

The Haymarket Affair: Why Were the Eyes of the World on Chicago in 1887?

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Abstract

On May 4, 1886, violence erupted on a Chicago street that would reverberate around the world. Forever known as the Haymarket Affair, it would mark a terrible breakdown between labor and capital in the United States. This lesson will explore the causes and effects of this climactic event and shed light on nature of the industrial revolution in this country.

Essential Questions

- How did capitalism differ from socialism in the 1880s?
- How did industrialization transform the United States after the Civil War?
- Why was Chicago so important during the early labor movement?

Background

After the Civil War, industrialization occurred at a breathtaking pace throughout the United States, but nowhere as dramatically as Chicago, Illinois. As immigrants poured into America, many sought work in the burgeoning steel, meatpacking, and lumber industries in the heart of the nation's railroad network. While some men grew rich and enjoyed lives of leisure, some labored ten hours a day (or more), six days a week, in desperate attempts to provide for their families whom they barely saw. Once economic prosperity hit the United States in the early 1880s, workers all over Chicago struck for ten hours pay for eight hours work against their employers. Business owners bristled and sought to enhance the ability of the Chicago police department to suppress strikers. Perhaps inevitably, clashes between laborers and police led to violence, death and ultimately a tragic miscarriage of justice.

Assessment

The final assessment of this lesson will involve students responding to the prompt: "Why were the eyes of the world on Chicago in 1887?"

Setting the Purpose

This lesson begins with a discussion of labor and capital, or the haves and have-nots. Students will share their thoughts on the American dream and its conflicting goals for individual prosperity and national equality. Students should address the questions: Is everyone wealthy in this country? What privileges does money seem to buy? What should our social safety net look like (i.e. welfare, free and reduced school lunches, social security payments, Medicare and Medicaid, and so on)?

Analysis of Local Primary Sources Part I

The bulk of this lesson should be conducted with students working alone or in pairs on computers connected to the Internet.

Students should go to The World's of Prairie Avenue map at:

<http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/10432.html>

This interactive map of one of America's most exclusive neighborhoods contains information from 1880 census and other period information including photographs of the residences. Assign one of the four blocks along Prairie Ave. to each student or student group to use to fill out the [World's of Prairie Avenue Feature Analysis Chart](#). Students should click on both Residents and Sources to complete the chart for each address. If information for either one of these links is unavailable, students should select another address for which there is information.

Once students have completed the chart for four residences, they can list the birthplaces of the servants on back of their chart for a future discussion about immigration to Chicago.

The feature analysis chart ends by asking students to provide a summary statement about the nature of Prairie Avenue. These statements should be shared in a large-group discussion as a culminating activity for this part of the lesson.

Analysis of Local Primary Sources Part II

The bulk of this lesson should be conducted with students working alone or in pairs on computers connected to the Internet.

Students should go to the Labor Unrest in Chicago, April 25-May 4, 1886 map at:

<http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/10002.html>

This interactive map of Chicago shows the activities of various labor groups and unions in weeks up to and including the Haymarket bombing on May 4, 1886. Students will examine this map, completing the [Labor Unrest in Chicago, April 25-May 4, 1886 Study Guide](#).

In question 1, students should identify the map as representing small strikes, large strikes, marches, capitulation by business owners, and confrontations with police. In question 2, students should discover that 25,000 workers marched in support of the 8-hour working day. In question 3, students should observe that strikes tended to follow the Chicago River and were conducted by significant minorities of European-born (German and Irish, mostly) workers. In question 4, students should observe how the Tribune advocated the point of view of capitalists over laborers.

Students should then engage in a summary discussion, exploring the cause of such widespread strikes and the rational for the Tribunes vitriolic attack on foreign-born socialists and anarchists.

Analysis of Local Primary Sources Part III

This part of the lesson does not require students to have computer or Internet access although one computer hooked up to a projector and speakers would enhance the lesson.

Students should listen to, if possible, or read Labor and the Haymarket Affair: His Father's Namesake here:

<http://www.chicagohistory.org/greatchicagostories/namesake/index.php>

This piece of historical fiction humanizes one of Chicago's great early labor leaders, Albert Parsons, who was tried, convicted, and hung for his alleged role in a conspiracy responsible for the Haymarket bombing. The above page links to background articles, vocabulary terms and definitions associated with the story, and questions that can be given to students after they have heard or read the story. All of these items can be downloaded as PDFs.

This page also links to an interactive map with primary source photographs, depictions, and text. Discussion questions accompany these documents to help students understand the story of Albert Parsons, 1880s Chicago, industrialization and the early labor movement as well as the Haymarket affair itself. These documents can also all be downloaded and printed for students.

Ties to National Primary Sources

Once this final website has been explored, students should be prepared to address the initial question posed in the title of this lesson, "Why were the eyes of the world on Chicago in 1887?" Answers should reflect concern on behalf of workers throughout the world watching the fate of eight men, including of course, Albert Parsons, as they are put on trial and found guilty of conspiring to spread anarchy. Students should consider the plight of workers and the power of capitalists and ideals of America as they distill this disturbing and critical period of history. From here, they should look at subsequent labor organizations and their role in society, like the UAW, the AFL-CIO, the UEA and others. The power and influence of collective bargaining is an issue that all democratic societies must address if their citizens are truly to be free.

Attachments

In its entirety, this lesson requires access to the Chicago History Museum's website at:

<http://www.chicagohistory.org/>

Elements created specifically for this lesson include:

[The Worlds of Prairie Avenue Feature Analysis Chart](#), a graphic organizer designed to help students navigate the Chicago History Museum's interactive map Chicago's Prairie Avenue circa 1880.

[Labor Unrest in Chicago, April 25-May 4, 1886 Study Guide](#), a set of questions designed to help students understand the Chicago History Museum's interactive map of labor unrest in 1886.