



Looking Back Moving Forward

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A newsletter of the Michigan Labor History Society

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The Women of WOOLWORTH'S An 'Occupy' Movement of the Thirties

BY DAVE ELSILA

On a busy Saturday morning on February 27, 1937 throngs of shoppers walking along the west side of Woodward Ave. near Grand River in downtown Detroit were startled to see hand-lettered signs being posted in the windows of the Woolworth's five-and-dime store. The message was bold and simple: "All We Want Is A Living Wage."

More than 100 young women — some in their teens — had suddenly locked the doors to the crowded store and stopped serving customers inside. The soda fountain went dry, the cash registers were slammed shut, and the women began ushering customers outside. It was the start of a sit-in strike that would last for most of the coming week.

During those coming days, the women would lay sleeping bags in the aisles, organize entertainment, feed themselves, give each other hair permanents, and even curtain off an area as a "love booth" where the women could have five-minute private visits with their steadies.

As a youngster growing up in Redford Township in the 1950s, I would sometimes take the Puritan-Fenkell bus and the Grand River streetcar downtown. There I'd peruse stamps for my collection on the mezzanine of Hudson's De-



partment Store. I'd then cross the street to Woolworth's, where the smell of freshly popped corn permeated the store and where you could buy a pet goldfish to carry home in a water-filled plastic bag.

Back then, I knew nothing of the history of the labor struggle that had taken place twenty or so years earlier. Not until much later did I learn the stories of how these women of Woolworth's — inspired by the sit-down strikes at the Flint auto plants — had decided to take action into their own hands. The women had been spending up to 54 hours a week on their feet, were paid 25 cents an hour, and had to pay for their uniforms, and

launder them themselves. They had pleaded with the store manager for higher pay and better conditions, but all they got was "no" for an answer. So, on Feb. 27 at 11 a.m., an organizer for the Waiters and Waitresses Union blew a whistle, and the action was on.

A delegation of workers went to the third-floor office of the manager and demanded a 10-cent-an-hour raise, an eight-hour workday, time-and-a-half for overtime after 48 hours a week, free uniforms, discounted lunches, seniority rights, and a closed shop.

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Women of Woolworth's

Continued from page 1

The manager said he would talk with higher-ups in Cleveland if the women would go back to work, but they refused, and the sit-in continued. Mira Kamaroff, later known as Myra Wolfgang, the energetic leader of Local 705 of the Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union in Detroit, helped guide the young workers as they prepared for the sit-in.

Woolworth's was a global chain with thousands of stores in the U.S., Canada, Europe and the Caribbean. It used a variety of tactics to keep prices low — sidestepping wholesalers by buying in large quantities directly from manufacturers, displaying goods in big cases and trays and letting customers pick out what they wanted, and, most important, keeping wages low. The “girls,” as management called them, were de-skilled into doing not much more than ringing up sales and bagging the purchases. Woolworth's was, in effect, the Wal-Mart of the 1930s. Mom-and-pop merchants resented their business model as unfair competition.

Inside the locked store, the women set out food on the soda fountain, opened up a “beauty parlor,” and formed committees they called Clean Up, Cheer Up, Entertainment, and Health. Outside the store, sympathizers, many from other unions, picketed, and the local media provided ongoing coverage. The strike soon spread to another Woolworth's store farther north, and it seemed likely to affect all 40 Woolworth's stores in the Detroit area. Meanwhile, just down Woodward, managers at a competitor, Kresge's five-and-dime, preempted a strike there by raising workers' pay.

By Wednesday that week, negotiations had become serious. By the end of the day on Friday, an agreement was reached to cover not just the two stores on strike, but all 40 stores in the Detroit area. The women gained a 5-cent-an-hour raise, 48-hour weeks with time and a half above that, laundered uniforms, and half-pay for the time they had spent on strike.

The spark lit in Detroit spread to New York City, and Woolworth's workers occupied two stores there. Police evicted them on March 18, but the women quickly re-occupied the stores once they were released from police custody.

Reports leaked out from inside the big F.W. Woolworth Building, the global headquarters of the chain, that company executives were so worried about the protests spreading that they quickly changed their labor policies in many areas of the U.S. In New York, under a one-year contract negotiated with the help of Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, workers won a wage increase and a 48-hour workweek.

