HISTORIC TRACES OF THE CHAMPAIGN-URBANA STREETCAR WORKER STRIKES

Garrett Burger

Recently, strikes and other actions taken by University of Illinois service workers, graduate student employees, and workers at Urbana's Flex-n-Gate plant have made headlines. Is this surge of activity within organized labor a new development or does Champaign-Urbana possess a long legacy of strikes, collective bargaining, and strong unions? And can the memory of past labor insurgencies be used to inform and inspire ongoing struggles for higher wages and better working conditions in the Twin Cities and beyond?

The answer to the former is yes, there is a long history of strikes and other organized labor activities in Champaign-Urbana. However, although the University motto of "Learning & Labor" may be inscribed on the Hallene Gateway, the history of labor—both on campus and off—is not so prominently inscribed on the landscape. In fact, the heritage of strikes and strikers is virtually absent from it. One such body of strikes that lies dormant in the gray matter of the city streets is that of the conductors, motormen, and other employees of the Urbana & Champaign Electric Street Railway Company. Although the streetcars they worked on stopped running in 1936 and many are unaware that they ever trundled through the streets of the Twin Cities to begin with, the history of the streetcars is actually well-documented. Over the years, many articles appeared in the Daily Illini and the Champaign News-Gazette (in all its incarnations). A number of materials exist that document streetcar history, but virtually none makes reference to the strikes that the streetcar workers organized in pursuit of higher wages, shorter hours, and safer working conditions. This invisible history can be made more visible by identifying strike flashpoints—not only in the provided map, but the physical landscape as well—and interpreting the material remains of the streetcar system to reflect the workers' experiences and the strikes they organized. Establishing such visibility is essential since this history has the potential to inform and activate current struggles for workers' rights in Champaign-Urbana and farther afield.

Electric street railway arrived in Champaign-Urbana (CU) on October 25, 1890, when cars began running on a line that extended from the intersection of Green & Wright to the corner of Neil & Hill in downtown Champaign (see map). In developing an electric streetcar system, CU was at the forefront of public transportation. Richmond, Virginia—the first American city to successfully harness this technology—only did so two years earlier. Throughout the 1890s, the street railway network and its workforce grew considerably. In 1904, the street railways were acquired by the Illinois Traction Company, which also operated a number of interurban lines. This system of trolley and interurban lines became known as the Illinois Traction System (ITS). This system continued to grow throughout the early 20th century and in 1915 the "Short Line," which is notable for being the last stretch of track in operation, became its final addition. For more information on the history of streetcars in Champaign-Urbana, see here: http://www.cs.uiuc.edu/homes/friedman/champaign-urbana/Contents.htm.

Just three years after the addition of the Short Line, streetcar workers organized their first strike. This was during an era when the actions of labor organizations regularly made headlines, and streetcar workers in cities from New York to Lincoln, Nebraska, went on strike. In CU, the strike began on September 3, 1918, and as the headline of the Urbana Daily Courier trumpeted, traffic on the street railways was "paralyzed" as a result. According to the Courier, conductors and motormen on the railway walked out because of the company's failure to recognize their union and increase wages. The paper also printed a letter from E. A. Thompson, the president of the local division of the Amalgamated Association of Street & Electric Railway Employees of America (See "Material Remains"). Thompson writes, "We are desirous of continuing in the employment of the company, but we are also desirous of securing a better wage and the right to bargain with our employer. We request that you meet with our committee ... and go over with us the entire matter. We feel that if you will do this a satisfactory settlement of the entire question can be arrived at" (Courier, September 3, 1918, p. 1).

Following a conference between company officials and union representatives on September 5th, streetcar workers returned to work. The conductors and motormen "agreed to remain on duty pending negotiations over their demands for an increase in salary, shorter hours, and the maintenance of a closed shop" (Urbana Daily Courier, September 5, 1918, p. 1). Although it is unclear exactly how these negotiations concluded, according to an item on increases in streetcar fares that appeared in the Courier on November 20, 1918, the streetcar employees did receive a wage increase. Interestingly, the article suggests that there was some public resentment toward the streetcar workers because the increase in wages moved the company to increase fares, thus passing the burden of payment onto the public. The Courier echoed this sentiment even more forcefully in its January 13, 1919, edition, in which appeared an article stating the following:

When the streetcar men strike for more pay, they get it, the streetcar company proceeds to get more for its rides, and the public pays the bill.

