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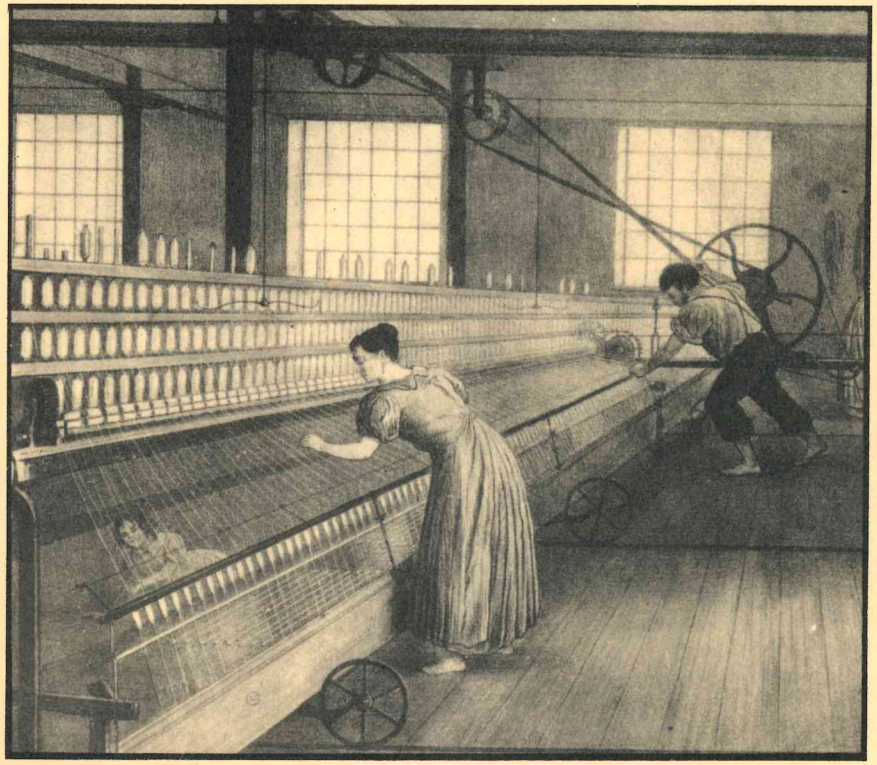
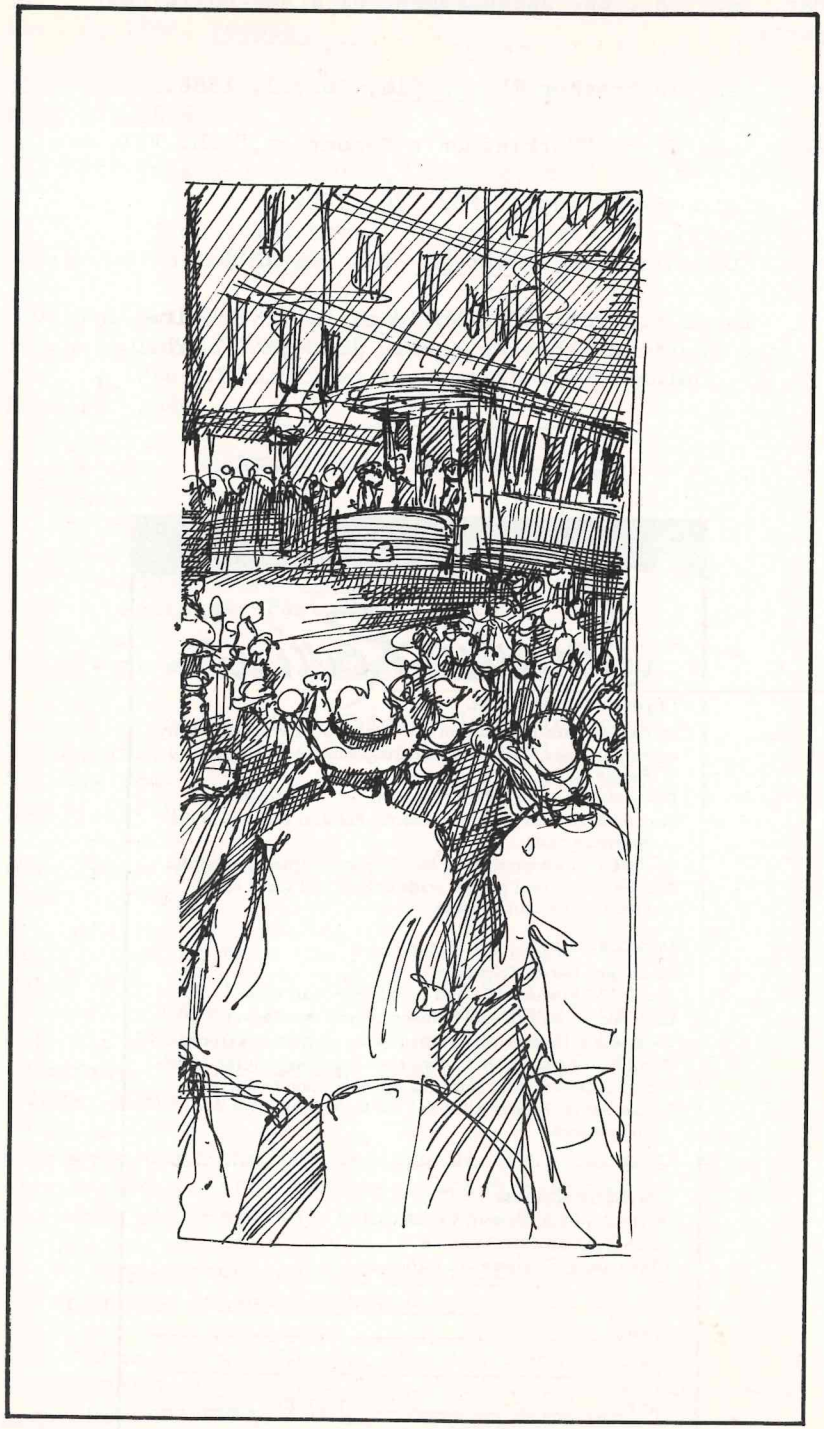
RADICAL HISTORY REVIEW



