

Kearney, Denis

by Patrick M. Geoghegan

Kearney, Denis (1847–1907), labour activist in America, was born 1 February 1847 at Oakmount, Co. Cork, second son among seven children. Orphaned, he left home (1858) to go to sea, eventually reaching the rank of first officer on an American steamer. Ten years later he visited San Francisco and decided to stay. He purchased his own draying business in 1872, and went on to become an American citizen four years later. An enthusiastic member of a weekly debating club, he gradually developed presentation skills, and began to speak with confidence, though not much ability, at trade-union meetings. He only became involved in labour agitation after losing his money in a careless stock investment. Soon he was a leading demagogue, addressing massive open-air meetings on a vacant site, a sandlot, where he compensated for the clumsiness of his expressions with the violence and intensity of his language. No perceived enemy of the working classes was spared from his attacks, and politicians, railroad companies, and banks were routinely condemned. Kearney's favourite target was the growing Chinese immigrant community, and he reserved a particular venom for attacking their threat to American labour. Although he warned his listeners against breaking the law, he was repeatedly arrested and charged with inciting violence, but the allegations were never proven.

In October 1877 the Workingmen's Party of California was founded and Kearney became a key figure, at first as secretary, but soon as president and guiding spirit; the party quickly became known as 'the Kearney movement'. Displaying a ruthless attitude to dissent, it countenanced no internal opposition, and Kearney addressed his members almost nightly from the 'sand lot'. In the 1878 election to the constitutional convention fifty-one party members won seats, but by 1880 the hollowness at the heart of the party had been exposed and Kearney went to New York, where he addressed meetings on behalf of the labour party. He failed to make the desired impact, however (although he did bring his anti-Chinese agitation to national prominence), and he soon retired from public life. He died 24 April 1907 at Alameda, California.

He married (1870) Mary Ann Leary in San Francisco; they had four children. A shrewd motivator of men, Kearney cultivated his image carefully, and always dressed in workingmen's clothes. Although not a fluent speaker (it was suggested that the San Francisco *Chronicle* edited his speeches to make them coherent, although he denied this vehemently), he was able to dominate meetings with the sheer force of his personality. His lack of political skills, however, ensured that his movement, which had a large Irish immigrant component, disappeared almost as soon as it had appeared. Kearney always claimed that he had acted with the best of intentions, but Ambrose Bierce in *The devil's dictionary* (1911) defined a 'sandlotter'

as 'a vertebrate mammal holding the political views of Denis Kearney' and alleged that he was bought off by his enemies, 'dying impenitently rich'.

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James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, ii (1895); *DAB*; R. A. Burchell, *The San Francisco Irish, 1848–80* (1979); *ANB*

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