... Labor, without intending it, is safeguarding and solidifying the interests of capital, and insuring it an absolutely safe return for its money. The struggle in the future promises to be between labor and the consuming public (p. 1).
ALTGELD HALL: RENOVATING AN ICONIC CAMPUS DESTINATION

Wendy G. Harris

Altgeld Hall tends to make quite an impression on incoming freshman, perhaps due to the chimes concert at 12:50 each weekday, its proximity to the Alma Mater statue, or the presence of the only gargoyles on campus. More likely, it is because the tour guides boast that the building has 14 floors and stairs leading nowhere! In reality, the four-floor Altgeld Hall is a National Register gem with many slopes and levels attributed to its several additions. (And despite what guides might say, the author can authoritatively attest that all stairs do, in fact, have a destination.)

The building has a rich history. In 1895, the University Board of Trustees passed a resolution to build a library, which was seen as an indicator that the University had moved from an industrial college to a respected institution of higher learning. After a failed design competition to determine the physical appearance of Altgeld, the University contracted DH Burnham and Company of Chicago. Their task was to design a library in the Classical style. Governor Altgeld, however, rejected the sketches, so the University turned to Illinois architect Nathan C. Ricker and James M. White. At last, Altgeld Hall was designed and constructed to meet Governor Altgeld’s specifications. The final structure reflects a Romanesque design with Classical, Gothic, and Byzantine architectural motifs. It has a pink sandstone exterior, sourced from the Kettle River area of Minnesota, and a cherry-red clay tile roof.

Altgeld Hall was dedicated on June 8, 1897, although much of the interior decoration, particularly on the third floor, was not completed until 1900. The two-story rotunda originally topped with an elliptical glass dome covered by a skylight now functions as the Mathematics library and features the work of Newton Alonzo Wells. Wells’s lunette murals, “The Four Colleges: Literature and Arts, Agriculture, Science, Engineering,” are the focus, with stenciled decorations in stylized organic shapes on nearly all of the capitals, arches, friezes, and walls in the space. The library also has many medallion-like portraits of America’s great soldiers, statesmen, and scholars, at President Draper’s insistence.

Wells wrote extensively on his technique, so it is known that the murals were done with a mixture of oils and dissolved white wax. This method allowed the paint to dry slowly, provided a flat and lustrless surface, and preserved the colors from the coal-gas fumes of the period. Three of the four lunettes reflect classical antiquity themes: “The Sacred Wood of the Muses” (Literature and Arts) depicts spirits gathering to hear Homeric tales; “Arcadia” (Agriculture) illustrates a bucolic festival; and “The Laboratory of Minerva” (Science) shows Minerva instructing personifications of Geology, Chemistry, Mathematics, Astronomy, Biology, and Physics from the Book of Knowledge. The final mural, “The Forge of Vulcan,” representing the College of Engineering, illustrates smelting activities of the 20th century.

Shortly after the dedication of Altgeld Hall, Katherine Sharp, the founder of the Library and Information Science program at Illinois, moved the Library Science program of the Armour Institute in Chicago to Urbana. Sharp was pleased to move to a college from a technical school, and the Urbana campus benefited by the 40,000-volume collection she brought. The library school, located in Altgeld, had a lecture room, faculty offices, a study room, and bookstacks, while the campus administrators were located in the north part of the third floor. The stacks, which still remain, were constructed with self-supporting modular cast iron and steel shelving with hammered finish glass floors to allow light between levels. Originally, the library had a capacity for up to 150,000 volumes, measuring 113 by 167 feet. Between 1907 and 1918, the administration moved out of the building and the stacks were expanded south, giving Library Science room for their growing program.

In 1919, a brick addition was made to the southwest portion of the building, providing a loading dock, four floors of bookstacks, and a workroom. In 1926, Altgeld Hall was expanded again, to the southeast, and both additions were covered with exterior stonework to match the original. The building has changed occupancy several times, hosting the Law School and finally the Mathematics Department. Once Math moved into Altgeld the loading dock became an atrium, and open areas in the additions were converted to offices. A final addition in 1956 created classrooms on the east side of the building, sealing many original windows into the new walls.