Labor and Community Militance in Rhode Island



A drawing of the angry crowd in Providence surrounding a streetcar

Rhode Island Communities and the 1902 Carmen's Strike

Scott Molloy

Introduction

Transportation workers might be said to contain within their own history a central dynamic of American working class mobilization. In a nation where, as Hegel early suggested, sheer geographic diffusion would long substitute for more decisive social constructs, the human link between commercial outposts constituted no less the ties among the variegated lower classes, commercial and industrial producers, small businessmen and family members of the blue-collar community. From the role of shipworker "Jack Tar" in igniting the American Revolution, through the agitation of the nineteenth century railroad worker in leading the "Great Strike" of 1877 and the Pullman Strike of 1894, to the actions of teamsters and longshoremen in the General Strikes of Minneapolis and San Francisco during 1934, transportation conflicts have more than any other marked the wider social crises and the necessity for a labor response. This militant tradition carried over into the transportation manufacturing industry with the creation of the democratic center of the CIO drive in the United Auto Workers, and the launching of "Black Power" caucuses in the same UAW during the late 1960's.

The public character of the transportation employers has guaranteed the central importance of these conflicts. Guardianship of the public turnpikes and canals constituted the last great mercantile right practiced by antebellum state governments. The subsequent corruption of state and local administrations by railroad management enraged citizens of all classes, provoking landmark Supreme Court rulings along with urban riots, agrarian revolt, and government reform. In our own time, "What's good for General Motors..." became the classic statement on government alignment with business, while challenges to energy policies, ecological waste, job-killing automation, auto-sponsored suburban sprawl and virtually every other public issue continue to revolve around the machines for travel and the people who supply them.

Transit employers and transit workers occupy a

special place in this history. The eclipse of the frontier connoted the consolidation and expansion of urban life into the dominant social pattern. Among the graft-ridden corners of city management, none was so blatant or outrageous as public transportation. The "traction magnates" almost blotted out the despised memory of the national railroad barons like Jay Gould (widely known as "the worse man on earth") and William C. Vanderbilt ("The public be damned"). as the fare to ride across town became an important consideration in the size of the family's meal, and the inefficiency and filth of the operation scandalized the middle classes. Technologically and culturally, street railroads and the early elevated tracks were the wonder of the age. Thus the genteel protagonists of William Dean Howells' A Hazard of New Fortunes compared the elevated to "fabled monsters...organized lifelessness full of a strange semblance of life," that offered a sublime view of urban life from the windows of the cars that was "better than theatre." Beneath the confidence in American urban achievement lurked a guilt and fear that Howells placed at the center of his drama, activity "thrilling with griefs and hopes hitherto strange to the average American breast"; the streetcar workers' steps toward self-liberation and social leadership in their New York strike of 1886.(1)

Transit workers' activity in the Progressive Age went far to realize this promise. Repeatedly, from Brooklyn to Duluth, and from Indianapolis to Philadelphia, striking carmen were joined by thousands of sympathizers who threw rocks, overturned cars, and beat strikebreakers. Transit unions, with huge memberships, had considerable influence in central labor councils which was used to mobilize assistance. Streetcar strikes, unlike other labor disputes, were highly visible and touched the lives of the entire population. Day to day interaction among motormen, conductors, and patrons forged a close rapport in those times. Neighborhood carbarns also contributed to this sense of community camaraderie. The appearances of scabs and strikebreakers, coupled with long-standing resentment over poor service, high fares, and outdated equipment, unleashed a torrent of hostility.

As a reporter from the International Socialist Review commented in 1913, "A street railway strike must always be swift and furious, carried on among scenes of violence. Attempts to operate the cars of a struck service brings the hated scabs within close view of the strikers and their sympathizers, acting upon them as an insult and a slap in the face."(2) The highest point reached, the Philadelphia transit strike

of 1909, touched off a city general strike, sympathy strikes up and down the East Coast, and a call for a nationwide general strike of all workers. For a thin moment, organized and unorganized labor, union members and large segments of the public, shared one objective: the conquest of that hated enemy who owned the right to travel.(3)

Rhode Islanders experienced only a little of this drama, mostly in the brief phase between the economic slump of the 1890's and the recession of 1903-1904, when the defeats and indignities of the hungry years surfaced in Pawtucket and Providence. Nevertheless, the following account offers, in a microcosm, all the key events--employer intransigence, public support of labor, intense community activity in a blue-collar town like Pawtucket, violence and repression. Through the narrative, we may appreciate how well the transit strike undercut the exterior calm of the age and exposed the underlying class relations.

We Walk

The working class of Rhode Island was on the move in 1902. Demands for union recognition, shorter hours, and better working conditions riddled the labor peace of the year before. Weavers throughout the state struck for nine months in a tumultuous attempt to abolish the two-loom system. Team drivers sought a wage increase during a month long walkout, and brewery workers gained the nine-hour day after similar action. The skilled trades also shook the industrial establishment with successful agitation for an even shorter day of eight hours. In fact, the commissioner of industrial statistics called the year "...a remarkable one. Probably never before, with conditions so prosperous and work so abundant, has there been so intense a spirit of unrest among the wage earners."(1) The most spectacular event in this constellation of strikes was the violent walkout by employees of the Union Railroad in June 1902.

