

The Mass Transit Murders

Morton J. Marcus
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It our human practice to be saddened by the deaths of those whose struggles we understand. So it is with the victims of the Mass Transit Murders a tragic story, well-known at the time and now forgotten. The problems and passions of those days differ from our own times, so to sympathize we must first understand.

The Background

The model for mass transit began with Noah and his Ark, the first “build-it-and-they will come” venture. Limited in design, the Ark met the exigencies of its time and served the future of all life.

Is that not what we seek for Indianapolis in our time? A system designed to resolve our current transit problems, yet one that will make a contribution to the well-being of future generations.

For Indianapolis, transit for the masses by street car began in 1864, during the Civil War. These early street cars were horse- or mule drawn. As in other cities, working for the street car company was difficult, but not skilled, employment. Most males of that time could command a horse.

The drivers stood on a board at the front of the car, unprotected from rain, sleet, or snow. It was not uncommon for drivers to become ill and miss work, or die, from weather-related illness. Drivers were also known to fall from the icy board on which they stood and fall under the wheels of the car. Families of such unfortunate drivers received no compensation. At that time, the loss of a horse cost the company about \$75, but the loss of a man cost the company nothing.

Since many streetcar workers were most often immigrants, Irish, Catholic, or otherwise subject to derisive attitudes, they had little support from government or the public in general.

Between 1890 and 1894, the Indianapolis streetcar system was electrified, which improved service and provided relief from the discharges of the animals. As in other cities, streetcars made transportation convenient and affordable. In Indianapolis, the streetcars helped develop suburbs like Haughville, Irvington and Woodruff Place.

The labor movement, at this time, was in its formative stage. Local unions were ephemeral attempts to improve the wages and working conditions of labor; they had little experience in developing relationships with their companies and difficulty in maintaining their precarious existence.

In 1892, workers of the Citizens' Street Railway Company, a small streetcar firm, went on strike. The fledging union did not demand higher wages, shorter hours, or better working conditions. They sought restoration of a benefit the company had rescinded - - the free off-duty streetcar pass. After nine days, city residents and those commuting to Indianapolis realized the importance of the streetcar to the economic and social life of the city. The strike ended with restoration of the free passes, but no recognition of the union by the company.

That same year, 1892, the dominant labor leader of the time, Samuel Gompers, called for a meeting of the Amalgamated Association of Street and Electric Railway Employees of America (AASEREA) in Indianapolis. Delegates came from many of the largest cities in the country. It was promptly decided to make Indianapolis the headquarters city for the national union.

However, the battle for the union presidency was long and bitter. Finally, William Law, of the Detroit local, offered his office facilities free of charge, and he agreed not to take a salary as president. This was an offer the union could not refuse. Indianapolis lost the

headquarters. Law, however, lost his presidency the next year after he absconded with the union treasury.

By 1899, transit workers in Indianapolis stabilized their union sufficiently to affiliate with the national Amalgamated union.

During those last years of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th, Indianapolis mirrored the nation's philosophical turmoil - the rights of ownership and the rights of labor. By 1905, the city was the headquarters of nine national unions including the typographers, bricklayers, carpenters, barbers, mine workers and teamsters. This was a result of Indianapolis' superior rail access to industrial America.

At the same time, Indianapolis was the center of employer opposition to organized labor. The open-shop movement was nurtured here. In 1902, David Parry of this city became the president of the National Manufacturers' Association. He later became president of the Citizens' Industrial Association which, with the Employers' Association of Indianapolis, propagandized against labor, took credit for defeating pro-labor candidates and for passage of an anti-boycotting ordinance in the city.

Thus Indianapolis became, for a while, both the open shop and labor union capital of the United States. Ironically, while the anti-union forces in the city railed against labor goals, other business leaders helped raise money to attract more union headquarters to Indianapolis as an economic development program.

The greatest civil disorder in the city's history

This, then, is the background for the Mass Transit Murders, or as you will find it recorded in the literature, the 1913 strike by the streetcar workers' union against the Indianapolis Traction and Terminal Company. This firm held a 31 year lease agreement to

own and operate both the Downtown streetcar terminal as well as operate the Indianapolis Street Railway. Located on Market Street, just east of Capitol Street, the terminal served as a central hub for both the intra- and extensive inter-city lines serving Indianapolis and Indiana.

The union (the AASEREA now called the ATU – Amalgamated Transit Workers) still sought to improve wages and working conditions in Indianapolis. In August 1913, following successful efforts in several cities, including St. Louis and Cincinnati, J.J. Thorpe, the ATU's vice-president, came to Indianapolis.

Thorpe formed a committee to recruit union members from the 900 non-union workers at the Traction Company where workers earned less and worked longer hours than union workers of the smaller Indianapolis Street Railway Company. As the union's efforts progressed, the company responded by firing those who joined the union. When the company refused to recognize the union, Thorpe's committee petitioned the U.S. Department of Labor to mediate the dispute. Ethelbert Stewart, from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, was detailed to the task in October 1913.