The changing needs of higher education and the decreasing availability of maintenance resources over the years have taken their toll on Altgeld Hall. The sweeping views across the entire width of the second floor are gone, as the archways on the east side of the library were closed in to create more classrooms. Much of the original stenciling on the second and third floors has been painted over in solid green or white, and plaster falls from ceilings and capitals. The dome and skylight were removed in the 1940s and 1950s, leaving the library rotunda much darker than originally conceived. In 2003 a historical evaluation by Humeczi Studios uncovered evidence of the original ceiling work on the third floor corridors and even found some of the original stencils in the University Paint Shop. No further funding was committed to the project after the completion of the studio’s report... until recently.

In 2011, DeStefano Partners completed a feasibility study for the rehabilitation and renovation of both Altgeld and Illini Halls. The underlying concept is to return Altgeld to its former glory while maintaining its functionality for 21st century instructional needs. The proposed plan would restore much of the original structure to its historic appearance as well as alter interior spaces to allow for effective use by the Mathematics and Statistics Departments. The arches on the first floor of the library would be visually reopened, the original paint uncovered, and the dome reinstalled with backlighting. The additions would be sensitively upgraded to provide for modern accessibility and conveniences. The exterior would be chemically cleaned, returning it to the natural pink tone with repointing and stone patching as needed.

A related project, the renovation and expansion of Illini Hall located across Wright Street is in the planning phase as well. The University hopes that together these two projects will better house the faculty, instructors, and graduate students of the Mathematics Department, coupling the collaborative environment for mathematical research and instruction in Illini Hall with the welcoming atmosphere of the refurbished Altgeld Hall.

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CU STRIKES
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One must wonder whether the public shared the Courier's assessment of the situation, and if the strikers felt any ire from the citizens of CU. If they did, it was grossly misplaced as—whether it be an immobilized streetcar or an overflowing trashcan in a university building—one must be careful not to blame the worker for inconveniences and price increases that are really the result of a corporation avariciously guarding its profit margins.

Beginning on July 3, 1919, the second strike by streetcar workers was far longer and more contentious than that of the previous year. This time, the main issue was the company's refusal to grant the workers a shorter, nine-hour workday. The company had promised its employees this during the negotiations that concluded the 1918 strike, but then reneged and continued to force its employees to work ten- and twelve-hour days. However, the headline the following day announced that the strike had "failed" as a sufficient number of men reported to work that day for the streetcars to run. According to the Courier, it had appeared that the employees were unanimous in their decision to strike, but they were actually quite divided over the matter. The source of these divisions, according to a statement released by the company, included a failure to obtain prior authorization from the head office of the Amalgamated Association of Street and Electric Railroad Employees (referred to as "the Union"); the strength of another union within the company, the "Brotherhood," that did not support a shortening of the work day; and a split between older and younger workers. The Union also released a statement explaining that the company signed an agreement to bargain exclusively with the Union and characterizing the Brotherhood as a "rival organization, organized by company officials... to fight the legitimate union and cause trouble" (Courier, July 5, 1919).

Despite how these issues may have impeded the strike, as tensions heightened, streetcar traffic came to a standstill once again on the night of the 4th. Specifically, a mass gathering of strikers, their supporters, and a number of scofflaws coalesced that night at the intersection of Neil and Main (see "strike flashpoints" in map). According to the Courier, the crowd blocked streetcars from running through this area and intimidated the non-striking conductors and motormen. The commotion culminated in a standoff between brick-toting rabblerousers and police officers with their revolvers drawn.

After the threat of mob-fueled trouble subsided, limited service returned on July 5th. According to the company, the Brotherhood men and new hires were working to keep the system running. However, by the following day, service had been halted once again as Brotherhood members feared that the public would scorn them due to the disparaging comments made by the Union recounted above. To counteract this, the Brotherhood released a statement to the Courier in which they explained their reasons for not joining in the strike, and contended that they comprised a majority of the streetcar workers. However, it appears that there was also some truth to the Union's contention that the Brotherhood is riddled with cronies of the company. For instance, Calvin B. Casey, the president of the Brotherhood in 1919, was not a conductor or motorman, but assistant superintendent.

