From Revolution to Reform: German-American Radicals and the Making of the American Labor Movement, 1848-1910

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ABSTRACT

This paper follows a group of German activists—some driven into exile, others emigrating by choice—who carried their radical revolutionary ideas to the United States. These ideas encountered resistance and hostility, but the American system also adapted, accommodated and changed in response to their forcefulness and organizational power. Although German-American radicals brought a revolutionary critique of industrial capitalism to 19th century United States, their movement failed to institutionalize socialism because American institutions and the popular press recast radical labor activism as a dangerous foreign threat; simultaneously, though, they were able to achieve key demands, such as the eight-hour workday, through moderate reform.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section examines conditions in Europe which gave rise to German-American labor activism and subsequent immigration of German radical activists to the United States. The paper then delves into how liberal, socialist ideals of German-American radicals were received in the United States, how they collided with American thought based on individualism, and how German-American radicals influenced the 8-hour workday movement. Finally, the paper explores how mainstream discourse in the United States turned on German-American radicals after the Haymarket incident, labeling them as foreign and sealing their fate at the gallows. Ultimately, however, the paper argues that the American system had to change, albeit the change was gradual.

METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

This paper investigates the influence that German-American radicals had on the American labor movement between 1848 and 1910 by conducting a comparative analysis of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources used include August Spies's courtroom address, newspaper coverage of various labor activities and the Haymarket incident from the *New York Times*, the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, and the German-language *Chicagoer Arbeiter-Zeitung*, congressional and Senate testimonies. These sources were used to understand the nature of labor activism in different areas as well as examine competing perspectives from within and from outside. Comparing German-language publications with mainstream American newspapers illustrated how different groups saw the role of the labor movement and the role of the German-American protesters in shaping the discourse around it. These different sources speak to the

underlying political and social tensions that played out in the background. The sources were evaluated in their historical context, taking into account their intended audience as well as discerning any inherent political bias as opposed to simply reporting neutral accounts of events. Government and legislative documents were used to examine official responses to labor organizing efforts, including attitude towards and willingness to adopt demands of the labor movements.

Secondary scholarship, including the work of labor historians Paul Avrich, David Montgomery, and Philip Foner, provides historical context and supports the comparisons that are made between contemporary accounts and later interpretations. In tandem, these sources allow the paper to investigate the relationship between German-American radicalism, public opposition to labor activism, and the eventual acceptance of selected labor reforms.

CONTRIBUTIONS

Scholarship on German-American radicalism and the American labor movement is extensive, and has examined the political traditions of immigrants, the creation and development of working class organizations, and the public's response to the development of radical movements. Carl Wittke's Refugees of Revolution provides context for the political backgrounds of German immigrants while David Montgomery's The Fall of the House of Labor as well as Philip Foner's research on American Labor studies the development of labor organization and working-class politics. Paul Avrich's The Haymarket Tragedy and Krzystof Wasilewski's research on press portrayals consequences on public perception help explain how narratives can impact political movements. Finally, Troy Rondinone's work on nationalism during the Pullman Strike allows a lens for evaluating how national identity shaped responses to labor conflict.

Utilizing these areas of scholarship, this paper explores how political ideas advanced by German-American radicals intersect with public opposition to radicalism and the subsequent adoption of selected labor reforms. Its contribution lies in considering political marginalization and reform incorporation together, instead of treating them as completely separate outcomes, arguing that the rejection of radical movements did not necessarily prevent the acceptance of certain labor demands. Future research could compare German-American activism with the role other immigrant groups played in labor movements to investigate what factors influence the reception of new ideas and openness to accept reforms.

INTRODUCTION

The Revolutions of 1848–1849 across the German Confederation (Deutscher Bund) were part of a broader wave of revolutionary upheavals across Europe, also called the "spring time of the peoples"(Pelz, 2016). Europe was already undergoing a transformation from small-scale agriculture and artisanal trades to factory work(Pelz, 2016). In this early industrial period, with the potato famine causing a steep increase in food prices and widespread hunger and industrialization leading to insufficient work (including low

wages and high unemployment), deep economic distress was the catalyst for mass uprisings of workers and artisans alongside the spread of democratic and nationalistic ideas (Pelz, 2016).

