

Henry George: Haymarket and Tariff Reform*

By ANNA GEORGE DEMILLE

DURING THE preceding decade grossly unjust labor conditions in the big industrial plants had resulted in a growing group of rebels who might today be designated as "leftists," but who were then confusedly and interchangeably called "Anarchists, Communists, Socialists."¹ They were groping for a way out of their economic difficulties but they focussed on immediate demands for the right to organize, to strike and to reduce their ten-hour working day to eight.

In the vicinity of Chicago this fight became intensely bitter and to cope with it the powerful industrialists used not only the State militia but private police forces of their own—the Pinkerton Detective Agency or "The Protective Patrol."² Bloody riots ensued. With working conditions so cruelly unjust, there developed a group of labor leaders who advocated "force against force" and openly advised, from platform and printed page, the making and using of bombs.³

On the night of May 4th, 1886, a mass meeting was held in the neighborhood of the Haymarket that, although called by a group of avowedly direct-action Anarchists, was devoted solely to advocating the eight-hour day with ten-hour pay. The meeting was held completely within the law, yet, as it was about to end as peaceably as it had begun, a body of policemen suddenly appeared and ordered that it be dispersed.

While the speakers were descending from the truck that had been their platform, a bomb hurtled through the air into the police ranks, immediately killing one and wounding scores of others. Swift retaliation followed, resulting in the death of one civilian and the wounding of dozens of others. This horrible tragedy with its toll of eight deaths and at a conservative estimate, eighty-two wounded,⁴ threw the whole country into a ferment that continued during the long criminal court trial of the eight Anarchists before a jury chosen from nine hundred and eighty-one talesmen.

* Copyright, 1946, by Anna George Demille. A section of a previously unpublished study, "Clashes of the World," see *Am. Jour. Econ. Socio.*, 1, 3 (April, 1942), p. 233 n.

¹ Abram S. Hewitt's phrase. See Post and Lebuscher, "The George-Hewitt Campaign," New York, John W. Lovell Co., 1886, p. 31.

² Gustavus Myers, "History of The Great American Fortunes," New York, Modern Library, 1907-1910, p. 152-3.

³ For a complete account, see Henry David, "The History of the Haymarket Affair," New York, Farrar and Rinehart, 1936.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

The defense was not a denial that the accused men had for years advocated the use of physical force. It was not a denial that they had, on that very May 4th, printed the exhortation "To arms!" and "Revenge!" and "Workingmen arm yourselves and appear in full force!"⁵ in their dailies and in circulars spread among the desperate unemployed. It was not a denial that one of them had been making bombs similar in workmanship to the one that produced such devastating results. It was a denial that there was *proof* that any one of the eight defendants had thrown this particular bomb.⁶ The prosecution contended that although there might be no proof that any one of these eight had thrown the bomb, they were responsible for it having been thrown. After the trial which began on June 21st, the verdict of guilty was rendered on October 9th. The case was then carried to the Supreme Court of Illinois where, on March 13th, 1887, the judgment of the lower court was affirmed.

In October, 1887,⁷ in Union Hill, New Jersey, a public meeting was held to express sympathy with the men condemned to the gallows. This meeting was broken up by the police. Henry George wrote in *The Standard* a protest against this attack on free speech. He wrote publicly and privately to the Governor of Illinois, urging that the death sentence be commuted to a sentence of imprisonment. He had believed that the anarchists were unjustly accused of the crime until he had read the "summary of the evidence which is embraced in the decision of the Supreme Court of Illinois."⁸ One of the eight men originally accused had committed suicide. Wrote the editor of *The Standard*:

There was evidence to connect the seven men with a specific conspiracy to prepare dynamite bombs and to use them against the police on the evening on which the bomb was thrown. It was not indeed proved that any of the seven men threw the bomb, nor even was it proved who did throw the bomb, it was proved beyond any reasonable doubt that the men were engaged in a conspiracy, as a result of which the bomb was thrown and were therefore as guilty as though they themselves had done the act. . . .