The Union Horse Railroad began a modest operation in 1865. In the next twenty-five years horsecar tracks crisscrossed the Providence metropolitan area. By the 1890's the use of electricity created a revolution in mass transit, providing speed and mobility unmatched by the horsecar or the steam train. Locally, the workforce grew from a handful in 1865 to 300 in 1877. By the turn of the century there were 1000 employees.(2)

Nelson W. Aldrich, powerful United States senator

from Rhode Island, understood the possibilities. He arranged a thirty-five million dollar windfall for the American Sugar Refining Company by spearheading special tariff legislation in the Senate. The Sugar Trust returned the favor and bankrolled Aldrich with one million five hundred thousand dollars to purchase the Union Railroad. Aldrich and his business associates then set up a holding company, the United Traction and Electric Company, in New Jersey where "fewer questions might be asked."(3) Originally a family concern with close personal ties to the workforce, the railway system was now in the hands of an impersonal syndicate.(4)

The carmen fought against the new management and organized Division 39 of the Amalgamated Association of Street and Electric Railway Employees of America. Membership swelled in the union when salaries were reduced from $2.50 a day to $2.00. The company moved quickly to disrupt the union, establishing a Mutual Benefit Association with death and sick pay to make up for wage cuts. Union organizers were fired and the business agent was installed as president of the Benefit Association.(5)

After the union drive of 1894 the Union Railroad gobbled up the few remaining independent railway companies in the state while forming subsidiary lines of their own in the suburbs. Wages were now $2.00 a day. as in 1865. The normal workday continued to average eleven hours spread out over as many as eighteen hours. "Some of our men in performing their day's work haul passengers to and from work and places of business, and have not completed their day's work until they have brought some of the same people home from the theatre at night."(6) Conductor Jimmy Quinn remembered a man in Olneyville who worked "seven years and five days" without any time off.(7) Similarly, the track gangs and repairmen toiled at least sixty hours a week.

In the spring of 1901, according to a publication of the Rhode Island Central Trades and Labor Union, a new organization, Division 200 of the Amalgamated Association of Street and Electric Railway Employees of America, was chartered. Carmen chose officers including a full-time business agent and an executive board with representatives from each carbarn. The Evening Telegram noted that the employees were not really angry at the company "but at the same time the men claimed that there were a number of grievances that ought to be adjusted, and the only way to bring

about such a result, in their opinion was to have the backing of a strong union."(8) The initial meeting included a large delegation from Pawtucket and the suburban carbarns.

The union gathered momentum in its first year, pressing management and the state legislature for better working conditions. In March 1902, the union officers presented thirteen grievances, in the form of a contract, to General Manager A.E. Potter of the Union Railroad. The union demanded recognition, a closed union ship, and arbitration of all grievances. The Division also wanted $2.25 for a ten-hour day. Potter promised to reply as soon as he conferred with other company officials.(9)

At the same time the carmen's union began a campaign in the state legislature for the ten-hour day, a measure that had been proposed unsuccessfully for several years. This year, the Republicans, who usually opposed the measure, supported it in order "to catch the labor vote at the next general assembly."(10) The ten-hour law passed in April 1902 and was to take effect June 1. The carmen, who had petitioned the legislature and attended the senate sessions in large numbers, were jubilant. One sympathetic legislator exclaimed: "It seems to me with the great privileges granted the company, the employees should finally receive some considerations."(11)

In late March, during the legislative debate on the ten-hour day, the company rejected the contract demands after several weeks of deliberation: "Not only is it proposed to submit all differences between the company and its employees to arbitration," replied Potter, "but by the terms of the agreement, the operation of the road is practically taken out of the hands of the company and placed in the hands of the association."(12) Furthermore, the United Traction and Electric Company considered the labor organization "an outside and irresponsible authority" that would force the syndicate to fire many oldtimers who would refuse to join the union. Management feared that a Rhode Island union would set an example for the syndicate's other employees, especially the non-unionized carmen in Philadelphia.(13)

In private, the company promised to abide by the ten-hour law and to consider a wage increase. Also, by agreeing to meet with a five-man union committee, the company, at least in the eyes of the men, actually recognized the union. One member of the negotiating committee reasoned that Potter would have thrown them

out of his office as individuals "but in the present case, knowing that we are acting under instructions from a large body, he hears us. Is not that recognition of the union?"(14)

Although the union's gains were small and tentative, the carmen were temporarily satisfied to have a foot in the company's door. The employees pledged to act conservatively so as not to jeopardize public support. At one of the union meetings "the mere mention of the word 'strike' was met with derision." The company, meanwhile, had received a "flood of letters" from strikebreaking firms ready to come to Providence in case of a shutdown.(15)

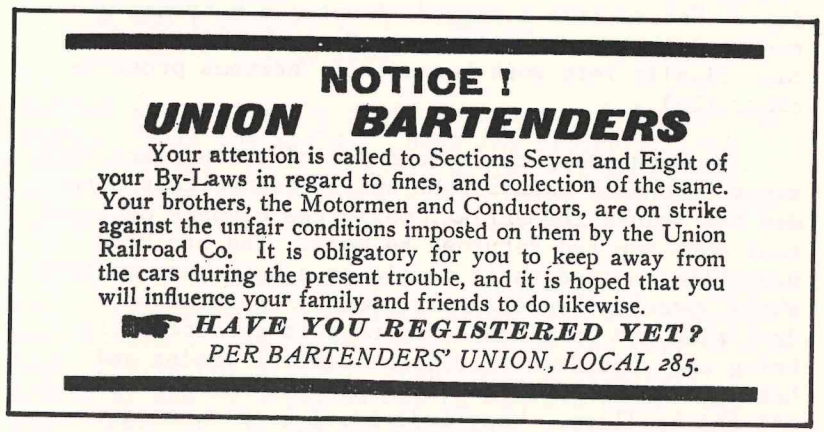
In the interim the union continued to organize while keeping up the pressure on the state legislature to enforce the ten-hour bill when it became law in June. Division 200 also participated in a voter registration drive under the leadership of the newly founded Rhode Island Trades Union Economic League. Many members of the League were fed up with being "tails for the Democratic kite" and pushed for the election of a pro-union mayor in Providence. (16) Carmen's Union helped by passing out literature in this aggressive, but unsuccessful campaign.(17)