France had experienced two earlier revolutions in 1789 and 1830 that dismantled the Bourbon monarchy. While led by middle class “bourgeoisie”, including bankers, business owners, merchants and others who were wealthy but not part of the nobility, the working class "proletariat" were the driving force demanding “liberty, equality, and fraternity”(Pelz, 2016).

French revolutionary ideas had a profound impact across Europe as they spread during Napoleon's conquests of Central Europe. When they reached the German Confederation, which consisted of several fragmented and agrarian states, they gave rise to German nationalism and demands for constitutional governments with civil rights. After Napoleon’s defeat in the 1813 Battle of Leipzig, the German Confederation, however, used the murder of playwright August von Kotzebue in 1819 to suppress nationalist and liberal movements by implementing the Carlsbad Decrees, allowing for censoring/monitoring universities, and the dissolution of nationalist student groups("Germany—Metternich, Unification, 1815–71”).

Political oppression drove thousands of German political refugees to emigrate to the US, though this wave was minuscule in comparison to the migration that later followed the 1848 Revolutions(Goebel, 1912).

The 1848 Revolutions erupted to dismantle the oppressive Metternich system, abolish monarchy and set up a unified German state with democratic rights. It marked a shift to widespread, socialist-leaning advocacy to address economic struggles caused by industrialization. The Revolutions briefly raised hopes for democratic governance, particularly with the Frankfurt Parliament, which sought to draft a constitution for a unified German nation state with civil liberties and equality. However, internal divisions led to the dissolution of parliament by 1849, and uprisings in German cities were crushed by the authoritarian state. The failure of the Revolutions led to severe political repression (including censorship, imprisonment, and exile), dismantling organized labor and socialist movements within Germany(Pelz, 2016).

Many participants in these failed movements (later known as the Forty-Eighters) emigrated to the US. Bringing with them socialist political ideals and skills in publishing radical newspapers and settling in the “German Triangle" (Milwaukee, Cincinnati, St. Louis), in cities such as Chicago, New York City, Baltimore, and in rural areas in Wisconsin and Texas, their integration was far from seamless (Indiana University, 2007). Their fellow countrymen who had previously settled, felt no sympathy for them and did not share their political ideas. The new German immigrants sought to publicly disseminate these ideas. Karl Heinzen, for example, a journalist and political thinker, settled in Boston and became the editor of *Der Pionier*. The political program he proposed involved advocating for the abolition of slavery and absolute freedom of religion. These ideas clashed with some of the preexisting notions including those of individualism and materialism while challenging deeply rooted oppressive structures such as slavery(Goebel, 1912).

AMERICAN COLLISION OF INDIVIDUALISM VS. COLLECTIVISM

By the mid-1800s the US was undergoing an industrial transformation in urban centers. Predominantly capitalist, the country was defined by private ownership, wage labor, competitive markets, and minimal government regulation of industry. Wage-earners were often immigrants who came in pursuit of economic gain. They were subject to harsh working and living conditions. They endured long hours, unsafe workplaces, low wages, and overcrowded tenement housing, as industrial elites consolidated economic power in a system that offered few protections for wage laborers (Montgomery, 1987).