For the past several years, the Michigan Labor History Society has taken visitors on tours of some of the key labor history sites along lower Woodward Avenue, including the statue of Hazen Pingree on Grand Circus



It used a variety of tactics to keep prices low ... most important, keeping wages low. Woolworth's was, in effect, the Wal-Mart of the 1930s. Mom-and-pop merchants resented their business model as unfair competition.

Park, Cadillac Square and the Labor Legacy Landmark and Underground Railroad monument at Hart Plaza. One of the most popular sites has been the old Woolworth's store, and visitors from four continents have been energized and inspired by the tale of what these 108 women did nearly 80 years ago.

And the story of their struggle has not been lost on today's activists, many of whom have pointed to the 1937 occupation of Woolworth's and many other businesses as a model for today's labor movement.

Three blocks north, Occupy Detroit took over Grand Circus Park for several weeks two years ago. And at the IBEW Local 58 hall a mile west of the old Woolworth's, workers who occupied a window and door factory in Chicago came to tell their story at a Jobs with Justice rally in 2012. The legacy of the Woolworth's struggle continues to inspire us.

For more information on Woolworth's, read the account by Dana Frank in Three Strikes (Beacon Press, 2001), and by Steve Babson in Working Detroit (Wayne State University Press, 1986).



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'Emma' Comes to Detroit

"Emma," a one-woman stage production based on the life of Emma Goldman, the fiery activist of the early 20th Century whose messages on workers' rights, freedom, war, and feminism electrified America, will be presented May 16-18 in Detroit.

Goldman was born in Russia, and in 1885 emigrated to Rochester, New York, where she found a job as a seamstress, earning \$2.50 a week working 10-hour days. Her experiences radicalized her and she toured the country speaking out as an anarchist and defender of labor rights.

Although she was a citizen by then, she was deported as a "dangerous" person by J. Edgar Hoover, then working in what would become the FBI, and sent to Russia. Becoming disillusioned with the Bolsheviks, she lived in France and Spain

and returned to the U.S. briefly in 1933, then moved to Canada. The home where she lived in Windsor, Ont., is sometimes included on labor history tours. Emma Goldman died in 1940 in Toronto.

During her brief visit to the U.S. in the 1930s, she told reporters, "I'm glad that President Roosevelt has been one of the very few men in the White House who has come to realize the right of the working people to organize and better their conditions by means of their organized power."

The Detroit production will be a staged reading based on Howard Zinn's play *Emma*, and will be presented at Matrix Theater, 2730 Bagley St., on Detroit's southwest side.

Tickets are \$10 for general admission and can be reserved at 313-967-0599 or



at matrixtheatre.org.

Performances will be given on Friday, May 16 and Saturday, May 17 at 8 p.m. and Sunday, May 18 at 3 p.m. A special preview program "Conversations with Emma in the Here and Now" is set for May 1 at 6:30 p.m. at Swords into Plowshares Gallery, 23 E. Adams, Detroit.

Faith, Labor & Economic Justice Michigan Labor History Society's Annual Meeting



PHOTO: UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

Angela Dillard will speak May 14 in Detroit.

The Michigan Labor History Society will celebrate the ties between labor and religion on Wednesday, May 14, by honoring three local clergy who have spoken out on behalf of economic justice for many years.

Retired Roman Catholic Auxiliary Bishop **Thomas Gumbleton**, Central United Methodist Church Pastor **Edwin Rowe**, and Sacred Heart

Catholic Church Pastor **Norman Thomas** are the honorees whose activism will be celebrated at the MLHS annual meeting at UAW Local 22, 4300 Michigan Ave., Detroit at 6 p.m. The event is open to the public and refreshments will be provided. There is free, lighted and gated parking (turn north from Michigan onto 28th St., then right into the alley and parking-lot entrance), or take the DOT #37 Michigan Ave. bus.

Angela D. Dillard, director of the Residential College at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, will address the meeting on the topic of "Faith, Labor, and Economic Justice." Professor Dillard is the author of *Faith in the City: Preaching Radical Social Change in Detroit*, a book focusing on the interconnections of religion and political radicalism from the 1930s to the 1980s.

The meeting will also mark the centenary of the Clayton Anti-Trust Act, which declared that "the labor of a human being is not a commodity" (see story, page 7).

