

# Lucy Gonzalez Parsons

The Life Of An Anarchist Labor Organizer  
by Joe Lowndes



Little is known about the early life of Lucy Parsons. She claimed to have been born the daughter of a Mexican woman, Marie del Gathier and John Waller, a Creek Indian, and orphaned at age three. From there she said she was raised on a ranch in Texas by her maternal uncle. However, later research has pointed to the possibility that she was a slave in Texas. Around 1870 she met Albert Parsons, a former Confederate soldier turned radical Republican and married him in either 1871 or 1872.

Forced to flee Texas because of their mixed marriage, they settled in Chicago in 1873 and became heavily involved in the revolutionary elements of the labor movement. In 1877 Lucy Parsons opened a dress shop after her husband was blacklisted from the printing trade. She began writing articles about the homeless and unemployed, Civil War veterans, and working women for *The Socialist* in 1878, and gave birth to two children within the next few years. Known for being a powerful writer and speaker, Parsons played a crucial role in the worker's movements in Chicago. In 1883 she helped found the International Working People's Association (IWPA), an anarchist-influenced labor organization that promoted revolutionary direct action towards a stateless and cooperative society and insisted on the equality of people of color and women. Parsons became a frequent contributor to the IWPA weekly paper *The Alarm* in 1884. Her most famous piece was "To Tramps," which encouraged workers and the unemployed to rise up in direct acts of violence against the rich.

Although Parsons was primarily a labor activist, she was also a staunch advocate of the rights of African Americans. She wrote numerous articles and pamphlets condemning racist attacks and killings. Her most significant piece being "The Negro: Let Him Leave Politics to the Politician and Prayer to the Preacher." Published in *The Alarm* on April 3rd, 1886, the article was a response to the lynching of thirteen African Americans in Corrollton, MS. In it, she claimed that blacks were only victimized because they were poor, and that racism would inevitably disappear with the destruction of capitalism.

In 1886 Parsons and the IWPA worked with the other industrial trade unions for a general strike in support of the 8 hour work day beginning on the first of May that involved close to 80,000 workers. Five days later at a rally at Haymarket Square in support of the strike, a bomb was hurled at police officers after they attacked the demonstration. Police blamed the IWPA and began rounding up anarchist organizers, including Albert Parsons. Lucy Parsons took the lead in organizing their defense, and after they were all found guilty of murder, she travelled the country speaking on behalf of their innocence and raising money for their appeals. In November of that year her husband was hanged, along with the other three Haymarket defendants.

After her husband's death, Parsons continued revolutionary activism on behalf of workers, political prisoners, people of color, the homeless, and women. In 1892 she published the short lived *Freedom*, which attacked lynchings and black peonage. In 1905 she participated in the founding of the Industrial Workers of the World, an anarcho-syndicalist trade union, and also published a paper called *The Liberator*. In 1927 she was made a member of the National Committee of the International Labor Defense, a communist-led organization that defended labor activists and unjustly accused African Americans such as the Scottsboro Nine and Angelo Herndon. After working with the Communist Party for a number of years, she finally joined in 1939, despairing of the advance of both capitalism and fascism on the world stage and unconvinced of the anarchists' ability to effectively confront them. After almost 50 years of continuous activism, Parsons died in a fire in her Chicago home in 1942. Viewed as a threat to the political order in death as well as life, her personal papers and books were seized by the police from the gutted house.

Source: Lucy Parsons Center, [www.lucyparsons.org](http://www.lucyparsons.org)