High labor turnover and persistent wage inequality reflected the instability of industrial employment, particularly among immigrant workers. As labor unrest grew, workers organized strikes and protests demanding shorter workdays, safer conditions, and higher wages. Growing American industries displayed an overall disregard for wage earners' quality of life and safety, prompting wage laborers in the mid-1840s, such as the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association, to protest against poor working conditions and for 10-hour workdays (Lowell Female Labor Reform Association, 1845/1977). These early reform campaigns reveal that “labor” itself was internally diverse. Young female textile operatives, skilled male craftsmen, and newly arrived immigrant factory hands often utilized different tactics and political languages(Faue, 1991; Roediger & Foner, 1989). For example, socialists (influenced by The Communist Manifesto published in 1848 by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels) advanced a structural critique of industrial capitalism that framed worker exploitation as systemic rather than accidental. They pushed for worker-centric reforms. The belief that structural change, rather than gradual reform, was necessary was shared beyond socialists. Others, such as moderate republicans, favored expansion of suffrage and civil rights while preserving private property and national unity, offering an alternative path that would incorporate some labor demands without a full socialist transformation. These differing views sometimes led to fractures between different groups. For example, later on, during the Great Railroad Strike of 1877, the tension between "Brotherhoods" of skilled engineers (who sought exclusive contractual protections) and the unskilled "trackmen" and local sympathetic crowds highlighted a fractured movement where class solidarity was often undermined by trade-specific interests (Foner, 1977).

German-American radicals emerged as prominent advocates within these movements, applying socialist critiques along the same lines of the German labor movement. However, not all German migrants were radicals: some edited liberal or Republican-leaning newspapers that increasingly emphasized integration into American party politics over revolutionary socialism, while others prioritized ethnic community-building, religious life, or small business ownership above class struggle(Kamphoefner et al., 1991). Although German-American radicals were often labeled as revolutionary socialists, most advocated a range of reforms (from structural critiques of capitalism to immediate demands like the eight-hour workday) rather than a unified call for violent overthrow.

While socialism resonated with American workers (particularly in industrial cities) its structural critique clashed with entrenched American values of individualism, meritocracy, and self-advancement, limiting its political legitimacy. American elites promoted a competing ideology: inequality was a product of character and effort. Andrew Carnegie's *Gospel of Wealth* (Carnegie, 1889)and Horatio Alger's "self-made man" narratives defined success as the result of hard work, while Russell Conwell's "Acres of Diamonds" insisted that wealth could be achieved through personal initiative (Conwell, 1890). By attributing poverty to individual shortcomings rather than systemic injustice, this rhetoric encouraged workers to pursue personal advancement instead of collective action and framed structural critiques as pessimistic and un-American.

These ideas were reinforced in congressional and presidential rhetoric. During the 1883 Senate Committee on Education and Labor, industrialist Jay Gould and others argued that any worker could rise through frugality and industry, and that interference with the "liberty of contract" violated American freedom (U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Education and Labor, 1885). In this framework, opposition to labor radicalism was not presented as self-interest, but as a defense of individual liberty, making repression appear as the protection of national values rather than oppression.

German political exiles (including both socialist-focused reformists and anarchists) brought to the US organizational strategies developed during the failed revolutions of 1848 (in Germany) such as disciplined labor associations, mass meetings, and a radical press(Wittke, 1952). In cities with large German immigrant populations, such as Chicago and Milwaukee, these radicals helped to organize workers through unions, socialist clubs, and German-English newspapers. Radicals such as August Spies were pivotal organizers in the eight-hour workday movement, as they coordinated strikes and peaceful demonstrations. Within this group of radicals, however, there were important distinctions. Some were anarchists (hostile to the state itself), social democrats (who favored electoral participation and trade unions), and more moderate "labor republican" reformers who talked about restoring the dignity of free labor rather than overthrowing capitalism. Each proposed different strategies for change and often criticized one another's tactics (Avrich, 1984).

ORGANIZING FOR THE EIGHT-HOUR DAY

At a convention of the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions in Chicago in October 1884, delegates declared May 1, 1886, as the start date for the eight-hour workday as standard(Roediger & Foner, 1989). Since the goal of the eight-hour workday wasn't achieved by May 1 of that year, thousands of workers in Chicago went on strike and to rallies. These remained largely peaceful until police shooting into the crowd led to two workers getting killed on May 3 (see Appendix A). After an initially peaceful labor rally at Chicago's Haymarket Square the next day, on May 4, a bomb was thrown as police ordered rallygoers to disperse, killing a policeman. In the end, seven police officers and four workers were killed (Avrich, 1984). As historian Paul Avrich explains in *The Haymarket Tragedy*, the 1886 Haymarket Affair occurred from a movement for labor reform (specifically demands for the eight-hour workday) rather than from an organized campaign of violence (Avrich, 1984). In fact, when making posters for the Haymarket