The company lagged on instituting the ten-hour day, and attacked the union again in April by discharging the union's president, John Arno, for a routine accident with a delivery wagon. The angry carmen argued that Arno had been dismissed for his union activities. Arno labelled the act a revenge for the passage of the ten-hour law: "This was the first time in the existence of the traction company that they had ever been forced to give in to their employees, which, no doubt, was very embarrassing and provoking."(18) The Evening Telegram, after covering a special meeting of the division, reported that "unless the United Traction Company assumes a different attitude toward the officers and members, they would sooner or later be forced to take some radical action."(19)

The tension mounted in the carbarns as Potter refused to rehire Arno, and accelerated to a strike vote when the Union Railroad announced on May 31 that it would not obey the ten-hour law. Two days later, on June 2, the union membership voted unanimously to strike unless the company offered $2.25 for a ten-hour day. At the same time, Division 200 began the battle for public opinion by promising to provide transportation during the strike.(20)

Before the scheduled walkout on Tuesday, the company posted notices in all barns refusing to recognize the union or honor the union's demands: "Compliance will mean the practical destruction of the dividend earning power of this company and therefore a serious impairment of the value of its property to its stockholders and of its ability to fulfill its duties to the public."(21) The conservative Journal took the side of the company "against recognizing a labor organization that has its headquarters in another city." The Journal and the railroad also warned the men not to interfere with employees who wanted to stay on the job or the police would take action. At midnight on June 4, 1902, the men struck.(22)

Approximately 700 of the 1000 motormen and conductors went out, including some repairmen and laborers. "The strike was arranged and carried on," according to the Journal, "by the men engaged since the old horse car days, the $2.00 men."(23) The oldtimers, the 225 employees who operated horsecars before electrification in 1894, continued to work. These veterans had had the old wage scale restored a few years earlier. They now earned $2.50 a day--fifty cents more than the other carmen. The oldtimers were joined by 100 of these younger, lower paid employees. The handful of linemen and power house employees, the elite of the workforce and members of an electrical union, stayed on the job despite statements of solidarity.(24)



Nevertheless, car service was cut in half the first day. Evening service was severely crippled--only twenty-four out of 137 night cars ran. There were no cars in the Pawtuxet Valley, and only two cars out of thirty-two in Pawtucket ventured out. East Greenwich, Warren, and Bristol, on the other hand,

maintained regular daytime schedules. Services in Providence was irregular.(25)

In a quick attempt to panic the carmen, the company demanded that all strikers turn in their badges and punches on payday. Most of the strikers simply did not bother to pick up their wages. The company also advertised for experienced motormen and conductors in the local newspapers and prepared to bring in professional strikebreakers from other cities.(26) In an appeal to the public, the management issued a statement to discredit the union: "This strike has been brought about by professional agitators who go from city to city sowing seeds of discontent, endeavoring to create dissatisfaction between the employee and the employer, and then injecting themselves into the situation as arbitrators, that they may become dictators later. They have no interest in the community, and no stake in our common welfare."(27)

The public did not share the company's attitude; instead, the strike tapped consumers' anger at the arbitrary practices and poor service of the streetcar monopoly. "There is no apparent dissatisfaction," the Evening Telegram reported, "by the traveling public whose sympathy is all with the men."(28) In East Providence and elsewhere the strikers fulfilled their pledge to provide service in wagons. The trolleys were practically deserted, and former passengers hooted the carmen who stayed on the job. One old-timer, repeatedly called a scab by a crowd in Providence, "cried like a baby." A veteran motorman who received the same treatment in Pawtucket for a few days finally left work because of "nervous prostration."(29)

On Wednesday, the second day of the strike, both sides announced gains: the union claimed that more men had joined the strike, while the company declared that more men had returned to work. The strikers meanwhile boosted their morale at a huge mass meeting where speeches "were interrupted by applause so deafening and long continued that it threatened to bring the roof down."(30) The Central Trades and Labor Union asked its twenty thousand members to stay off the trolleys. Many individual locals voted to fine or dismiss brothers caught riding a streetcar. That night a crowd of one thousand gave a preview of the coming storm by surrounding a trolley in Providence and yelling "Push the car off the tracks." The company announced the hiring of fifty scabs.(31)

The storm broke on Thursday, June 5. That evening 500 strikers paraded downtown and twenty thousand sympathizers turned out to cheer them on. A military band led the procession, and dozens of banners and signs boldly proclaimed that "Ten hours are enough," that "We are out for a just cause," and that "The Union Railroad has the people by the throat."(32) Initially streetcars were blocked by carts, wagons, and bicycles. Then there was a full scale riot. The crowd, egged on by some strikers, showered the cars and scabs with rocks.(33)

The Journal described the scene in a front page headline: "Streets filled with rioters; cars destroyed, motormen and conductors terrorized, and the police officers stoned."(34) The Evening Telegram reported that "enthusiasts jammed the business section of the city and gave to an outburst of popular feeling that has no parallel in the city's history."(35) Even the police commissioner was amazed: "I don't think that anyone in the city dreamed that such a thing would occur at that time and place."(36)

The Journal observed that some of the rioters were "strikers, or at least, union men. Others looked to the police like college boys from the hill. Many were unmistakably boys in their teens or young men in their early twenties apparently workers in the mills or big factories." They sang:

> We are, We are, We are, We are, We are
> the union men,
> We won't go back till doomsday,
> and maybe not go then.

