



LOOKING BACK *Moving Forward*

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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

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Great Streetcar Strike

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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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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."