The connection between labor and religion goes back many years. When UAW was trying to organize workers at the Ford Motor Co. in the 1930s, the

Rev. Charles A. Hill opened his church, Hartford Avenue Baptist, to union meetings when it was difficult for union organizers to find a place to meet.

During that same period, the Rev. Lewis Bradford sought to organize workers on the shop floor at Ford's River Rouge plant; he later opened a shelter for the homeless in downtown Detroit and assisted at Central United Methodist Church.

In the 1940s, the Rev. Claude Williams opened the People's Institute for Applied Religion, which worked with union members to bring the message of social and economic justice into factories.

And in 1963, union leaders walked with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in a mass march of 100,000 people on Woodward Ave. in Detroit.

Today, the ties continue as unions work with many churches, synagogues, and mosques to press for such programs as raising the minimum wage, providing adequate funding for education, and other social and economic justice issues. Those kinds of continuing efforts will be discussed at the May 14 meeting.



The Great 1886 STRIKE for Shorter Hours

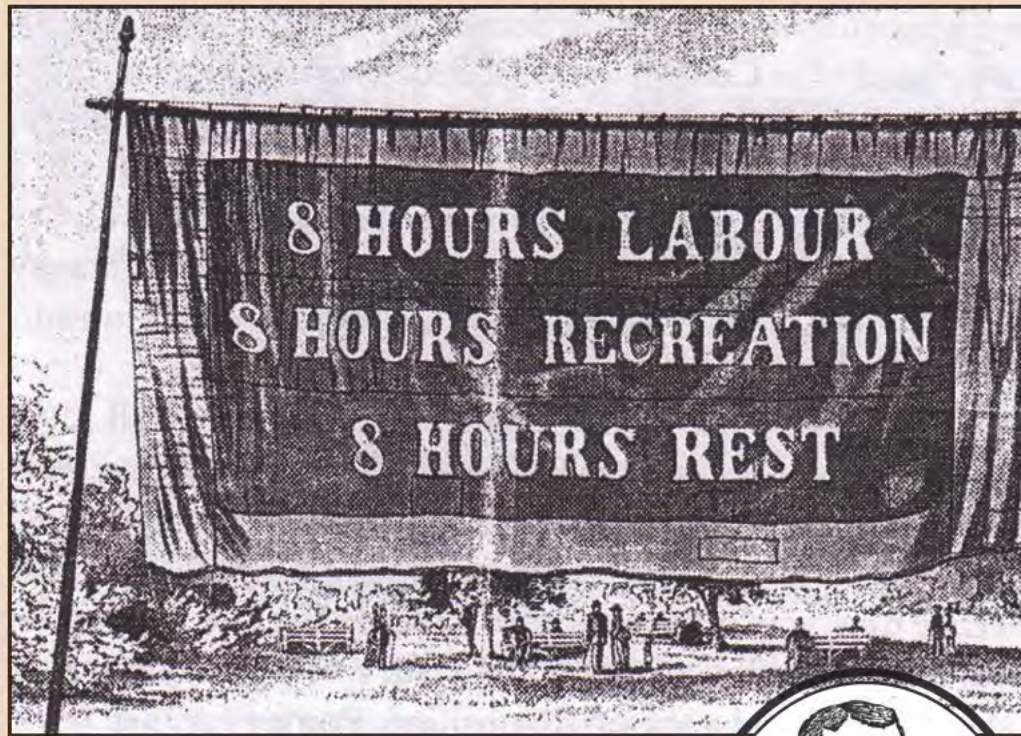
"There must be something fearfully wrong," wrote a "workingman's wife" in a letter to the editor in the *Detroit Evening News*, March 24, 1886, when a few Detroiters "can accumulate millions in so few years, during which time the workingman has become a serf."

Like a 19th Century prophet of the "we are the 99 percent" rallying cry of the 21st Century Occupy movement, the letter-writer was upset with the inequality between those who owned the city's industries and those who toiled in them. In the weeks after the letter was published, that sentiment took hold among thousands of Michigan workers who struck for shorter hours and higher pay.

Unions in many parts of the U.S. had long been campaigning for shorter hours. In 1884 in Chicago, unions passed a resolution declaring that as of May 1, 1886, the eight-hour day should become the legal workplace standard. The eight-hour movement quickly spread across the country.