When the union submitted a grievance list, the company refused the services of the mediator, denied there was a labor problem, said no attempt at unionizing was being made, that only a small number of workers were behind the union and these were outside agitators.

The company hired spies to trail union leaders and discover their plans. Management of the company found the union's proposals unreasonable and believed it to be unfair for employees' wages to exceed the income received from the company by the shareholders. Union men discovered the spies, attacked and injured them. This began an irreversible rise in tensions.

With less than half the employees enrolled in the union, Thorpe's committee sought help from other unions in the city.

Thursday, October 30, 1913:

Thorpe sent a letter to Robert Todd, president of the Traction Company, demanding higher wages, reduced work hours and reinstatement of those fired for joining the union. If his demands were not met, a strike could not be averted.

Halloween Night – Friday, Oct. 31:

A meeting of pro-union men at Labor Hall determined to support the strike. Given the carnival atmosphere of Indianapolis' downtown Halloween Festival, men dispersed around the city to halt the streetcars. Some streetcar drivers were taken forcibly to Labor Hall to give their oaths in support of the union. Some resisted and were severely beaten.

Saturday, November 1:

Only half as many men showed up for work on the normal routes. The striking streetcar men were joined by thousands of pro-union men in blocking streetcar tracks and harassing workers. Dozens of streetcars were vandalized, some destroyed, overhead electric cables were cut, and passengers were advised not to ride the cars. Again, some workers were taken to Labor Hall to repeat their oaths after being convinced or intimidated to join the strike.

A police squad was sent to protect repairmen trying to restore the flow of power to the cables. Both groups were promptly surrounded by strikers with sticks and clubs. The police and repairmen fled. By afternoon, all streetcar service was halted. The inter-city light-rail services also were shutdown.

Sunday, November 2:

The disruption of both the intra- and inter-city trolley services and the violence that erupted on November 1 caused consternation at the Traction Company and in city government.

Local elections were approaching and Republicans suggested the strike was a move by Democrats to keep their (Republican) voters from the polls.

The Traction Company response was vigorous. They brought in 300 Pinkertons from Chicago to operate the streetcars. In addition, President Todd wrote city leaders that his men did not wish to strike and with adequate police protection to drive off outside agitators, normal operations could resume.

When the Pinkertons arrived from Chicago, they were escorted by mounted police from Union Station to the Company's storage carhouse south of the terminal building. In response, local unions sent additional men to support the strikers.

As the strikebreakers brought streetcars out, the strikers and their supporters attacked them with rocks and bricks. The cars were boarded and scab crews were dragged out while the cars were lit on fire. Many on both sides were injured and taken by ambulance to a hospital. In all, six cars were destroyed and a riot was in full progress.

Vandalism and violence filled the streets, but only 20 arrests were made. The police chief and many of his officers sympathized with the strikers. In court the situation was different. Strikers faced fines up to \$50 [over \$1,200 in 2014 dollars], but strikebreakers were summarily discharged by the local magistrate.

Now the strike moved into the political arena. The Republican Mayor, Samuel Shank, supported his police and their refusal to oppose the strikers. He appealed to Democratic Governor, Samuel Ralston, to take control of the situation. Shank wanted Ralston to call a special session of the legislature to pass a law mandating compulsory arbitration.

The Governor, knowing his legislature, refused because that body was not capable of agreeing in a timely manner. Instead, Ralston order Mayor Shank to require the police to act. Shank refused. The Governor then requested Marion County Sheriff, Democrat Theodore Porttens, to bring in the county police and restore order.

Monday, November 3:

The Sheriff deputized 200 men who marched to the terminal building to assist the strikebreakers move the streetcars to the carhouse across the street. The strikers and their allies intensified their attack with stones and bricks. Traction Company's President Todd was seriously injured and taken to the hospital. The outnumbered police began to abandon their posts. Shots were fired, killing one strikebreaker and injuring others.

The strike was now a riot covering the entire downtown area.

Fewer than 50 policemen remained on duty in the city. The Sheriff ordered the police to protect the streetcars, but 33 men resigned rather than obey. Mayor Shank supported the police mutiny. Without protection, the Traction Company shut down, a violation of the Company's contract with the City.

Tuesday, November 4:

As in 2014, November 4 was Election Day. Pro-union men roamed the city, vandalized property, and shut down much of Indianapolis. Sheriff Porttens again ordered the police to do their duty and 29 more officers resigned.

About 1,500 pro-union men marched to the streetcar electric distribution building, not far from the Terminal Building. The police had a heavy guard around that structure and Sheriff Porttens ordered the use of firearms, if the strikers attacked. The police opened fire, injuring several persons, and the crowd dispersed.

This action brought out more union sympathizers and between 8,000 and 10,000 rioters poured onto Illinois Street, setting fires, destroying property, and attacking people.

Clashes continued between strikers and strikebreakers. At the carhouse the strikebreakers and the remnant of police opened fire on the strikers, killing four while many on both sides were injured in the on-going battle. Eventually, the rioters overpowered the defenders of the carhouse.