Square protest in the *Chicago Arbeiter-Zeitung*, the initial poster implied a "call to arms" by stating "Workingmen Arm Yourselves and Appear in Full Force" (see Appendix B). This phrase was later scrapped since August Spies, a labor movement leader and invited speaker at the protests, threatened that he wouldn't speak unless these words were remove (Avrich, 1984). Spies' rejection of violence highlights the gap between how German-American radicals understood their own movement (as disciplined and reform-oriented) and how they were consequently portrayed by the press as inherently violent extremists.

Despite a lack of definitive evidence of the bomb thrower's identity, eight anarchists (six of them German-Americans) were arrested and put on trial. In German-American August Spies' address to the court, he explicitly stated that there was no evidence linking him to the bombing incident, and he offered his own life to the court in exchange for freeing his co-defendants and fellow activists. He argued that his death should suffice for the "fury" of the prosecution (Spies, 1887). The trial, however, led to seven death sentences and a 15-year prison sentence. Four of the anarchists were hanged, one took their own life, and the remaining three were ultimately pardoned by the Governor of Illinois.

THE "OUTSIDE AGITATOR" AND THE CRIMINALIZATION OF RADICALISM

The Haymarket Affair in 1886 changed how socialist ideas were perceived in the US. Biased media reports and a crackdown on worker rallies triggered national opposition towards socialist labor activities as they were increasingly perceived as a national threat. The New York Times piece "Anarchy's Red Hand" used the Haymarket bombing to portray the radicals as foreign agitators, stating "The villainous teachings of the Anarchists bore bloody fruit in Chicago tonight" ("Anarchy's Red Hand," 1886). Another paper, the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, likewise warned of anarchists behind the bombing, reinforcing the idea that radical labor was an external threat rather than a homegrown response to industrial conditions ("A Hellish Deed," 1886). The popular press became fond of dismantling the reformist narrative of the German Radicals, painting them as foreign agitators(Wasilewski, 2017). The cultural reframing of socialism as "un-American" marked its point of failure in the US. Instead of acknowledging socialist critiques of industrial exploitation, the media made labor activism politically untouchable by portraying it as the work of "outside agitators".

In a recent article about the history of the term "outside agitators", Graham Lee Brewer helps explain how the use of this strategy would have allowed authorities to dismiss labor unrest as foreign interference instead of a response to genuine economic grievances. By attributing activism to immigrant radicals, responsibility was shifted away from structural inequalities of American capitalism (Brewer, 2024). This tactic proved especially successful against German-American radicals whose language and immigrant status made them vulnerable to accusations of foreign subversion. This narrative also helped justify the use of state power in shutting down strikes and rebellions. In its issue on July 3rd, 1894 a *New York Times* article titled "The Real Issue of the Strike" condemned the laborers as rebels and quoted Senator Davis describing support for the strike as an "'[] overt act of levying war against the United States'" (The Real Issue of the Strike, 1894). Six days later, a *New York Times* editorial associated organized labor with the

"Anarchists at Chicago" ("[Editorial on the Pullman Strike]," 1894). These descriptions allowed support for the strike to seem un-American and a threat to American political and social order, instead of a dispute over wages. President Grover Cleveland had deployed federal troops on July 3rd, 1894 and allowed for their violence on the Pullman strike. The narrative associating workers' progress with ~~socialism~~ anarchy facilitated support for Cleveland's violent response (Rondinone, 2009). The newspaper coverage after Cleveland's decision illustrates how labor activism was represented as a threat to public order, and therefore demonstrates how the association of labor unrest with radicalism could undermine the legitimacy of workers protests and provide a justification for suppressing militant labor movements.