Unions in Michigan joined the effort and began making plans for May 1. "This, The Fearful Day" was the headline in the *Detroit Evening News* on that date. "Looked For With Anxiety by Employers and Employed," it continued.

Some Detroit workers had already made partial advances. Stove workers had gotten 10-percent raises, shipyards had agreed to an eight-hour day after a strike, six breweries had set eight-hour days, and carpenters and joiners had won a one-year contract to reduce the workday to nine hours at 10 hours pay. Painters, bakers, and school janitors were joining the campaign. Months earlier, in the Saginaw area, lumber mill workers had gone on strike to reduce their workday to 10 hours, under the slogan "10 Hours or No Sawdust."



May 1 was a half-day at many Detroit factories because it was a Saturday. At the Michigan Car Works, workers who built railroad cars showed up only to find that the company had laid off 125 workers. On Monday, they learned that the company had fired Knights of Labor organizer P.J. Clair (shown at right). These two actions led even the *Evening News* to complain that the company had shown a "lack of spirit and conciliation" in dealing with workers.

Organizer Clair went from depart-

ment to department to tell workers of his firing, picking up support and ending at the plant manager's office where a growing crowd demanded Clair's reinstatement, shorter hours, and a pay raise. When management said no, 1,500 workers struck and went to the Car Works



THE MOVING SPIRIT.
Patrick J. Clair, the leader of the Car Works strike.
Patrick J. Clair, the leader of the strike at the Michigan car works, is a small, well-built and neatly dressed man of 35 years. He is 5 feet 6 inches in height, weighs 135 pounds.

foundry and spring works, with a demand to lower the workday from 10 to nine hours with no cut in pay. The next day, May 4, a crowd of 3,000 assembled for a solidarity rally.

Within the week, over 5,100 workers in Detroit were on strike including 3,400 from Michigan Car, Peninsular Car, and three other rail-car companies.

Although the newspapers had predicted that workers would be forced to return to work because their families were hurting, a benefit dance raised \$900 for relief and the strikes continued. On one day alone, the *Evening News* published a "box score" showing 3,780 workers on strike — among them workers at Pullman's rail-car factory, sewer laborers, the Diamond Match factory, cracker bakers, and more.

As 3,000 workers gathered at Michigan and Trumbull, the site that would later become Tiger Stadium, for a rally, a leader of the cigar workers union, George Vonberger, predicted, "When the workingmen become intelligent they would turn the rich man out of the palaces and live there themselves."

At some of the targeted companies, management locked out workers; at others they tried to break the strikes — in one case, owners of a screen and pail factory hired 12- and 13-year-old boys as replacements for striking workers.

The strike at the Michigan Car Works failed after three weeks as workers returned to their jobs. But their decision to challenge management for as long as they did generated a new spirit among Detroit's workers. Over a four-month period, an estimated 9,000 Detroit-area workers had either gone on strike for shorter hours or had negotiated shorter hours with their employers.

On Labor Day, Monday, September 6, spirits were so high among workers that thousands defied their employers by leaving their jobs to join a three-mile



Pipefitters' Centenary 100 Years of Skill & Solidarity

Passengers arriving at Detroit Metro Airport's midfield terminal, fans watching a Lions' game at Ford Field, visitors to the polar-bear exhibit at the Detroit Zoo, or delegates attending a convention at Cobo Hall all can thank members of Pipefitters Local 636 — which this year celebrates its 100th anniversary—for helping to build those facilities. Members of the union, who also include steamfitters, plumbers, welders, sprinkler-fitters, and other pipe trades, were part of the work crews for all those projects.

Local 636 was chartered on March 17, 1914, as separate unions began coming together to meet the American Federation of Labor's call for a single union that would represent all of the pipe trades. In its early days, Local 636 members had to battle Detroit's employers. The city's employers association "was determined that all work in Detroit would be done under open-shop conditions, and they were therefore trying to force fair contractors to fight us," according to the Local. But the union prevailed and during the 1920s, membership shot up.

Over the years, Local 636 members played key roles in many projects:

- In 1924, they installed three 125-ton centrifugal chillers at the J.L. Hudson Dept. store, the tallest such store in the country. Hudson's, then on Woodward Ave. in downtown Detroit, became the first air-conditioned department store in the U.S.
- Before and after Prohibition, they helped build and restore the Stroh's Brewery on the Detroit waterfront, and later worked on other breweries.