Another group of young protestors carried threatening signs: "Kill the scabs," "Hang the traitors," and "Yank them off the car."(37) At least some of the destruction of the company's sophisticated electrical equipment could be attributed to strikers.

Most of those arrested by the police were ordinary working people like Frank Byron "who was found to have stones in his pocket and a button and card of the Team Drivers Union."(38) John Cook, a prominent socialist and official of the Carpenters Union, was also locked up, as was Lester Davis, a striking conductor, who pulled a trolley pole off the wire. According to the Telegram, even white-collar people helped out: "Prosperous looking men who under ordinary circumstances would not be seen talking to a poor driver, filled with a desire to sympathize with the strikers, came down to the plane of social equality and halted the wagons in the middle of the track to

carry on an impromptu conversation with the drivers. The sole object of this was to impede traffic on the cars."(39) The riot lasted until midnight although the police had been knocking heads for hours.

The labor unions, including Division 200, all condemned the violence. But the riot served its purpose. All car service was discontinued that evening and Potter sadly admitted that "three hundred men whom we have engaged and who have never run a car are afraid to venture out."(40) The union leadership and the newspapers claimed that the violence would tarnish the strikers' image, although the public had joined enthusiastically in the rioting. The company posted five hundred dollar reward notices for information leading to the arrest of troublemakers. The Central Trades and Labor Union countered by distributing ten thousand handbills explaining the carmen's cause. A house-to-house canvass in working-class neighborhoods was also organized to persuade people to stay off the cars. In Pawtucket local businessmen eventually outfitted eighteen wagons with a striking motorman and conductor tending each one. All fares went to the strikers' defense fund.(41)

The weekend after the riot, June 6-8, was relatively quiet in Providence. On Friday night most of the Providence carmen traveled to Pawtucket by steam train for a rally and parade to Central Falls. Thousands turned out to cheer the marchers and applaud the speakers. The strikers carried protesting signs: "If the working man breaks the law, he is arrested, 'tis different with the railroad company" and "The legislature and the union railroad seem to be one company."(42)

In Providence there were no demonstrations over the weekend although there was occasional violence. Streetcars were pelted with rocks and eggs, and shots were fired at a Broad Street and a Mt. Pleasant car. Throughout the city teamsters obstructed the trolleys with their slow-moving wagons, and in many areas the tracks were blockaded with garbage and debris. The police shut all saloons early in an attempt to prevent mass violence. Strong public support moved the few oldtimers at one Providence carbarn to strike with the union.

Forty-three other veterans, all non-union carmen from the Olneyville carhouse, sent a delegation to A.T. Potter, the senior vice-president of the Union Railroad and father of general manager A.E. Potter. The committee complained that "the public was against

them and they were ridiculed by the public." The vice-president urged them "not to get discouraged, for the company appreciated the trouble the men were having and would always remember it."(43) Potter knew his audience. He had worked with these men as helper, hostler, switch boy, and driver since the 1860's and maintained a close rapport even after joining the management. He had hired many of the horsecar employees, sometimes offering work to a man on the street after observing some exemplary personal quality or civic act. He also had a hand, no doubt, in reinstituting the $2.50 a day wage scale for horsecar veterans.(44)

The Potters, father and son, also knew how to divide the workforce: the oldtimers against the new employees, the interlopers who had never experienced the tug of a "hoss" and who took for granted the speed, power, and convenience of the electric streetcar. The veterans spent a lifetime around horses in stables, on farms, or in delivery wagons. They were skilled workmen who nimbly worked brake and horse on inclines and strained their muscles with a fourteen horse team in the snow.(45) A retiree in 1926 still chided the younger men: "Think of it boys, with your vestibuled cars, and your little 'La De Dah' seats to sit in. We never sat down during business hours."(46) The union sent a committee to talk with the oldtimers in Olneyville but the delegation could not persuade them to go out. The veterans, with higher wages, seniority, and tradition, stuck with Potter instead."(47)

Meanwhile, Providence and Pawtucket citizens supported the union against strikebreakers. When strikers drove furniture wagons filled with commuters "the passengers were cheered by people along the route and they responded with other cheers."(48) Merchants in Olneyville, Fox Point, and other neighborhoods would not sell goods to scabs. Storekeepers on Wickenden Street refused all services to a landlady who put up strikebreakers in her boarding house. In Clyde, a distraught father dragged his son, a scab motorman, off the streetcar. Even a tired policeman displayed sympathy when he confessed to a reporter that "if any of us men had our way about it we would haul in every scab at work on general principles."(49) But with scabs and strikebreakers working overtime under intense police protection, daytime service returned to normal in most areas. The scene of action shifted to Pawtucket. There, widespread union strength and the support of city officials reinforced local resistance to the traction company.

