



# LOOKING BACK *Moving Forward*

A newsletter of the Michigan Labor History Society

Spring/Summer 2015

mlhs.wayne.edu

*Public Transportation Then and Now:*

## The Great Streetcar Strike of 1891

By JOHN RUMMEL

New streetcars are coming to Detroit. As Detroit constructs the M-1 Rail along Woodward Ave., a look back at the groundbreaking trolley strike of 1891 reveals how public transportation, or the lack of it, has shaped the history of the city.

Just as today, Detroiters in the last decade of the 19th Century needed public transportation to work and move about the city. But disgust with the Detroit City Railway Company, the private streetcar monopoly that ran the trolley system, was so great it inspired a united rebellion from a wide cross-section of the city's working class and all who relied on the system.

Steve Babson in his must-read book *Working Detroit*, reported that male trolley workers averaged a measly 18 cents an hour for a 12-hour work day while women workers suffered the indignity and discrimination of being paid only 9 cents. Worse still, to cover both the morning and evening rush hours, workers were often forced to stay at the job site for 18 hours — but those six additional hours were unpaid.

Riders too had their gripes. Fares of five cents for each ride were exceedingly high. While other cities had modernized to electric trolleys, the company continued to use horse-drawn carriages. Riders endured the foul smell of straw, horse manure, and fumes from gas fired heaters.



Streetcar photos: Walter P. Reuther Library; M-1 photo: Robert Ingalls



**An early horse-drawn streetcar, and a group of Detroit streetcar workers around the turn of the 19th Century. Far left, building the new M-1 light-rail streetcar line that will open in Detroit in 2016.**

Streetcar workers formed an Employees Association and began to fight back by pushing for a 10-hour day. The firing of 12 organizers in April of 1891 was the catalyst that provoked the strike.

City police broke up picket lines and escorted strikebreakers into the car barns. However as the company had alienated both its workers and customers, sympathy for the strikers was widespread and quickly grew. By the second day of the strike, huge crowds gathered at intersections to block trolleys driven by

strikebreakers. A cheering crowd of 5,000 men, women, and children rolled a streetcar into the Detroit River.

Thousands of Detroit workers from shoe, radiator, and stove factories abandoned their jobs to show solidarity with the strikers. Ironworkers leaving their shift ripped up tracks in front of their shop. Even downtown businesses donated to the strike fund.

By Friday, the fourth day of the strike, the trades council made plans for a mass

*Continued on page 2*



## Great Streetcar Strike

*Continued from page 1*

rally on Saturday to unite all the workers who had gone out.

Company officials pleaded with Mayor Hazen Pingree to call in the state militia. Pingree, who had long railed against the high fares and poor service of the private trolley company, refused and the company capitulated to the strikers' demands. The mayor became known as a "friend of the workingman."

It was quite a conversion for this former successful shoe manufacturer who, as Babson writes, had come to believe "the greatest threat to social peace was the greed and callousness of private corporations, not unions."

The 12 organizers were rehired and their union recognized as the bargaining agent. Fares were lowered to 3 cents and electric cars were phased in over the next several years.

Pingree championed the public ownership of the trolleys as the only way to improve service but it took until 1922

to win complete public control. In 1897 he was elected the Republican governor and championed public ownership of utilities, higher taxes for big business, and regulation of private capital. As Vice President Joe Biden enjoys saying, the current crop of Republicans are "not your father's Republican Party."

What's happening with trolley service today? The M-1 rail service under construction on Woodward Ave. will be the first trolley service in Detroit since 1956, running 3.3 miles along Woodward Ave from West Grand Blvd. south to Congress St. Will it help solve the city's and region's public transportation deficiencies?

Fred Westbrook, president of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 26 (the successor to the original trolley local) whose union will represent the new conductors, has his doubts.

Westbrook says the trolley line is more of an "economic development piece" to serve the new restaurants and hockey arena being built rather than a "public transportation service piece."

He notes that wait times for buses in the city have increased from 3 to 12 minutes during peak hours and 20 minutes during non-peak. The system has seen huge cuts, from 800 drivers in 2010 to 430 now. Westbrook said Mayor Duggan has promised to add 100 by summer.