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long parade from Grand Circus Park to a park on Jefferson Ave., where they heard speeches and picnicked with their families. An estimated 10,000 people participated with floats and banners — in effect, a one-day general strike.

It would take several decades before the eight-hour day became a universal standard. While five-day, 40-hour weeks took hold in some industries (at Ford Motor Co. in 1926, for example), it wasn't until the Fair Labor Standards Act was introduced during the New Deal in 1937 that a 40-hour week with overtime pay above

that became the law of the land in many industries.

Yet, even then there were workers not covered by the law (see the story, page 1 about the Woolworth's workers who worked 54-hour weeks). It would take organizing and bargaining by many different unions before a standard 40-hour week became widely implemented.

This article was developed in conjunction with work by UAW retiree Dianne Feeley and Dr. Thomas Klug at Marygrove College on the "Southwest Detroit Auto Heritage Guide" website that will launch later this spring.



Power Point in the Works

Jim Pedersen, a UAW staff retiree and member of the Michigan Labor History Society program committee, has been working with other committee members to develop a Power Point video presentation on labor history. When finished, it will be suitable for presentation to union meetings and school classrooms.

MLHS members who would like to volunteer to show the Power Point and speak to groups on Labor History are welcome to participate. As the program nears completion, we will set up a training program for those who are interested.

If you'd like to volunteer, please send a note to the Michigan Labor History Society, c/o Walter P. Reuther Library, 5401 Cass, Detroit, MI 48202, or telephone 313-577-4003.



PHOTO: DON NICHOLSON

'TRANSCENDING' Getting a Face Lift

The Michigan Labor History Society has contracted with Booms Stone Company to do necessary repairs at "Transcending," the Labor Legacy Landmark at Hart Plaza in Detroit.

Repairs will include fixing broken tiles on the dais and re-grouting the quotations and other legends that are engraved on the tiles and walkway.

Work will hopefully be completed by June, when the MLHS has been asked to conduct a Labor History tour, including "Transcending," for international delegates to the UAW's international convention at Cobo Hall, a short distance from the landmark.

MLHS Donations are Now Tax-Deductible

After a three-year hiatus, the Internal Revenue Service has restored the 501(c)3 status of the Michigan Labor History Society.

That means that contributions to the Society are now tax deductible.

One benefit is that you may now reserve a name listing on the Memorial Wall at the Labor Legacy Landmark in downtown Detroit when you make a tax-deductible donation of \$100. Once we receive 80 such donations, we will be able to engrave and mount a new plaque on the wall with your name or the name of a designee. A form with full details will be available later this summer and will be mailed to each person on the MLHS mailing list.

For Now & In the Future

Your membership in the Michigan Labor History Society insures that this and future generations will maintain a link to labor's rich heritage.

For just \$10 a year, your membership provides you with MLHS educational event information, a subscription to our newsletter Looking Back, Moving Forward, and the knowledge that you're helping to keep Labor History alive!

Mail with a check payable to **Michigan Labor History Society,**
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Pipefitters Centenary

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- Coming out of the Great Depression, when membership had dropped from nearly 400 to only 92, pipe workers here and elsewhere in the U.S. helped build dams, roads, schools, public buildings and housing projects through the New Deal's Works Progress Administration (WPA), which put members back to work.

- Many auto factories — Ford, GM, and Chrysler— went up with the help of Local 636 members, and when Detroit's Renaissance Center was renovated in 1996, union pipefitters were on the job.

The members' work continues today at many projects including the new Detroit Medical Center Heart Hospital, scheduled to open this year, reports Joseph Bourgeois, Local 636 Secretary-Treasurer.

This spring, union members and their families gathered for a gala dinner at Cobo Hall in Detroit to honor their history and to celebrate their future.

'LABOR IS NOT A COMMODITY'

100 Years Later, the Clayton Anti-Trust Act's Principled Language Still Needs to be Enforced

"The purchase and sale of labor is 'Business' just as much as the purchase and sale of cows and pigs. Men who have labor to sell will fool themselves perpetually if they continue to imagine they can sell it on any other principle than that on which other commodities are sold. They can get for it only what those who need it are compelled to pay."