SELECTIVE INCORPORATION AND THE INDUSTRIAL LEGACY

Reform movements emphasized gradual change within existing institutions, which rendered socialism's association with foreign radicalism incompatible with the dominant American political culture. As a result, socialism was not defeated through refutation or lack of workers' support, but through a cultural narrative and machinery of the state that defined it as dangerous, and therefore unworthy of formal political power. Despite socialism being marginalized through public fear and political suspicion, reform movements that led to improvements without structural upheaval gained legitimacy as this aligned with the American expectation of gradual change. At the same time, legislative and statistical evidence demonstrates that labor politics did reshape the industrial order in limited ways. The National Labor Union's 1866 call for an eight-hour day, later echoed in the 1868 congressional act (United States Congress, 1868) establishing eight hours for federal laborers and Ulysses S. Grant's 1869 enforcement proclamation (Grant, 1869), signaled that even a suspicious state could codify shorter hours under sustained pressure (Montgomery, 1987). Average weekly hours in manufacturing still hovered around sixty in 1880, but they gradually declined over the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, indicating incremental success of moderate labor strategies (Whaples, 1991).

The presence of powerful non-socialist unions, notably the Knights of Labor (with hundreds of thousands of members in the mid-1880s) and, after 1886, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) offered workers more moderate paths to achieving shorter hours and better wages, further shifting support away from explicitly socialist parties (Fink, 1983; Foner, 1955).

The reframing of socialism as foreign and dangerous helped channel working-class discontent into reformist unions, issue-specific campaigns for hours and safety, and party politics that accepted the basic framework of private property and wage labor, rather than fostering mass socialist parties. Over time, policies such as the federal eight-hour law for government workers, later New Deal protections for collective bargaining and minimum standards, and the rise of collective bargaining in certain industries reflected a selective incorporation of labor's demands without embracing socialist critiques of capitalism. This continuity—radical ideas generating limited structural reforms while the political system stigmatizes "extremism"—became a defining feature of U.S. labor politics, keeping socialist critiques on the margins while more moderate approaches defined the boundaries of acceptable reform (Montgomery, 1987).

CONCLUSION

German-American radicals in the US ultimately were unique in their roles within the labor movement. The qualities that made the Forty-eighters successful (effective organizing, and disciplined tactics) also made them susceptible to being recast as outsiders. This cultural pessimism allowed for American institutions to reject socialism based on cultural context instead of evaluating it as a genuine solution to industrial conditions. In the end, the Forty-eighters' success lies in the transformation of the American labor system which occurred through their efforts and legacy.