On July 10th, the Twin City Federation of Labor, the largest union in the area, entered the fray, requesting that the cities impel the streetcar company to remove the "imported gunmen" that they had hired to guard the streetcar barns and tracks and initiate discussions of holding a general strike in solidarity with the streetcar workers (July 10th Courier). The event that precipitated the involvement of the Federation was a clash between Walter Snook, a striking motorman, James Bell, a Brotherhood conductor, and G. H. Stone, one of the so-called "imported gunmen," at the street railroad's Wright Street stop that led to Stone being arrested for clubbing Snook over the head with a blackjack (see strike flashpoints).

On the 17th, the Federation held a meeting at Labor Hall (see below) to discuss the general strike. Although the attendees voiced a great deal of support for the streetcar workers, the Federation voted to leave the question of a strike up to its constituents. No supportive strike was initiated, however, as soon after this conference word emerged that the company and the strikers were nearing a settlement. This later proved to be nothing more than wishful thinking, and tensions spiked yet again in late July when a tussle between City of Urbana police and Chicago-based guards hired by the streetcar company occurred on "the dark stretch of rough track between the Flat Iron building and the university" (July 30th Courier; see map). This proved to be the last major incident in the strike of 1919, and on August 7th, after 35 long days, the strike finally ended. Following a number of bargaining rounds, both sides agreed on a new contract that included a wage increase and a compromise on workday hours. Although other disputes flared up between streetcar workers and the company before the termination of the street railroad in 1936, this was the final strike.

As recent events attest, however, this was not the final strike that CU was to experience, and local workers will continue to organize strikes in the future. The streetcar worker strikes are part of a long history of local labor actions, and it is now time for this history to be translated into heritage. The invisible must be made visible as the streetcar worker strikes and other aspects of local labor history have the potential to inform and activate current and future struggles for workers rights in Champaign-Urbana and farther afield. This could be achieved through mapping and physically identifying places associated with the streetcar worker strikes, as well as other sites of insurgency, in collaboration with workers today. What follows is a preliminary starting point.

Material Remains

1. The Illinois Traction Building, Champaign
The main depot and headquarters for the ITS were housed in a Joseph Royer-designed building at 41 E. University Ave. The station remains an iconic, National Register-listed...
feature of downtown Champaign today (PACA, 1985). Although not confirmed, this is likely the place where union representatives and company officials negotiated to end the strikes.

2. 111 W. Washington St., Champaign
(Home of E. A. Thompson)
E. A. Thompson was President of the local division of the Amalgamated Association of Street & Electric Railway Employees of America during the strike of 1918. According to city directories, Earl Thompson lived at 111 W. Washington St. with his wife Emma from 1916 to 1920. Thompson was also a conductor on the Church St. line (directories, Courier, January 20, 1920). The footprint of the current structure at 111 W. Washington first appears in the 1909 Sanborn map, indicating that the building was constructed at some point between 1902 and 1909 and that the current structure is the very same in which Thompson lived.

3. Labor Hall, Champaign
The site of the Federation's meeting about the streetcar strike of 1919 was the upper floor of 324 N. Hickory, which was included in a structure then known as the Stern Building. As city directories and several Courier articles reveal, Labor Hall was a meeting place for the Federation, the streetcar workers union, and many other labor organizations from roughly 1916 to 1927. Labor Hall is virtually unrecognizable today, but Sanborn maps and photographic evidence suggests that it is still at the core of the former Sears building that now occupies the site.

5. 904 Hickory St., Champaign
(The Fred H. Summers Residence)
According to the city directory of 1919–20, Fred Summers, a motorman on the street railroad until at least 1927, lived at this address with his wife Anna. He was also Vice President of the Brotherhood, the group of workers that opposed the strike of 1919. The Summers' home first appeared in the Sanborn maps in 1909, and the current shingle-sided home at this address is the very same in which they lived from roughly 1918 to at least 1940. Hickory St. was also a major axis around which the lives of many streetcar workers turned as both Labor Hall and a major streetcar barn were located on this street as well as the homes of a number of workers including Summers, Burt Maxfield (a conductor) at 507, George Viles (a motorman) at 311, and James Bell (the conductor involved in the aforementioned altercation) at 3120.

