

# Teamster Power Mural

By Mike Alewitz

Chicago, Illinois, 1997

Destroyed 2012

*Teamsters Strike United Parcel Service - August 4, 1997*  
*Mural Dedication - September 20, 1997* "If you think that by hanging us you can stamp out the labor movement--the movement from which the downtrodden millions, the millions who toil in want and misery expect salvation--if this is your opinion, then hang us! Here you will tread upon a spark, but there and there, behind you and in front of you, and everywhere, flames blaze up. It is a subterranean fire. You cannot put it out." (The following are edited remarks by Mike Alewitz, of the Labor Art & Mural Project, to a spirited rally at the tenth annual Jobs with Justice meeting, held at Teamster City, Chicago. The rally was held to dedicate the 'Teamster Power.' The mural, measuring 20' x 130' was painted during September 1997, at Teamster City; to commemorate the strike victory over United Parcel Service.)



## THE LABOR MOVEMENT IS A IS A SUBTERRANEAN FIRE

This mural, like all art, is the result of a social process. The tens of thousands of striking UPS workers who refused to be intimidated any more; who said they would not eat it as they had done in the past; who had the support of tens of thousands of workers behind them, and the entire working class movement of this country who made this a victory...they are the authors of this work. And those who struck at P-9, and didn't get their jobs back; and those who struck in Detroit, and struck at Pittston and a hundred other smaller actions whose names we do not even know...they are also the authors. They are all part of the process of transforming the labor movement from one of consistent defeat to the beginning of one that will have consistent victories. What happened during the UPS strike was not an accident or a freak of nature; it was part of the collective knowledge of what working people have learned over the last two decades. We've learned it by losing. You lose for a while and eventually you figure out how to win. We won this one, and we'll win the next one.

## ART MUST BE CHALLENGING

I would like to explain what is in this mural. Most of the murals I paint, you really cannot tell what they are about. I don't paint murals that are easily understood. I don't want to paint murals that are easily understood. Art must be challenging. And the labor movement must be challenged. And we must be challenged.

This mural began as part of a cross-border project. I originally came to Chicago to participate in a cross-border project that the United Electrical workers union was sponsoring, to paint a mural in Mexico City and one in Chicago, to symbolize international solidarity. When the UPS strike took place, we realized we had to change our plans. The UPS strike, and what it symbolized about fighting for the most oppressed sections of the workforce, for those who had the least work and lowest wages, was part and parcel of the same struggle in Mexico. And so the imagery that exists on that wall relates directly to that which was painted in Mexico. When I went to Mexico City, to the offices of the FAT [Frente Autentico Trabajadores], and said I was going to paint Albert Parsons and Lucy Parsons into the mural, the workers there were very happy about this, because Lucy and Albert Parsons are heroes in Mexico. These workers understood that there is a great and militant tradition to the working class movement in this country.

### **WE MUST RELEARN OUR HISTORY**

When I came up to Chicago, we had a meeting in this room. It was packed, a stewards meeting of hundreds of Teamsters, very militant. People were psyched. It was a great meeting of militant, mobilized workers in this local, and I asked for everyone who knew of Albert and Lucy Parsons to raise their hands. A couple of hands went up. Here in Chicago, the home of Haymarket, we don't even know our own history. We have to relearn our history. And so we need pieces of art and literature and education that make us grapple with and relearn our own history. The Haymarket martyrs were anarchists and socialists who went willingly to their deaths because they felt that the working class movement was worth it. Their names will live when all of the employers and those who ran are forgotten. What we put on the wall of this building is part of the process of relearning this history, and re-educating ourselves, and understanding that what motivates and mobilizes people in strike-after-strike and action-after-action is not a buck-an-hour more, its the idea that you are building a movement that speaks for your children, that speaks to the future and it is going to transform society. Lucy Parsons lived and died in poverty. She was of Mexican and African descent, she was a freethinker, she was a feminist, and she was uncompromising. During the bleakest periods of our movement, when no one was in the streets, Lucy Parsons was. She went on the streets by herself to sell pamphlets to tell the truth about Haymarket and the labor movement. She was fearless, as they were all fearless, because they realized that their lives were small in comparison to the future of the working class movement.

### **WE ARE A NEW MOVEMENT**

Albert Parsons, one of the Haymarket martyrs that we painted on the wall, fought in the Confederate Army for the slavocracy. After the Civil War, in response to the militant struggles of African-Americans in Texas, he was won to Radical Reconstruction. He fell in love with Lucy, and they went off to organize in Chicago. We are only a couple of generations removed from Albert and Lucy. That's how new the working-class movement is. We haven't exhausted our possibilities; we're not at the end of our movement. We are in our infancy...and organizations like the Teamsters Union and Jobs with Justice are just beginning to think out how we can build a labor movement that can win.