Wednesday, November 5:

The violence and destruction of Tuesday, and the fear of its renewal, caused the Indianapolis Merchants' Association to petition Governor Ralston to call out the Indiana National Guard. Union leaders advised the Governor that the National Guard would only cause an intensification of the riot and more bloodshed.

The riots made national news, further unsettling those concerned with the image of the state.

Ralston declared martial law that day, calling out 2,200 men of the well-organized militia, the National Guard. Companies of troops patrolled the streets, enforcing a curfew. Gatling guns were set up around the headquarters of the Traction Company. However, the Governor refused to order the strikers to return to work as the Company demanded.

Thursday, November 6:

At noon, an angry crowd formed at the Statehouse. Union leaders issued demands, and the crowd urged the Governor to appear to address their demands in person. They wanted the Guard to leave Indianapolis and to have the legislature address their list of grievances.

Ralston, escorted by armed guards, against the advice of friends, went out onto the steps of the building to speak to the crowd. His speech was impassioned. He would withdraw the troops, negotiate with the union leaders, and introduce legislation to reform working conditions. In return, he wanted the strikers to return to work.

The assembled crowd calmed. They dispersed. The riot was over.

Friday, November 7:

Governor Ralston met with the Company and union leaders. In just a few hours they agreed temporarily that workers who were not involved in violence could return to work, wages would be

raised five percent, and there would be guaranteed weekly minimum salary. The union would be recognized, but Thorpe and other national union leaders would leave the state immediately. Further, all grievances would be submitted to the Indiana Public Service Commission for binding arbitration.

By 6 p.m., union members approved the agreement unanimously and the strike was over.

Saturday, November 8:

The National Guard escorted the Pinkerton strikebreakers to Union Station for the return train ride to Chicago. The motormen and conductors of the streetcars returned to work. Some union men refused to work with non-union employees. These objections were dropped when Governor Ralston threatened to have the National Guard run the cars until the Public Service Commission could resolve the question.

The Aftermath

The National Guard demobilized on November 10. Governor Ralston and the federal mediator finished a final agreement; all employees except those arrested for violence would return to work without loss of seniority.

Sheriff Porttens brought charges against 33 officers for insubordination only to have the police threaten to go on strike. Mayor Shank supported a petition signed by several thousand citizens to retain the charged policemen. Sheriff Porttens resigned. Mayor Shank resigned when the city council sought to impeach him because he sided with the police.

Governor Ralston had the General Assembly pass a minimum wage law and improvements in the living conditions of the poor, which included funding for clean running water and children's playgrounds.

The union formulated a list of 23 grievances for the Public Service Commission. The Commission sided with the Company

on most of the items on the list. They ruled new employees would not be required to join the union and those who did not join the union could not receive benefits derived by the union from the arbitration. Wages were increased from 21 to 28 cents per hour, a 33 percent jump, but way below the 35 cents the union sought. [In terms of 2014, this was an increase from \$5.05/hour to \$6.73/hour instead of the desired \$8.41/hour.] All workers were guaranteed a minimum of \$45/month [\$1,081/month in 2014].

This ruling came down February 14, 1914. Later the Company banned the union from recruiting new members on company property. It also offered incentives for new workers if they promised not to join the union. The union objected to the Public Service Commission, but that body once again sided with the Company.

Three final notes

1. The Indianapolis streetcar strike of 1913 cost six men their lives. Hundreds were injured. The cost in property is unknown. Trolleys continued to serve the city until 1953. Little evidence remains of that system today, except in the hearts of old timers and modern dreamers. Current plans do not call for a resurrection of the streetcar network. Rather a tenuous proposal exists to address current congestion concerns and a limited vision of the city's future.

2. Governor Ralston was progressive for his day. He signed Indiana's first workers' compensation law, inaugurated the primary election system, and helped create the inheritance tax. Ralston was against prohibition, favored women's suffrage, and sought to close brothels. He reformed the state's utilities law and began a system of free vocational education. His efforts created the state park system and Indiana Department of Natural Resources. He brought together seven governors to create an interstate highway from Chicago to Jacksonville. He insisted on a

rainy day fund, while paying off the State's entire bonded indebtedness, and had a surplus when he left office.

Unable to succeed himself, Ralston went on to become a U.S. Senator from Indiana in 1923 with support from the then powerful Ku Klux Klan because of his anti-Catholic stance. He was considered for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1924, but declined to be part of that fiasco because of ill-health. He died a year later.

3. For me, the most singular, intriguing point in this story was the firm belief of executives at the Traction Company that the wage-bill, the total compensation of labor, should not exceed the compensation of stock holders. I have never encountered this concept before. I do not know of any economic writings that include such an idea or of any other business leaders who expounded this position. It is certainly worth investigating further.

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Sources:

The title of this work was independently derived and only incidentally identical with the same title used on a blog by Kristofer J. Carlson in a far broader context.

See also:

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