6. 410 W. Springfield Ave., Urbana
According to city directories, Ralph L. Hillis, a motorman and later conductor on the street railway and the secretary of the union during the strike of 1919, lived at this address with his wife Edith from roughly 1917 to 1920. The current house at 410 first appears on the Sanborn Maps in 1909, and it is the very same in which Mr. Hillis lived. At that point in time, this section of Springfield was known as Railroad St. because it was an exclusive right of way for the street railroad. Thus, during these years, Hillis's entire life revolved around the railroad.

4. The Hickory Street Car Barn, Champaign
According to the street railroad historian H. George Friedman, the current structure at 804 N. Neil St. was built as a streetcar barn in 1906. Although the main entrance to the building is now on Neil St., the streetcars originally entered from the Hickory St.

7. 401½ W. Vine, Champaign
According to city directories, Frank Silkey, a conductor, lived here with his wife Elizabeth, and their children, Genevieve, Harriet, and Herbert, from roughly 1912 to 1918. This small, 1½ story house first appears on the Sanborn maps in 1915. Beginning in 1904, Silkey worked as a conductor with the street railroad even before he called 401½ home, and he continued to do so until the railroad's end in 1936. In fact, Silkey drove a streetcar on the very last day they were in operation (Champaign County Archives, "Streetcars in Champaign-Urbana" [sound recording], 1978). The next day, he began taking bus-driving lessons. After it became apparent that Frank would not be able to drive a bus, National City Bus Lines wanted to let him go. There was great public outcry at this, and the mayor at the time successfully secured a pension for Silkey so that no financial harm would come to him due to the switch from streetcars to buses.

Frank Silkey (far left) in front of a streetcar at the intersection of Green & Prospect, the terminus of the New St. Line (early 1900s).
Source: Don T. Thrall photo, William C. Janssen collection (via H. George Friedman)
RECAPPING PACA'S ANNUAL MEETING AND HERITAGE AWARDS

PACA's Heritage Awards took place on April 21st at our annual meeting held at the Community United Church in Champaign. The Heritage Awards were established in 1985 in order to recognize outstanding preservation projects and individuals who have contributed to historic preservation efforts in east-central Illinois. This year PACA awarded 14 recipients for a variety of projects such as the restoration of a personal residence, the design of a historically respectful addition to an existing building, and an online preservation advocacy endeavor, among others. PACA would like to thank everyone who participated in making this event possible, with special thanks going to the Community United Church for hosting us again this year as well as to all of the volunteers who prepared refreshments and who worked to ensure that everyone had an enjoyable time.

Rich Cahill (Chair of the PACA Heritage Award Committee and past President, pictured) presents T. J. and Louise Kuhny (homeowners, pictured); Andrew Fell (architect, pictured); Ken Wooten (Wooten Historic Revivals, pictured); Wells & Wells Construction (not pictured); and Mid American Nursery (not pictured) a Heritage Award for restoration of a 1920 Craftsman, Georgian Revival home at 801 West Indiana Ave., Urbana.

HERITAGE GRANT PROGRAM REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS

The PACA Heritage Grant Program was established in 1994 to contribute to other not-for-profit organizations in Champaign County which are in need of financial assistance for preservation and conservation related projects. In order to qualify for a grant, projects must involve preservation, conservation, and/or education related to history, architecture, or archaeology in Champaign County and may fall into any of five categories: bricks and mortar, land acquisition/move, professional architectural feasibility study, preservation education, and interpretation. Please visit the PACA warehouse to pick up an application. Contact PACA's executive director, Tom Garza, at the warehouse (217-359-7222) with any questions or to request an application via mail.

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

MEMBERSHIP STATUS

☐ New    ☐ Renewal

MEMBERSHIP CATEGORY

☐ Adult   $15
☐ Student  $10
☐ Senior Citizen  $10
☐ Family   $20
☐ Corporate $75

☐ I wish to include an additional contribution of $_______

NAME: __________________________

ADDRESS: __________________________

PHONE: __________________________

E-MAIL: __________________________

Note: Please make your check payable to PACA. Your contribution is tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law.
ALTGELD HALL
(continued from page 2)

Alumni frequent Altgeld Hall as a beloved and well-known building on campus. Hopefully the planned renovations will resemble the building of ages past, rekindling memories for seasoned alumni and providing future students with a picture of the University's rich architectural history.

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