Westbrook had hoped the trolley line would have gone north to Pontiac, a route that would have made a real dif-



Photo: Barbara Ingalls

**Hazen Pingree looks over Woodward Ave. from Grand Circus Park in Detroit. Thousands of Detroiters made donations to help build this statue of the "Idol of the People."**

*The greatest threat to social peace was the greed and callousness of private corporations, not unions.*

— *Attributed to Mayor Pingree*

ference for Detroit and the region. "One day I hope I'm here to see it," he said.

*For further information, see Working Detroit by Steve Babson (Wayne State University Press, pages 14-15).*



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Published by the

**Michigan Labor History Society**

c/o Walter P. Reuther Library

5401 Cass, Detroit MI 48202

Telephone: 313-577-4003

**MLHS.wayne.edu**

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## The Streetcar Driver Who Dreamed of a Better Future

In 1901, ten years after the successful streetcar workers' strike in Detroit, Malcolm McLeod, president of the streetcar-drivers union, wrote a message to put into a time capsule that was opened a hundred years later, in 2001, during the celebration of Detroit's tri-centennial.

"All skilled labor in Detroit is organized into trade unions," he wrote. "And through the efforts of these unions, we have bettered our conditions, reduced the hours of labor, and increased wages so that we now can find time to educate ourselves and our children and take the place in society which has been denied them."

In his letter, McLeod described how during his lifetime he had seen streetcars pulled by horses replace by ones powered by electricity, and he told of his dreams for the future: "It is my earnest hope that the union movement will continue to grow and prosper and that class society will be wiped out of existence in this new century, and that we will all stand on the same plane."



## At the Mackinac Bridge:

# A Monument to the 'Men of Iron'

By JOHN DICK

One of the most iconic images of our great state of Michigan is the Mackinac Bridge. Spanning five miles between the Lower Peninsula and the Upper Peninsula, the "Mighty Mac" was one of the spectacular engineering feats of its time. Started in 1954 and opened to traffic on November 1, 1957, this incredible suspension sensation not only connected our two grand land masses, but became an historical testament to the power of union labor.

The Village of Mackinaw City has taken on the task to honor the workers who created the Mackinac Bridge. The Walk of Iron, the Ironworkers Walk of Fame, had its groundbreaking in August, 2008. The purpose of this tribute is to honor and commemorate the legends and stories of Ironworkers and Mackinac bridgemen from all over North America who helped create this mighty masterpiece. Located on North Huron Avenue, and shadowed by the hulking concrete and iron of the Mighty Mac, this monument is being built in phases.



**A plaque and statue commemorate the union workers who built the Mackinac Bridge, five of whom lost their lives.**

Canada. Engraved bricks are embedded in the sidewalks adjacent to the monument area. To date, close to 200 bricks have been planted at the site and those names have been inducted into the "Ironworkers Walk of Fame."

The next phase of the project is the construction of a 25-foot globe with spokes and three ironworker characters, two men and one woman. These ironworkers will be seven feet tall and constructed out of ironworker tools and components. The theme of this piece is "We Built the World."

Five workers died while building the Mackinac Bridge, and many more were injured. While celebrating the success of building this wonder of the modern world, a visit to this monument should be a sobering reminder to all of us of the sacrifices made for progress.

Ironworkers, Mackinac bridgemen, and monument supporters can purchase an engraved brick to help the "Walk of Iron" by visiting [www.walkofiron.com](http://www.walkofiron.com). Orders placed by June 30th will be ready for placement every year for the annual August dedication ceremony.

*I wish to extend my humble thanks to all the workers, past and present, who enable me to visit "God's Country" year after year. Your spirits move through me every time I cross the Mighty Mac.*

The first phase, unveiled in August, 2010, is that of an ironworker throwing a rivet. This figure was made out of over 3,000 ironworker tools donated by ironworkers from across the U.S. and

Photos: Jackie Dick

## LABOR HISTORY IS OUR HISTORY

Join the Michigan Labor History Society and help take our story to schools, community groups and unions. Your tax-deductible dues will help fund MLHS educational programs and publications. And you'll receive "Looking Back, Moving Forward" and other MLHS materials and invitations to events.

Fill out the form below and mail with your dues payment to:

Michigan Labor History Society  
c/o Walter P. Reuther Library • 5401 Cass Ave., Detroit, MI 48202

Enclosed is my dues payment of \_\_\_ \$10 for one year \_\_\_\$25 for three years.