The Providence Journal grudgingly admitted that in the Blackstone Valley "the air is surcharged with the organized labor spirit, which during the last few months has experienced a renaissance a little less than wonderful. It has spread and taken possession of one form of skilled labor after another, until there now exists a well nigh perfect and unbroken solidarity of laborers, craftsmen, and salespeople whose numbers run into the thousands."(50) Earlier in the year, Pawtucket had formed its own militant Central Labor Body. Also the publicity surrounding the formation of the Trades Union Economic League gave organized labor more political power throughout the state. This labor solidarity was endorsed by local politicians, especially the new mayor of Pawtucket, John J. Fitzgerald. For years the traction company had paid a skimpy twelve hundred dollars in annual taxes for profitable runs in Pawtucket. In return, according to city officials, the railroad gave poor service, refused to provide transfers, and overpriced the fares. Fitzgerald went so far as to legally force the Union Railroad to rip up four hundred feet of track on Walcott Street because the company had violated the contract by not completing the line on time.(51) Even the railroad commissioner admitted that "The people are obliged to ride in vehicles which are a disgrace to any civilized community; not only uncomfortable, but absolutely injurious to health and morals."(52)

When the strike began, the 125 Pawtucket carmen were highly organized. With the support of the people of the city and publicly elected officials, the employees disrupted the operations of the Pawtucket Street Railway. As one reporter for the Evening Telegram observed: "Trees, railroad ties, boulders, stones, planks, and barrels filled with rocks made the railroad track impassable."(53) Few passengers rode the cars. Most trolleys were empty. A large banner, strung across Main Street, warned everyone that the "Electric Car Strike Is On, Friends of the Men Will Not Ride In The Cars." The superintendent of operations in Pawtucket was forced to drive a streetcar himself and was pelted with rotten fruit by a crowd of women and children.(54)

When the traction company complained that the mayor filed to protect their property, Fitzgerald replied: "Our police force is not at the beck and call of any corporations who feel they are entitled to special escort service, nor is it large enough to spare men for ornamental purposes on the streetcars."(55) The company retaliated by asking the sheriff of

Pawtucket streetcar in 1895. The motorman stood at the front of the car unsheltered.

Providence County to send in marshals. Twenty-four were assigned to Pawtucket initially, and two were placed on each of the six cars still running. The Pawtucket City Council labeled their presence insulting, and called for their immediate withdrawal. The Council also threatened to pass a law requiring the Pawtucket Street Railway to hire "competent and experienced motormen only."(56)

If the fight in Providence had become merely a war of words, Pawtucket was a real battleground. On June 8 deputies pulled their guns when two thousand angry people surrounded a trolley on Dexter Street. As more and more sheriffs streamed into Pawtucket, the townspeople became angrier. The Cumberland Town Council blamed the deputies for "inciting the people to disorder and disturbances."(57) On the night of June 11, eighteen deputies were injured by rocks and bricks when they tried to escort a car past Pawtucket and East Avenues. They fired a dozen shots into the air. One constable quit on the spot and was chased by a gang through backyards and over fences. After this, Governor Kimball, for the first time in the state's history, called out the militia, including a company of cavalry and a gatling gun battery.(58) The Journal commented editorially that "Pawtucket is being disgraced by manifestations of mob rule and anarchy."(59) The editors were really jolted when the militia almost joined the strikers.

Pawtucket was now an armed camp, but the strategy of bringing in one thousand militia almost backfired. Most of the troops were working people who had friends in the crowd and therefore "openly expressed their sympathy with the mob and the strike which is back of all the trouble."(60) In fact, several strikers actually belonged to the militia. One group of soldiers passing the Pawtucket carbarn, called the strike-breakers scabs, while thirty-five others took a streetcar to Pawtucket and refused to pay their fares. An infantry sergeant taunted a reporter, claiming that the cars would never be protected. And one militiaman told a group of strike sympathizers: "Never mind, boys, we are with you. We have to do this."(61)

Alarmed, the Journal called for drastic measures: "Let no gentleness be shown toward the lawless who obstruct cars or jeer at men who are earning their living as they see fit."(62) Military discipline was severely enforced and two naval batallions from Newport, strangers to the people to Pawtucket, were brought in after extensive training in the "street riot drill." The military commanders, besides facing the people of Pawtucket, also encountered another problem. Most stable owners in the state sympathized with the strikers and refused to sell horses or else charged exorbitant rates.(63)

As more troops entered the city, the hated sheriffs were finally withdrawn, but not until they shot into a crowd wounding a fourteen year old boy in the throat. The day before their retreat, a mob attacked the deputies' headquarters at Pawtucket and Main Streets and sent them scurrying. The sheriff of Providence County complained that his men had "to face a mob as vicious as any which ever assembled in an American community."(64) The militia, forced to toe the line by their commanding officers, helped to calm the situation. The Journal happily informed its readers "the infantry was instructed to use musket butts should resistance be encountered, but bayonet and bullet were also to be called into play should there be occasion for their use." If that failed, four gatling guns were in place "ready to sweep the streets in any direction if a rush should be attempted."(65)

The courts also helped to suppress the strike. A teamster who beat up a scab on Elmwood Avenue got ninety days in the Providence County Jail, while an East Providence judge was prepared to impose a fine of twenty dollars on anyone yelling "scab." Two Brooklyn carmen, who traveled to Pawtucket to even a score with a scab who had helped break a strike in New York City, were sentenced to ninety days in jail for assaulting him. Many of those arrested for throwing rocks or blocking streetcars were bound over to the grand jury. Scabs in Pawtucket, on the other hand, who brandished illegal weapons on the trolleys were slapped on the wrist by the judge and then freed.(66)

Despite the militia in Pawtucket, the police in Providence, and the harsh sentences of the court, the strikers and their sympathizers fought back. Night-cars in Pawtucket, if and when they went out, were sure to incite the "mill help" to riot. The Evening Telegram actually reported "guerilla warfare" on Prospect Street. In Central Falls a scab motorman from Dallas, Texas, was knocked unconscious by a rock. His trolley ran uncontrollably into a barricade of lead water pipe. Bullets were shot into passing streetcars, and there were many cases of dynamiting and derailment. One explosion on Bullocks Point Avenue in Riverside blew the trolley off the track. Women often took a leading role in the street violence.(67)