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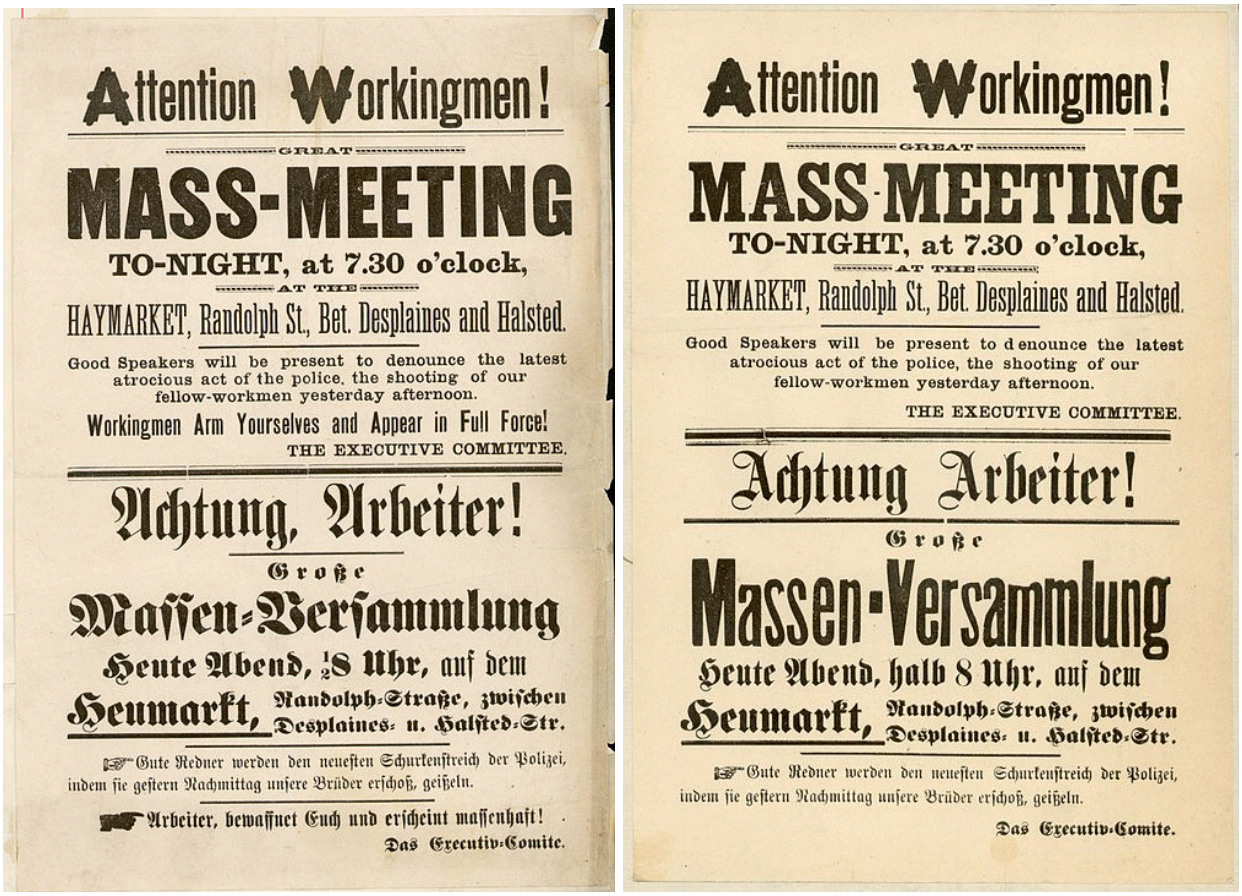
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APPENDIX A



This is a picture of the May Day rally. Banners read "United Labor 51st May Day: 1886-1937" "German-American Workers Club Milwaukee" and "United Trade Union."
Source: Wisconsin Historical Society, Eisenscher, Edmund, May Day Rally, 83034.

APPENDIX B



Attention Workingmen!

GREAT

MASS-MEETING

TO-NIGHT, at 7.30 o'clock,

AT THE

HAYMARKET, Randolph St., Bet. Desplaines and Halsted.

Good Speakers will be present to denounce the latest atrocious act of the police, the shooting of our fellow-workmen yesterday afternoon.

Workingmen Arm Yourselves and Appear in Full Force!

THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE.

Achtung, Arbeiter!

Große

Massen-Versammlung

Heute Abend, ½8 Uhr, auf dem

Heumarkt, Randolph-Straße, zwischen Desplaines- u. Halsted-Str.

☞Gute Redner werden den neuesten Schurkenstreich der Polizei, indem sie gestern Nachmittag unsere Brüder erschoß, geißeln.

☛Arbeiter, bewaffnet Euch und erscheint massenhaft!

Das Executiv-Comite.

Attention Workingmen!

GREAT

MASS-MEETING

TO-NIGHT, at 7.30 o'clock,

AT THE

HAYMARKET, Randolph St., Bet. Desplaines and Halsted.

Good Speakers will be present to denounce the latest atrocious act of the police, the shooting of our fellow-workmen yesterday afternoon.

THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE.

Achtung Arbeiter!

Große

Massen-Versammlung

Heute Abend, halb 8 Uhr, auf dem

Heumarkt, Randolph-Straße, zwischen Desplaines- u. Halsted-Str.

☞Gute Redner werden den neuesten Schurkenstreich der Polizei, indem sie gestern Nachmittag unsere Brüder erschoß, geißeln.

Das Executiv-Comite.

Broadside announcing the meeting of workers in Haymarket Square, May 4, 1886. The poster on the right has the words "Workingmen Arm Yourselves and Appear in Full Force" removed.
Source: Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.