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E-mail \_\_\_\_\_ Telephone \_\_\_\_\_

Union/Organization \_\_\_\_\_



# The Woman of Ternstedt and The First ‘Slowdown Strike’

By DAVE ELSILA

In the spring of 1937, workers at the huge General Motors Ternstedt plant in the Livernois-Fort neighborhood of Detroit faced a dilemma.

The workers were demanding a contract including recognition, fair wages, and an end to favoritism, but were getting nowhere in their negotiations with management. The national agreement between the UAW and General Motors, reached a couple of months earlier after the Flint sit-down strike, barred them or any GM workers from striking. How could Ternstedt workers pressure management without the right to strike?

Ternstedt was the largest GM plant in Detroit. It had 12,000 workers, the overwhelming majority of them women, who made door handles and other chromium parts for GM vehicles. The company had hired mostly women workers because it felt women could manipulate small parts more easily than men.

Women faced sexual harassment and discrimination. Male supervisors demanded dates in exchange for desirable jobs. Managers would play off ethnic groups—Southerners and Poles, for example—against each other. When Southern workers complained that they weren’t getting their promised productivity bonuses, managers would respond that the Polish workers had produced so much more that they’d gotten the bonus. But when asked by the Polish workers where their bonuses were, the managers would turn around and blame the Southerners.

Into this situation came the UAW, fresh from its victory in Flint. Although some organizers didn’t think they could attract women workers into the union, Stanley Nowak, an organizer for West Side Local 174, disagreed.

“I have found women very dependable, vocal, and militant,” Nowak said, “often more so than men.” Nowak led a union bargaining committee with a large group of women to meet with



Factory and worker photos: GM Heritage Center

*Women faced sexual harassment and discrimination. Male supervisors demanded dates in exchange for desirable jobs. Managers would play off one ethnic group against another.*

S.E. Skinner, the Ternstedt manager. Skinner met with the union for weeks but would make no concessions. Although frustrated by his stalling, UAW leaders were reluctant to take any overt action that might jeopardize the new national agreement with GM.

But Nowak came up with a solution to the dilemma. He recalled a conversation in Chicago with an old European-born worker whose union had faced a similar problem in Vienna. Instead of

striking, the Vienna workers acted together to deliberately cut their productivity—a “slowdown.” The worker had given Nowak a book describing the tactic, and Nowak went home to read it.

Leaders of the growing Ternstedt UAW group began to discuss the idea of conducting their own “slowdown.” Word was passed quietly to union stewards and then to trusted rank-and-file workers.

On the same day that UAW bargainiers next met with Skinner, workers started a rolling slowdown, department by department, cutting production by up to 50 percent.

As the union laid out its demands at the bargaining table, Skinner was interrupted by several phone calls. Nowak recalled that he became increasingly agitated. Apparently he was getting reports from several shop-floor supervisors of the production slowdown.

Looking up from the phone, Skinner yelled, “you sonofabitch,” at the union organizer, and he ordered the entire union team to leave.





## 'Transcending' Gets New Lights, Tiles



Left, opposite page, the old GM Ternstedt plant at Livernois and Fort in Detroit, since torn down; top, a UAW woman working at Ternstedt in 1942, five years after the union held its slowdown; below, a 1940 Chevrolet Special De Luxe KA Convertible Coupe likely had its chrome parts manufactured at the Ternstedt plant.



1. L. giswe/CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia

The slowdown was working, and within days, Skinner contacted the union to come back to meet with him. The company agreed to recognize the union at the plant, abolished piecework, and eventually negotiated a day rate for pay.

The legacy of the Ternstedt slowdown lives on. Workers in other parts of the U.S. have used a "work to rule" strategy from time to time to win their demands. From Vienna to Detroit and elsewhere, labor has found creative ways to win.

*For further reading:* *Two Who Were There* by Margaret Collingwood Nowak, Wayne State University Press, and *Women, Work, and Protest: A Century of U.S. Women's Labor History*, edited by Ruth Milkman, Routledge Press.



Photo: Dave Esilia

Installation of new lights, tiles, and surfaces are underway at the Labor Legacy Landmark "Transcending" in downtown Detroit, thanks to generous contributions made by nearly 150 individuals, unions, and others.