—Editorial, *Detroit Evening News*, May 10, 1886

BY MIKE KERWIN

For much of human history, the idea that labor is simply a "commodity" to be bought and sold like cows and pigs was the common wisdom of the employer class and its allies.

It was not until Oct. 15, 1914, when the United States passed the Clayton Anti-Trust Act that that concept was challenged. The law, passed by Congress and signed by President Woodrow Wilson, clearly states that "The labor of a human being is not a commodity or article of commerce." That provision was placed into the law following pressure by American Federation of Labor President Samuel Gompers.

Nevertheless, it was then — and is now — a basic plank in the ideology of U.S. Free Market Capitalism that the labor of a human being is a commodity, and can be manipulated just like any non-human commodity such as raw materials, tools, buildings, etc. Free Market Capitalism calls on its perpetrators to minimize the costs of all the commodities they use, in order to maximize profits. Labor is always the first target for cost reduction. We see that whenever companies demand takeaways in workers' wages or benefits. The fact that the average worker today earns less than he or she did in the 1970s, accounting for inflation, is proof of that behavior.

Indeed, the Clayton Act's provision that "the labor of a human being is not a commodity" should have been a major legal bulwark against corporate labor cost-cutting. It has not been. While Congress included the statement of principle in the Act, it provided no words for the legal enforcement of the principle. That advance for workers has to be fought

now and in the future — on the picket lines, at the bargaining table, at the ballot box.

The Clayton Anti-Trust Act, whose centenary we are observing this year, also contained another important labor provision in its effort to curb the growing power and abuses of the huge U.S. monopoly corporations.

It states that efforts by workers to join together and bargain over their wages, hours, and working conditions do not constitute an illegal monopoly, and should not be prohibited under the provisions of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act of 1890. That Act had been passed to curb the excesses of the "robber barons" of the railroad, petroleum, coal, sugar, and other predatory monopolies of the late 19th Century. It contained a provision that victims of monopoly abuses could seek redress through the enactment of court injunctions issued by the federal government.

The irony of the U.S. legal process, however, was that for the first 20 years of the enforcement of the Sherman Act, federal injunctions were issued only against one so-called monopoly: organized labor. Unions were enjoined against picketing and other forms of collective action.

When the Sherman Act was passed, however, labor was not regarded as a monopoly in any sense. The few unions that existed, mostly affiliated to the American Federation of Labor, were in their infancy. Yet many companies who felt



Fred G. Cooper drew this representation of President Woodrow Wilson taking on the "triple wall of privilege," as he sought to reorganize the tariffs, banks, and trusts in the U.S. In 1914, he signed the Clayton Anti-Trust Act. His earlier actions led to the first income tax based on a graduated scale, and the Federal Reserve Act to govern banks.

they were in danger of being organized sought injunctions, and, ugly to tell, the federal courts issued them — with disastrous results for the unions so targeted.

Pressure generated by the Progressive movement and the willingness of President Wilson to act, led to the Clayton Act and its statement that it was legal for workers to act together.

While companies may still seek injunctions, and while the view that "labor is a commodity" still prevails in many circles, we have the Clayton Act to fall back on. What we must continue to fight for is its full and impartial enforcement. This anniversary year is a good time to rededicate ourselves to that battle.

Mike Kerwin is a retired member of UAW Local 174 and chair of the Michigan Labor History Society Program Committee.

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Angela Dillard will
speak May 14, Detroit.

Michigan Labor
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**ANNUAL
MEETING**
'Faith, Labor, and
Economic Justice'
Wednesday,
May 14, 2014 • 6 p.m.

UAW Local 22 Hall
4300 Michigan Ave.,
Detroit

Free, gated and
lighted parking

'EMMA'

A one-woman staged
performance
Based on Howard Zinn's
play "Emma"
Friday-Sunday,
May 16-18, 2014
Matrix Theatre
2730 Bagley St., Detroit
Friday and Saturday: 8 p.m.
Sunday: 3 p.m.
All seats \$10



INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION

Cobo Hall, Detroit
June 1-6, 2014

LABOR DAY MOBILIZATION LUNCHEON

August 2014

LABOR DAY MARCH

Michigan Ave. and Trumbull
to downtown Detroit
Monday, Sept. 1, 2014



PHOTO: BARBARA INCALLS @ BIGRAF

Labor Day marchers will gather in Detroit on Sept. 1.