Many strike sympathizers, who refrained from violent acts, helped out in other ways. Union barbers, sales clerks, loom operators, carpenters, teamsters, and hundreds of other working people donated quarters, half dollars, and greenbacks to the strike fund. Even William Cody, better known as Buffalo Bill, contributed five dollars when his Wild West show was in town during the strike. Thousands of others wore ribbons and badges which read "We Walk" in solidarity with the carmen. And they meant it.(68) The Journal marveled that the boycott of the trolleys succeeded "to an extent that can hardly be conceived to be possible."(69) The people stayed off the cars even in the rain. One union official who rode a trolley after a long illness was fined by his union. School teachers who rode the cars "have been abused by mothers of pupils, and children have been encouraged to violate rules."(70) A businessman, whose wife committed a similar sin, was boycotted. Elsewhere in the state scabs and strike-breakers were refused coal, haircuts, and plugs of tobacco. Most touching was the little shoeshine boy who, discovering that a customer planned to take a streetcar, delivered a lecture on treachery to the well-dressed man. The Pawtucket Street Railway was the only company in the state to lose money in 1902--all due to the strike and boycott.(71)

The carmen, in a further bid for public support, sponsored a wide variety of benefits and rallies in order to raise money and morale. Baseball games were

scheduled, and a spirited contest between the strikers and union bartenders drew many spectators to Adelaide Park in Providence. Hundreds attended fund raising picnics like the three-day affair at the Dexter Street Grounds in Pawtucket. Thousands more bought tickets for several benefit concerts.(72) Different strikers visited other unions to present progress reports, and at a meeting of the coremakers "many men immediately took the floor and championed the strikers' cause."(73)

The numerous mass meetings conducted during the strike were also a source of encouragement to the strikers. At a large gathering in Team Drivers' Hall on June 12, international treasurer Rezin Orr declared that the violence was "only the people uprising in their wrath against a corporation which had apparently up to the present owned them."(74) A similar meeting, under the auspices of the Trades Union Economic League, was attended by fifteen hundred in Providence. Mayor Fitzgerald, the keynote speaker, opened his address to thunderous applause when he shouted "We Walk." He said that the allegations in the newspapers about hoodlums and anarchy were unjust references "to you working people who were asserting your just rights."(75) Similar outdoor gatherings at Watchemoket and Olneyville Squares featured dynamic socialist speakers. One orator pointed his finger at the real enemy: "The politicans of both these parties (Democratic and Republican) have arrayed the forces of the state against the working class in all strikes."(76) The Journal, alarmed at such talk, tried to blame the disorder on one or two "red" agitators.(77)

Nevertheless, the carmen were in trouble. The scabs, oldtimers, and turncoat union members in Providence were running regular daytime schedules. The disunity in the capital city eventually demoralized the strikers throughout the state. Only in Pawtucket did the carmen hold their own. After three weeks, the union received some heartening news. On June 25, the State Supreme Court ruled that the ten-hour law was indeed constitutional and declared it illegal for the traction company to hire men for more than ten hours a day. The strikers seemed to have won an important victory. But the company simply refused to obey the law. Their lawyers tied the case up in Federal Appeals Court. A day after the hollow decision, the last soldiers withdrew from Pawtucket. A band of militia, already aboard a Providence bound streetcar, left the scab car in a final gesture of respect to the strikers. They took a steam train instead.(78)

The local police were once again in charge of affairs in Pawtucket, so Mayor Fitzgerald beefed up the force by hiring four special policemen--three of them strikers. With the end of the walkout in sight, and the strike sympathizers sensing defeat, they lashed out in a final week of fury. One trolley, for example, was attacked on Mineral Spring Avenue as it passed by Lorraine Mills. The motorman was injured, but a local fire company refused to let him use the phone. The scabs abandoned the car in Marieville, and a group of citizens demolished it.(79) "It presented the appearance," the Journal reported, "of having been struck by lightning or shattered in a dynamite explosion."(80) For a moment it looked as though the militia might be recalled.

On July 6, however, the men in Providence voted to call off the strike. Less than two hundred bothered to vote. The Pawtucket carmen decided to continue the walkout. Outside the meeting hall a tense crowd applauded wildly when a sign in a window announced "The Strike is Still On." This unity almost forced a reconsideration of the vote in Providence, but Albert Vetter, the union business agent, was rudely ignored when he visited Pawtucket. The strikers felt the union leadership had mishandled the walkout. A few days later the Pawtucket carmen admitted defeat. The banner over Main Street was lowered amid shouts of bitter hostility. It was a sign of surrender. The company had won.(81)

Only four scabs dared to remain in Pawtucket after the strike, and the strikers regained their seniority behind them. In Providence many scabs stayed, and the union men had to take spots behind them. All striking shopmen were replaced, and the most militant were never rehired. The company shortened the workday to ten hours but only for the faithful oldtimers. In August 1902, the management rewarded the 100 younger men who worked during the strike with a 12½ cents a day raise.(82)

In November 1902, the carmen and the rest of union labor in the state had the satisfaction of defeating Governor Kimball at the polls. Lucius Garvin, the carmen's ally and the originator of the ten-hour bill, was now chief executive. The large labor turnout, due to the unpopularity of the militia, turned the tables and gave the carmen a small measure of revenge although the governor was simply a figurehead. The ten-hour law was overturned by the legislature in December anyway. On August 1, 1902, Division 200 of the Amalgamated Association of Street and Electric

Railway Employees of America was disbanded.(83)