### **THE TEAMSTERS WERE LED BY REVOLUTIONARIES**

When I was a campus activist at Kent State in the late 1960's, I had a chance to meet and learn from Farrell Dobbs and V. R. Dunne. They were leaders of the general strike led by the Teamsters union in the Twin Cities.

All of these Midwest Teamster locals exist because of the massive movement that was built out of the general strike in Minneapolis in 1934. This union did not come into being as a gradual process. It was built as a modern industrial union, as a powerful force for working people, through a massive struggle that shook this country to its foundations. The Minneapolis strikes, along with San Francisco and the Toledo Auto-Lite strikes, laid the basis for the formation of the CIO. That's where our industrial unions come from. What motivated Farrell Dobbs, and Marvel Scholl, who led the women's auxiliary, was not a buck-an-hour more, or that they would have a period of relative peace with the boss. They weren't interested in quality circles. What motivated them was the idea of building an organization that could change society from the top to the bottom. And that is what they did. They were ordinary workers like you and I. They were no smarter or talented than us. What characterized them was their tremendous confidence in the ability of working people to change the world. They never doubted that. And so they were able to make historic changes. There are going to be fights in this country and we are going to have the opportunity to do the same thing.

### **GANGSTERISM IS A TOOL OF THE EMPLOYERS**

It's a very special thing to be a Teamster in the United States, because this union has a tremendous history of struggle. And when the government goes after Ron Carey, it's not because they are concerned about illegal payments. It is not because they are concerned about corruption. They are going after the Teamsters union because they understand that it has the potential to be a tremendous force in the labor movement. It would be inappropriate for me to comment here on the internal affairs of a union of which I am not a member. But I will say this: Some of my fellow artists have helped to create a myth, primarily through Hollywood, that somehow gangsterism was a tool that workers turned to, in order to be stronger in their struggles. Gangsterism has never been, and never will be a tool of workers. Gangsterism has always been, and always will be a tool of the bosses to keep workers in line. And anybody who romanticizes gangsterism is a fool or aspiring to be one themselves. Gangsterism is a product of attempting to work with the employers. It is the grease that keeps labor peace rolling. There was more corruption in the 1950's for the same reason there was more racism and chauvinism against workers in other countries. The so-called high wages of the 1950s is nothing to romanticize, because it was paid for at the price of our children. That's who will pay for it. Through two-tiers, through concession contracts and the disappearance of large sections of the labor movement. It isn't just the Teamsters, but the labor movement as a whole...we are not going to go back to those days.

### **THE TEAMSTER STRUGGLE IS OUR STRUGGLE**

The struggle to maintain the Teamsters as a democratic union, where the rank-and-file can participate, is of concern to every worker. Because if the government is successful in going after the Teamsters, it will go after every union that attempts to fight back against concessions, against two-tier contracts, against being-under-employed or against scape-goating immigrant workers. And so we dedicate this mural to those who, during the 1930's, built it as an industrial union, and to those who are giving it a rebirth through this strike and the struggles that will emerge from it. This is just the beginning. If you don't believe that, just ask a FedEx worker. I was in a FedEx office two days ago and asked the workers there. And they said, "Where's the Teamsters...if somebody'd come in here we'd all sign up." This is how you organize workers. Win, and workers will organize themselves. We dedicate this mural to those workers who are rebuilding this union,

for those who are yet to come into it, who will help to transform this union, and the AFL-CIO, and make the labor movement what it was supposed to be: a social movement for social justice.

NOTES: Some of the visual elements of TEAMSTER POWER Albert Parsons: Leader of the Chicago labor movement and the fight for the eight-hour day; framed up for the Haymarket explosion of May 4, 1886, and executed November 11, 1887. Lucy Parsons: Wife of Albert Parsons; leader of the working class movement; lifelong revolutionary activist. Haymarket Martyrs: Eight frame-up victims executed or imprisoned in the fight for the eight-hour day and working-class rights. Farrell Dobbs, Marvel Scholl, Dunne Brothers: Leaders of the Minneapolis General Strike and Teamster organizing that changed the Teamsters from a small craft union into a modern industrial union. Henry Ness: Teamster martyr, murdered by the police in the Minneapolis strikes. Louis Peck: An independent-minded leader of Local 705. Hands on the Trucks: Are the traced hands of UPS strikers Crowd: Are the traced children of Teamsters Jackrocks: Three cornered nail sculptures that puncture tires. Quote: By Albert Spies, one of the Haymarket Martyrs. Blockheads: Mr. Block, an old figure of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW,) was a worker who just doesn't get it. Monster of Capitalism: Hopefully, a soon to be extinct species.