

## Labor History: The Haymarket Riot

*By Ed Leavy, SVFT Executive Union Representative*

As organized labor faces attacks from politicians, the media, and the public – somehow it is now un-American to believe that workers deserve a fair wage and health insurance – we need to remember the sacrifices that courageous workers have made for over a century. One of the first and most notorious examples of this fight was the Haymarket Square riot in 1885.



On May 1, 1886, a general strike was called throughout the country to demand an 8-hour workday. The protests were peaceful almost everywhere, but at the McCormick Reaper Works in Chicago fighting broke out between the protesters and McCormick's "security" – goons hired by the company to break up the strike. Two workers were killed in the scuffle, outraging labor leaders across the Midwest. A Knights of Labor union rally was held at Haymarket Square on May 4 to protest the killings.

The rally was attended by 1500 people, and was again peaceful for most of the day. The mood changed when the police moved in to break up the crowd. A scuffle began, and then a bomb was thrown into the crowd. The explosion sent shrapnel everywhere. Inevitably, people panicked, and the police began firing into the crowd. Newspaper accounts at the time stated that the police fired for at least two minutes.

Seven police officers were killed and dozens of protesters were injured, primarily from the crossfire. The local newspapers immediately called for punishment of the union which had led the event. In addition to leading the protest, the Knights of Labor had a number of anarchists in its membership. Union newspapers were raided and shut down, and hundreds of union members were detained for days. Ultimately, eight anarchists in the Knights of Labor were arrested.

Despite the fact that the State of Illinois never presented any evidence linking the eight defendants to the bomb, all were convicted. The State argued that the defendants had increased the possibility of violence by promoting a spirit of radicalism. Four were hanged and one committed suicide. The other three defendants became martyrs to the labor movement, and were ultimately pardoned by Governor John Pete after he issued a report condemning the trial as unfair. His conclusions have largely been affirmed by history.

Despite the exoneration of the three remaining defendants, the Haymarket riot set the labor movement back for years. The government and the press were able to portray the labor movement as radical and out of touch with American values. The Knights of Labor ceased to exist, and the far more conservative American Federation of Labor gained in popularity. However, the sacrifice of the union marchers at Haymarket Square was not in vain; the 8-hour day soon became reality. Working together to improve everyone's standard of living is not un-American or radical. It should not require courage or sacrifice, especially the sacrifice of life that marked the Haymarket tragedy, to have everyone earn a fair wage and have health insurance.