In this country where a freedom of speech which extends almost to license is seldom interfered with, and where all political power rests upon the will of the people, those who counsel to force or to the use of force in the name of political or social reform are enemies of society, and especially are they enemies of the working masses. What in this country holds the masses down and permits the social injustices of which they are so bitterly

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

⁶ Sigmund Zeisler, "Reminiscences of the Anarchist Case," *The Illinois Law Review*, Vol. 21 (November, 1926), No. 3.

⁷ Sunday afternoon, Oct. 2.

⁸ Vol. 2 (Nov. 19, 1887), No. 20.

conscious, is not any superimposed tyranny, but their own ignorance. The workingmen of the United States have in their own hands the power to remedy political abuses and to change social conditions by rewriting the laws as they will. For the intelligent use of this power thought must be aroused and reason invoked. But the effect of force, on the contrary, is always to awaken prejudice and to kindle passion.⁹

Not satisfied with his own opinion, he sought the legal opinion of Judge James G. Maguire, who also studied the summary and was convinced that the anarchists were guilty. This confirmed George in his decision. "Our bench is not immaculate" he wrote, "but I could not believe that every one of the seven men [the judges], with the responsibility of life and death hanging over them, could unjustly condemn these men."¹⁰

A final appeal was made to the Supreme Court of the United States, where after a six-hour hearing, three given to each side, the Federal justices denied a "writ of error." The Governor of Illinois refused to pardon the condemned men and on Nov. 11, four of the eight were hanged. George felt more sorrow over the tragedy and understood the deep cause of it more profoundly than most of those who had accused him of heartlessness. In *The Standard* he wrote in a long front page article, on Nov. 19th:

With the mass of the so-called anarchists, anarchy is not a theory, but a feeling that working men are oppressed by an intolerable class despotism, and that the breaking down of governmental power by acts of violence is the only sure and speedy way of release. Anarchy is the child of despair. It is the impulse of the men who, bitterly conscious of injustice, see no way out.

Anarchy is an importation into the United States. It is not an accident that out of the eight men convicted in Chicago only one was of American birth. . . . But if anarchy did not find congenial soil it would not perpetuate and propagate itself on this side of the Atlantic. The foreigner, imbued with anarchist principles in a country where great standing armies maintain avowed class governments, crosses the ocean to a country where government is nominally based upon the will of the people. If he found here that political liberty brought social justice, that there was in the great republic room for all, work for all, and the opportunity to make a fair living for all, his anarchism would soon be forgotten, and the apostle of dynamite would, amid any class of our foreign population, meet only ridicule and derision. But what great bodies of the foreigners who come here actually do find, is that our political equality is little better than a delusion and a mockery, and that there exists here the same bitter social injustice which presses down the masses of Europe. . . .

⁹ Vol. 2 (Oct. 8, 1887), No. 14.

¹⁰ Letter to von Gütschow quoted by Henry George Jr. in "The Life of Henry George," New York, Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1943, p. 501.

And if it is true that there are among working men many who are disposed to condone acts of violence when committed by those who assume to be the champions of oppressed labor, is it not true that there is the same blind class feeling among the well-to-do? When Pinkerton detectives shoot down strikers; when superserviceable policemen club socialists, is there any outcry from those who deem themselves conservative?

The anarchists are not our most dangerous class. Back of the men who died on Friday in Chicago with a fortitude worthy of a higher cause; back of the men who sympathize with them in their deed, is a deep and wide sense of injustice. Those who are the most responsible for the existence of this are those who, having time and opportunity and power to enlighten the public mind, shut their eyes to injustice and use their talents to prevent the arousing of thought and conscience and to deny any peaceful remedy that may be proposed.¹¹

Several of George's friends, Louis F. Post among them, later concluded that if he could have had access to the full testimony of the case, and not merely to the summary, he would have had greater belief in the innocence of the condemned men. Suffice it to say that—a radical himself—it would have been the easier part for Henry George to have sided with other radicals. If he, as one of his detractors accuses him of doing, "simply traded his earlier sympathy with the condemned men for votes,"¹² he acted stupidly, for by his stand he lost the approval of most of the large "communist-socialist-anarchist" group who were caught in the hysteria of that period. Actually, regardless of consequences, he took what he considered the just course, thereby bringing down on himself the epithet of "traitor."¹³ "It is in the nature of things," he wrote von Guericke, "that the man who acts solely by conscience must often be misunderstood and seem to others as if he were acting from low motives, when in reality he is acting from the highest."¹⁴