When the work is completed, LED lights will have been installed at the top of the arcs that form the centerpiece of the public landmark in Hart Plaza on the riverfront, as well as in the lighting fixtures in the benches that surround the plaza. Already, new black granite tiles have been installed to replace the old, broken marble tiles on the central platform, and re-grouting of them have made the stones once again readable.

An outpouring of donations that approached \$100,000 has made the repairs possible, and a list of all donors can be seen at the MLHS website: <http://mlhs.wayne.edu>.

Fund-raising was coordinated by a committee chaired by AFT Michigan President David Hecker, and including UAW President Dennis Williams, Teamsters President James P. Hoffa, Metro Detroit AFL-CIO President Rick Blocker, Michigan Carpenters Secretary-Treasurer Mike Jackson, Michigan AFL-CIO President Karla Swift, and SEIU Health Care Michigan President Marge Robinson. Lisa Canada, Carpenters' legislative representative, helped coordinate the drive.

### Voices of Labor Note Cards

These timely 4 x 6 inch notecards with matching envelopes were created to help benefit the continued renovation and maintenance of "Transcending," the Labor Legacy Landmark at Hart Plaza on Detroit's riverfront, the largest work of art in America honoring working women and men.

Each set of cards features six distinct quotations from the Landmark. The insides are blank, and the cards are printed with a union label. They make great gifts, and you can order them for \$10 for a set of six. Send your check to the Michigan Labor History Society, 5401 Cass Ave., Detroit, MI 48202. Please add \$3 for shipping for each mail order. Cards designed by Barbara Ingalls.

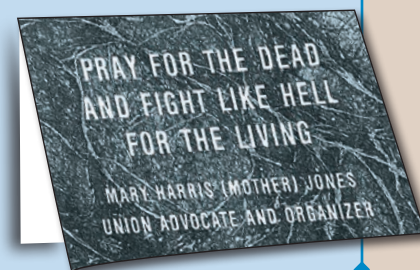
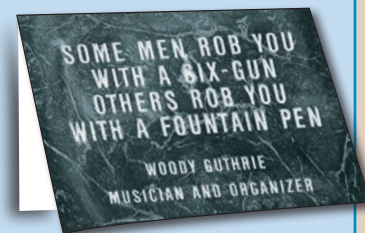


Photo: Dave Ivers





## MLHS Shows Detroit to Unions, Students & Groups

# Labor History Tours are a Hit

The Michigan Labor History Society continues to provide guided labor history bus or walking tours of the metro Detroit area. To date, nearly 1,000 people have taken these free tours.

In May, about 20 delegates to the state convention of the National Association of Letter Carriers walked a two-mile route from their hotel to Grand Circus Park, where they learned about Mayor Hazen Pingree, the "idol of the people," and the 1891 streetcar strike and then south on Woodward Avenue to the former Woolworths five-and-dime store to hear about the 1937 sit-down strike by 108 young women workers. They also visited Cadillac Square and the Labor Legacy Landmark and Underground Railroad monument at Hart Plaza, before adjourning to the Anchor Bar for more discussion and socializing.



Visitors examine a display of labor history prints at the Walter P. Reuther library during a recent labor/Jewish history tour sponsored by the Jewish Historical Society. Labor history tours have been increasingly popular, with several tours recently sponsored by MLHS and a May Day Bernie's Brigade/Detroit Area Workers Now tour.

Photo: Dave Elisha

Others who have enjoyed tours include an SEIU group of global labor leaders on June 6, and, earlier, UAW convention guests, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Detroit Federation of Teachers, Bricklayers and Allied Craftworkers, and Netroots

Nation. On Sept. 20, Michigan Economic Justice fellows will tour the Landmark.

MLHS trains volunteer guides. Contact the MLHS office at 313-577-4003 or write Michigan Labor History Society, 5401 Cass Ave., Detroit, MI 48202, if you are interested.

Unions, school groups, and others are welcome to set up a tour. There is no charge, and all that needs to be done by the sponsoring group is to arrange for a bus (unless the choice is a walking tour). Call the MLHS office, 313-577-4003.

### Labor Day Mobilization Luncheon

The MLHS annual Labor Day Mobilization Luncheon will be held Wednesday, August 19, 2015 at 11:30 a.m. at the IBEW Local 58 Hall, 1358 Abbott, in Detroit.

Tickets are \$40 and include a one-year membership in MLHS. They can be ordered through the MLHS office, 313-577-4003, at the Metro Detroit AFL-CIO, 313-961-0800, at UAW Region 1-A, 313-291-2750, or UAW Region 1, 586-427-9200.

