundred, a unit of 180 police arrived and ordered the last speaker and remaining people to disperse. Suddenly, a bomb blast in police ranks injured 67 police (7 later died), and in response, police fired into the crowd and wounded 200 hundred people. Without any evidence about who threw the bomb, eight labor leaders were arrested for the crime, even though 7 of them weren't even there. This inspired enormous public outrage all over the United States and internationally, and occurred just 3 days after the hugely successful demonstrations for the 8-hour workday.

What happened? The Grand Jury Investigation into May 4th will gather testimony from witnesses and concerned citizens, and then will present their findings as to whom should be criminally prosecuted for the violence.

Your class will divide into six groups representing defendants in this proceeding, and a seventh group for the Grand Jury. Each group is charged with inciting violence at Haymarket Square and conspiracy to commit murder, but for different reasons. Each group should prepare their defenses as well as accusations against other groups. The Jury should prepare 3 questions for each group.

Procedure:

Teacher or group leader will serve as prosecutor and make the charges against the first defendant group. Members of the group will: 1) defend themselves against the charges; and 2) accuse other groups of the crimes. The Grand Jury questions the group and the prosecutor will open the questioning of the defendant group to other groups before

moving on. This process repeats until all groups have been charged, defended themselves, accused others, and have been questioned by others. Jury retires to deliberate and to assign probable blame for criminal prosecution.

Debriefing: [Read](#) about actual prosecution and consequences, or [watch](#) *We Mean to Make Things Over: A History of May Day*.

Defendant Group roles:

1. Chicago Manufacturer's Association

Your members are the elite of Chicago...the local owners of beef, pork, merchandise, and farm machinery—the Armours, Swifts, Fields, and McCormicks. You are suspected of hiring someone to throw a bomb into the police unit at Haymarket Square on May 4. Why? To turn public sympathy against the workers organizing for 8-hour workdays and union contracts. You deny this of course. Why would you do anything to hurt the people that protect your factories when the workers protest? Besides, everyone knows that the many different political and ethnic factions among the workers in Chicago are enough to bring on conflict without you.

2. Chicago Press Association

Your members own the biggest newspapers of the city, the main media sources of the day with many competitors. You are suspected of hiring someone to throw a bomb into the police unit at Haymarket Square on May 4. Why? Because violence and sensationalism sell newspapers, and so does anti-immigrant and anti-socialist hysteria. After all, don't the radical socialists and anarchists, who are usually immigrants, want to take away everything that American-born citizens have worked so hard to acquire?

3. Chicago Foreign Language Newspaper Association

Your members are the owners and editors of the small newspapers that serve the immigrant communities in their own languages. Polish, German, Bohemian, Hungarian. In an era before electronic media of any kind, these newspapers are the most important sources of information in immigrant communities. August Spies is one of your colleagues.

4. Chicago Central Trades Union Council

In 1884, the largest national federation of labor unions in the country adopted a resolution that all labor join on May 1, 1886 to establish an eight-hour workday. In 1885, the Chicago Council recommended to its locals that “the workers arm in answer to the employment of private security, police and militia by their employers.” Important leaders of the Chicago 8-Hour League include Albert Parsons, recording secretary, and August Spies, along with the other six men arrested and charged.

5. Chicago Knights of Labor

Your slogan is “An injury to one is the concern of all.” A tide of new members, immigrant and unskilled labor, has engulfed the order between 1885 and 1886. Your membership has multiplied more than seven-fold, including black workers, women workers and immigrant workers, along with the growth of the Eight-Hour Movement and the AFL plan to strike on May 1 against all employers who refuse to shorten hours. Why? Despite the anti-strike national leadership of the Knights, locally, the workers were eager for pay raises and union protection and so, joined the Knights’ local chapter organizations by the thousands. (Lucy Parsons was an organizer in the Women’s Assembly.)

6. International Workingmen’s Association

You are an organization of radical labor organizers and activists, aka anarchists and socialists, formed in 1883 and united by objectives including ”Destruction of existing class rule, by all means....establishment of a free society based upon cooperative organization of production....and free contracts between independent groups....without profit-mongery....with equal rights for all...” (Albert Parsons and August Spies were founding members.)

You have dedicated all of your small organization’s resources to building the Eight-Hour movement that is sweeping the country, embraced by working families everywhere who are “Summoning our forces from shipyard, shop, and mill; Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will” (lyrics from a contemporary popular song, “We Mean to Make Things Over—the Eight Hour Song”.)

You are suspected of throwing the bomb at Haymarket Square to advance the revolutionary struggle to the next level. However, you deny ever advocating force except as a response to force first used by employers. You point out that the newspapers in the Chicago Press Association often call for violence against strikers in their editorials, and you can document many instances of police and militia shooting and killing workers without provocation. You believe that the Haymarket bomber was hired by one of the big business owners to break up the Eight Hour movement.