So when the "leftists" added their weight to the other forces fighting George in his Secretary of State campaign, the combination made for his overwhelming defeat on election day. When the ballots were counted the Democratic candidate had 480,000 votes, the Republican 459,000 and Henry George only 72,000.

¹¹ *Loc. cit.*

¹² Henry David, *op. cit.*, p. 402.

¹³ Benjamin R. Tucker, "Henry George, Traitor," pamphlet, 1896. Albert Jay Nock in "Henry George, An Essay," New York, William Morrow and Company, 1939, p. 199, says, "His acquiescence in the shocking miscarriage of justice which hanged the Chicago anarchists, Spies, Parsons, Engel and Fischer, accused of complicity in the murder of certain policemen in 1885, alienated great numbers of people; and neither his attitude towards anarchism nor his attitude towards socialism conciliated a single one of those who regarded his own social doctrine as substantially on the same footing with either the one or the other."

¹⁴ Henry George, Jr., *op. cit.*, p. 302.

Louis F. Post, candidate for District Attorney on the local ticket of the Labor Party, was also defeated. Carrying the sad tidings from *The Herald* bulletin board to campaign headquarters, the two men rode uptown on the front platform of the street car. Post chronicles that, knowing his friend's oft-expressed faith in Divine Providence, he suddenly asked, "George, do you see the Hand of the Lord in this?" And George, looking at him with "an expression of simple confidence," instantly replied: "No, I don't see it, but I know it's there."¹⁵

They arrived at the United Labor Party quarters to find their co-workers crushed with despair over their defeat. George sprang to the little platform and spoke words of high courage that made his listeners cheer and cheer and then crowd about him and grasp his hands. This same note of faith and hope he sounded at the Anti-Poverty meeting a few nights later:

It is within the power of each of us, the weakest, the humblest, to help the movement forward a little; it is not in the power of all of us to stop or to stay it. When a truth like this comes into the world, when it gets as far as this has done, then the future is secure.

Through strife, through defeat, through treachery, through opposition, the great cause will go on. There is something behind it more powerful than we; there is something behind it that will urge it on, no matter what we may do or what we may not do. And for ourselves, what reward can be greater than that of knowing that no matter what comes today or tomorrow or next week or next year, we struggle, do our little best on the side of that power that all through the Universe works for good?¹⁶

And in *The Standard* he wrote:

We may be disappointed, but we are not disheartened. We who have taken the cross of the new crusade did not enter for a pleasure excursion. If our hopes had grown too high and in the order of movement we had come to look forward to a march that should be a succession of triumphs, we can yet face disaster and gather strength from disappointment. . . . Such a tremendous social revolution as that at which we aim—the beneficent and peaceful social revolution which will emancipate labor and abolish poverty—must, in the nature of things, require time and work. . . . I have always declared that I cared little for how men voted, and much for how they thought. I accepted the nomination for mayor of New York last year solely because my candidacy would arouse discussion and set men to thinking about a great truth. It was the same reason that compelled me this year to accept the nomination for secretary of state. And as it is with

¹⁵ Louis F. Post, "The Prophet of San Francisco," New York, The Vanguard Press, 1930, p. 113.