### Labor Day in Michigan

The 2015 Labor Day March will kick off at 9 a.m. from Michigan Ave. and Trumbull in Detroit on Monday, Sept. 7, 2015. A lineup will be posted at the Metro Detroit AFL-CIO web-

site: Metrodafclcio.org. Other events are planned in several cities including Grand Rapids, Farwell, Flint, and elsewhere. Check with local unions to find your closest celebration or parade.

During the Labor Day weekend jazz festival in downtown Detroit, volunteers will be on hand to distribute self-guided

tour booklets about the Labor Legacy Landmark. If you'd like to participate, call the MLHS office, 313-577-4003.

### Some Special Anniversaries

This year marks at least three anniversaries important to the labor movement.



Photo: @DaymondHartley.com



DIA Exhibit:

# What Diego and Frida Saw

When you visit the current show of the works of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera at the Detroit Institute of Arts, on exhibit until July 12, you will pass by several brief video clips, one of which shows the couple standing in front of posters condemning Detroit's poverty and calling for radical solutions.

What would these two Mexican artists have seen in Detroit during the year that they spent here after arriving in April 1932? How might it have influenced their work?

Their arrival came just one month after the Ford Hunger March, where five protesters were killed after marching to the gates of the Ford Rouge Plant in Dearborn to demand jobs, unemployment relief, and medical care. At the Rouge plant alone, which Rivera used as the model for much of his "Detroit Industry" murals, employment had dropped from 128,000 in March 1929 to 37,000 while they were here. Overall joblessness in Michigan reached a high of 46 percent during the Great Depression, rising to 70 percent in some Detroit neighborhoods. Those still working saw their wages plunge by half—to as little as \$3 to \$4 a day.

Unemployment led to evictions as families could not keep up their housing payments, and as many as 150 evictions took place every day. Hunger stalked many areas: a Detroit Receiving Hospital doctor estimated that four people a day

who were suffering from pneumonia or other diseases were "too far gone from starvation for their lives to be saved."

Learning about the conditions of Depression-era Detroit can help us understand Rivera's and Kahlo's art.

While Rivera shows his appreciation for the potential benefits of industry and mass production, his art also captures the contradictions in science and industry: how they can be used for evil or good—as shown in his images of bombers and civilian aircraft, of vaccines and poison gas. The power of workers on the assembly line is contrasted with their unsmiling expressions reflecting their harsh economic lives, and their weariness as they leave the plant. Kahlo's art, too, reflects sorrow and pain, emotions that she felt from her personal experiences. The works of both artists offer profound social commentaries on the world as they saw it.



Photo: Carl Van Vechten, Library of Congress



Eighty years ago, the Social Security Administration was formed to help provide old-age security for Americans. And in the same year, Congress passed and President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Wagner National Labor Relations Act to protect the rights of workers to

organize unions and bargain contracts.

And on July 12 at Belle Isle State Park in Detroit, veterans and supporters of the Detroit newspaper strike will gather for a picnic to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the start of the strike.

During the five-year-long struggle, thousands of "No Scab Papers" signs sprouted on front lawns and in store windows around southeast Michigan in a massive show of community solidarity for the strike, which cost the two Detroit dailies nearly half of their circulation.



Painting by Frida Kahlo. www.wikigallery.org

Top, Frida Kahlo with her husband Diego Rivera in 1932. Inset, "Self Portrait On The Borderline Between Mexico And The United States 1932" oil on canvas by Frida Kahlo.



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## MARK YOUR CALENDAR!

### **LABOR DAY MOBILIZATION LUNCHEON**

**Wednesday, August 19, 2015 11:30 a.m.**

IBEW Local 58

1358 Abbott, Detroit

(enter parking lot from Porter St. east of Trumbull)

### **LABOR DAY MARCH**

**Monday, September 7, 2015**

Step off 9 a.m., Michigan and Trumbull, Detroit  
lineup will be posted at [metrodafcio.org](http://metrodafcio.org)



Photo: Robert Ingalls

### **RIVERA-KAHLO ART EXHIBIT**

Detroit Institute of Arts

Until July 12, 2015



Painting by Frida Kahlo, [www.wikigallery.org](http://www.wikigallery.org)