What accounted for the contrast in community support between Providence and Pawtucket? In Providence the carmen had to contend with a sizeable number of oldtimers, company pets, and union deserters. As the riot of June 5 demonstrated, the citizens of the capital city initially supported the strike like their counterparts in Pawtucket. Providence, however, was an older city with a population close to two hundred thousand. Politically, the city was in the vest pockets of the bankers and industrialists. Marsden J. Perry, a local magnate and vice-president of the Union Railroad, used the columns of his influential Providence Journal to attack the strikers. Business interests also controlled law enforcement. The Providence police chief, for example, met privately with general manager Potter to plan joint strategy to control the strike and protect company property.(84)

Pawtucket, on the other hand, was a smaller city of forty thousand, where city officials were more accountable to the voters. There was also less bureaucratic insulation to protect politicans from criticism. Mayor Fitzgerald, under direct public pressure, sided enthusiastically with the carmen, while the mayor of Providence maintained an aloof "neutrality." The Journal complained that "the known personal sympathy of Mayor Fitzgerald with the strikers has been seized upon by strike sympathizers in Pawtucket as a virtual official sanction of lawlessness."(85) The sheriff of Providence County called Fitzgerald "the faithful friend and familiar ally of the lawless."(86) Militiamen nicknamed the episode "Fitzgerald's Rebellion." Because of his office the mayor became a popular symbol of defiance but the muscle and the heart to sustain the strike came from ordinary citizens. The mayor appeared above the crowd because he was standing on the stout shoulders of working people.

While the situation in Providence hobbled the strike, the National Carmen's Union contributed to the defeat. Officials in Detroit failed to provide the five dollar a week strike pay because Division 200 struck without official permission. A recent call by the International had been rejected by the locals. Even so, the national office should have sent as much cash as possible, especially during the first week of the strike when a show of force was essential. The lack of financial support--only two hundred dollars arrived in Providence--was a severe psychological

blow and probably discouraged some carmen who viewed it as a sign of union weakness.(87)

The carmen's strike of 1902 went as far as a labor action could go without turning into a full-scale confrontation of urban social classes. Against the monied influence of the streetcar holding company, workers could pit only their personal resources and the slim strike fund of their international union. Against the power of police, carmen could offer no more than the direct action of ordinary citizens and the sympathetic response of shrewd local politicians. At the least, victory would have required a planned and sustained program of resistance combining the enthusiasm of fellow tradesmen and their families with the combined resources of the community. At the most, citywide general strikes in Providence and Pawtucket might have suspended all services, compelling a political resolution to the crisis. The extraordinary textile strike of the same summer in Providence indicated the volatility of wage-earners restive after the lean years of the 1890's depression, willing and even eager for a chance to fight for better conditions. Tragically, labor did not know how to turn its potential strength into actual power.

One year earlier, Rhode Island craftsmen had celebrated their accomplishments, the rise of local business, and the bright prospects for the state in their own 20th Century Illustrated History of Rhode Island. The reality belied this consecration of labor peace: manufacturers and merchandisers had put their stamp upon a limited quota of union labor because its existence preserved the illusion of an amicable settlement among social classes. "Where but a few years ago, trade unionism was looked upon as a vile and senseless thing," a labor editor wrote from Decatur, Illinois, in 1903, now "the unions have the sympathy of the public in general" because "the capitalist class themselves...have found that trade unionism itself is positively harmless."(88) The American Federation of Labor's advance of the late 1880's and early 1890's had long since ground to a halt. Nationally and locally, the federation had operated increasingly as a job trust to restrict the choice job market for a small sector of the working class, utilizing control over union membership to exclude the unskilled, blacks, women, and many of the recently immigrated workers from the choice positions in industry. The economic downturn in 1903 induced an employer offensive which virtually wiped out skilled unions in steel, meatpacking, textiles, and many lesser industries. Painful as it must have been to

admit, organized labor in Rhode Island had gained entrance into the industrial order only as a second-class citizen.

The final success of the carmen's union took place a decade later under conditions markedly different. By 1913, labor nationally had shown the way through a vast wave of strikes involving women, immigrants, craft and unskilled workers of every ethnic and racial variety. Rhode Island carmen and their employers knew about the streetcar strikes and riots which paralyzed major industrial centers. Rhode Island moved close enough to that calamitous state of affairs with its own widespread labor disturbances and mass protests of that year. Management and street railway employees chose the route of lesser confrontation, and the principle of unionism won a permanent footing in the business.

No historical incident offers any simple lesson. Rhode Island streetcar workers could, in the great strike of 1919, walk off the job reasonably confident they would not be replaced by strikebreakers or blacklisted from their trade, because labor earlier and elsewhere dared to go further than the strike and beyond the gentlemanly assumptions of the labor aristocrat and his mindful employer. The strike and rioting in Providence and Pawtucket during 1902 had contributed to that confidence both in victory and defeat. Ordinary folk of every description felt strongly enough about union labor and working-class unity to risk life and limb against the power of the state. That the force of sympathy and solidarity proved inadequate in 1902 demonstrated the need for better union campaigns. The eventual organization of Rhode Island Division 618 of the Street Carmen's Union in 1913 was a blend of sophisticated technique and firm backing from national headquarters. Although the union was finally christened in a new labor period, the carmen never forgot 1902. As late as 1920, young men breaking in on the streetcars were warned by union veterans to shun the scabs of 1902 who had stayed on the job after the strike.

Notes

Introduction

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We Walk

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Our Own Kind: Family and Community Networks

Judith E. Smith

The Rhode Island working class has been continually reconstituted by succeeding waves of immigration in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. First Irish, then French Canadian, then Italian, Jewish, and Portuguese: all have come from peasant communities to resettle in the mill towns and industrial cities of

the state. Listening to immigrants describe their daily life in the old country and in the New World, one is repeatedly struck by their frequent references to the family. Looking more closely at the process by which thousands of immigrants found their way to Rhode Island, one sees that family ties provided the links of the chain that extended from communities in Europe to communities in Rhode Island. The family stands at