¹⁶ The meeting, held on Nov. 13, was reported in *The Standard*, Vol. 2 (Nov. 10, 1887), No. 20.

me, so it was with others. During all the campaign we have proclaimed it on every stump that we cared nothing for the election of candidates, but everything for the education of the people. Our campaign has been a propaganda. . . . Who is there to whom "years have not brought the philosophic mind," who, looking back over his own career, may not see how often what seemed at the time to be disaster has really proved a blessing in disguise; that opportunity has come out of disappointment; and that the thing which he at the moment most strove to gain would have proved the thing which it would have been worse for him to have?¹⁷

Opportunity did seem to come out of disappointment—a chance to make an active, concentrated attack on protection. President Cleveland, in a message to Congress, had called for a reduction of the tariff. It was far from being a demand for free trade; it was merely a plea for tariff reform, but it was bravely made and stubbornly fought for. To Henry George it was a battle call. Since the Tilden campaign in 1876, he had fought with pen and speech to abolish the tariff. He had written a 356-page book discussing protection and free trade and now he felt that he would be better serving his cause by supporting Cleveland for re-election than by supporting a candidate nominated by the United Labor Party, who could not possibly win. In *The Standard* he said:

I regard the general discussion of the tariff question as involving greater possibilities of popular economic education than anything else. . . . I will support Mr. Cleveland, not as the best thing I would like to do but as the best thing I can do. When the wind is ahead the sailor does not insist on keeping his ship to the course he would like to go. That would be to drift astern. Nor yet for the sake of having a fair wind does he keep his yards square and sail anywhere the wind may carry him. He sails "full and by," lying as near the course he would like to, as with the existing wind, he can. He cannot make the wind, but he can use it.¹⁸

Most of George's erstwhile supporters agreed with him in this stand, but some of them preferred to stick with the Labor Party. One of these was Dr. McGlynn. Although an ardent free-trader and on friendly personal terms with Cleveland, the priest did not want to ally himself with the Democratic Party since it was represented in New York by Tammany Hall, which had played such an influential part with Archbishop Corrigan in trying to crush the Single Tax movement and those who espoused it. George, in refusing to try to make a national party of the United Labor Party, seemed to some to be deserting the group who were trying to push his own teachings. But he believed himself to be making a surer step toward his goal by supporting Cleveland. In an editorial in *The Standard* George wrote:

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, Vol. 2 (Nov. 12, 1887), No. 19.

¹⁸ *Op. cit.*, Vol. 3 (Feb. 18, 1888), No. 2.

To bring an issue into politics it is not necessary to form a party. Parties are not to be manufactured; they grow out of existing parties by the springing forward of issues upon which men will divide. We have already to hand, in the tariff question, a means of bringing the whole subject of taxation, and through it, the whole social question, into the fullest discussion.¹⁹

The divergence of opinion caused a split in the Anti-Poverty Society. In order to avoid more unhappy controversy, George and his followers withdrew. In confidence George wrote of the matter to an intimate:

You of course only know what had appeared in the papers, and I, as far as possible have refrained from "washing dirty linen in public." . . . The truth is our little [United Labor] party early developed a little "party machine" using to the full measure his [Dr. McGlynn's] influence. . . . I would not assent to this, and finally the Dr. and the machine which was really using him, read me and my friends out of the party and the Anti-Poverty Society. I would not contest this, but with my friends, left the whole thing to them.

After the first pain of separation from a man to whom I had given a most loyal support, I have not been sorry for this. We are now rid of the floatwood and the people who aim to use a movement as soon as it begins to show influence, and will not get into such a place again. . . . This campaign is doing wonderful work for us, and under the surface our doctrines are permeating in all directions.²⁰

The main issue of the Cleveland campaign was tariff reform although the reactionaries and protectionists inside the party were almost as rabid as were the Republicans in attacking this policy. But George went into it whole-heartedly for absolute free trade. He spoke many times to very large audiences in New York as well as in other cities. Indeed, so strong was the campaign of the Single Taxers that the tariff reform men felt constrained to temper their preaching by chanting, as they marched in the Democratic Party parades:

"Don't, don't, don't be afraid—
Tariff reform is not free trade!"

And Cleveland and Thurman lost to Harrison and Morton, which George believed was due to the lack of radical aggressive tactics on the part of the Democrats.

New York

¹⁹ *Op. cit.*, Vol. 3 (Feb. 18, 1888), No. 7.

²⁰ Written on *The Standard* note paper, 12 Union Square, Oct. 22, 1888, to von Gutschow. (In the private collection of the writer.)