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Labor Landmarks in San Francisco's Union Square District

Michael A. McCarthy

Marquette University, michael.mccarthy@marquette.edu

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Labor Landmarks in San Francisco's Union Square District

Compiled by Michael McCarthy
New York University

This year, our annual meeting will be held in the Union Square district of San Francisco. And unless you decide to stay in the meetings for your entire stay there, you may want to get out for a walk, see the sites, and learn a bit about the local history. Below is a walking tour of labor landmarks that are within close proximity to the conference.

This information was taken, with permission, from *The San Francisco Labor Landmarks Guide Book: A Register of Sites and Walking Tours*, edited by Susan P. Sherwood and Catherine Powell. If you are interested in obtaining this book, which has much more labor landmark information for the whole of San Francisco, please contact:

Labor Archives and Research Center (at San Francisco State University)

Location: 480 Winston Dr., SF, CA 94132

Phone: 415-564-4010

Fax: 415-564-3606

Email: larc@sfsu.edu



Union Square Tour

- 1) Union Square
- 2) St. Francis Hotel
- 3) Hallidie Plaza
- 4) Woolworth Building
- 5) Palace Hotel
- 6) Mechanics Monument
- 7) Mechanics’ Institute
- 8) Home Telephone Exchange
- 9) Votes for Women Club

1) Union Square

Bounded by Stockton, Post, Powell, and Geary Streets

John White Geary, San Francisco’s first mayor, gave the land that is now Union Square to the city in 1850. The Square gained its name 15 years later after hosting numerous rallies in support of the Union cause during

the Civil War. After the 1906 Earthquake, temporary shacks housed businesses while long tables served as makeshift restaurants, many staffed by members of Waiters Union Local 30, in the Square. In the 1940s, the California Labor School participated in annual art fairs there; since the 1980s, many unions have staged noontime protests and support rallies at Union Square. In the plaza of the Grand Hyatt, on Stockton between Sutter and Post Streets, Japanese-American sculptor Ruth Asawa’s playful fountain portrays both the history and fantasy of San Francisco. Asawa cast the fountain from low bas-reliefs made in baker’s clay (flour, salt and water) by 250 San Francisco residents aged three to ninety. Completed in 1972, the fountain includes scenes of Butchertown, the controversial Yerba Buena Redevelopment Project, and the building of the transcontinental railroad by Chinese workers. Union Square is California Historical Landmark No. 623.

2) St. Francis Hotel

335 Powell (Powell and Geary)

When seeking to organize or to change prevailing conditions—such as discrimination, low wages, or unsafe working conditions—activists often target the largest and most prestigious businesses in the city. The St. Francis Hotel on Union Square was one such target in the late 1970s. At that time, the Filipina, Latina, and African-American maids at the St. Francis were required to clean up as many as seventeen rooms a day, which often meant doing nine hours of work in seven. The hotel maids reached their breaking point in October of 1979, when the hotel added new assignments to their list of 69 required tasks for room cleaning.

The workers refused to comply with conditions that would force them to give up their lunch period and breaks to get the job done. Under the leadership of Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union (HERE), Local 2, the red-uniformed maids massed at the employees’ cafeteria for fifteen minutes at 10 a.m., noon and 2 p.m., even though it meant leaving undone two rooms fewer. Despite intense employer pressure, and numerous suspensions, the maids held firm. The following April, arbitration settled the issue in the maids’ favor. St. Francis Hotel workers were further outraged that year when a room service waitress was raped and robbed. Local 2 charged the hotel with

negligence in failing to provide safe working conditions. When management did not respond to the grievance, the union set up a picket line and the workers were joined by activists from the feminist labor organization UNION WAGE and over a dozen other groups. In July 1980, when the master hotel contract expired, a total of 6,000 hotel workers went on strike throughout the city. In August, the workers won a 15-room quota and a shop steward system for better representation and resolution of job disputes.

3) Hallidie Plaze

Located at Powell and Market

Andrew Hallidie, a mining engineer, invented the cable car—a trolley attached by a “gripping clamp” to a moving cable in a “slot” between the tracks—in 1873. Legend has it that he built it to overcome the difficulties that horse-drawn vehicles faced in climbing steep California Street to reach the mansions at the top of Nob Hill. Hallidie, whose father developed wire rope in England, had used the technology while working as a surveyor and blacksmith in the Sierra Nevada gold country and adapted the design for use on city streets. Streetcars had previously been horsedrawn or steam powered. The cable car was an enormous improvement—cleaner, quieter, and more efficient.

Several independent companies operated the San Francisco streetcars, but by 1893, most of the companies had consolidated into the Market Street Railroad Company. In turn, it formed the nucleus of United Railroads which, after the turn of the century, operated most of the lines in the city.

The California Workingmen’s Party, which rose to prominence in the 1870s, had called for public ownership of city transportation, a notion later supported by Mayor James D. Phelan in the 1890s. He argued for direct public ownership of such utilities as streetcars, water, and electricity, reasoning that regulation of such public utilities would most likely lead the regulated companies to corrupt the public officials responsible for creating and enforcing the regulations. He worked to accomplish public ownership both as an elected official and as a private citizen. During the early 20th century, organized labor also supported public ownership of public utilities.

In 1907, the Carmen’s Union struck United Railroads for a daily wage of \$3.00 for an 8-hour day. The company hired strikebreakers and armed guards to ride the streetcars. During ten months of violence at least 25 people died and over 2000 were injured in one of the most deadly streetcar strikes of the nation’s history. United Railroads broke the Carmen’s Union but, as a result of the strike, public opinion turned against the company to favor public ownership of the lines. The Municipal Railway (Muni), one of the first city-owned streetcar lines in the country, was inaugurated in 1912.

4) F. W. Woolworth Store 891

Market Street (this address no longer exists— now the San Francisco Shopping Centre)

In 1936 the F.W. Woolworth Company warehouses were organized by the International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA), the predecessor of ILWU Local 6. When the company refused to recognize the union, warehousemen went out on strike and also set up an informational picket line outside the main San Francisco Woolworth store at the corner of Fifth and Market.

Invited by ILA strikers, nineteen year-old Marion Brown (her later married name was Sills) and six other store employees attended a Sunday meeting at the San Francisco Labor Council to hear more about the issues. Observed by a Woolworth’s assistant manager, all seven were summarily fired upon returning to work Monday morning. An angry Marion Brown promptly joined the picket line outside.

When the Woolworth Company decided to negotiate, the ILA made re-employment of the seven fired store employees a settlement condition to end the Woolworth Strike. But as Marion Brown recalled this incident years later, the F.W. Woolworth Co. and she were in perfect agreement at that point in time—they didn’t want to put her back in her old job and she didn’t wish to go back “under any circumstances.” She went on instead to help found the Department Store Employees’ Union (Retail Clerks, Local 1100). Chartered in 1937, the union rapidly organized all the major department stores in the city, including the F.W. Woolworth Store at Fifth and Market Streets. The chief negotiator for the company, upon being introduced to Marion Brown, remarked ruefully that

“the Woolworth Company was sorry about one thing—that they ever fired Marion Brown.”

5) Palace Hotel

2 New Montgomery Street

The first Palace Hotel was built in 1875 at this location on the south side of Market Street by William C. Ralston, head of the Bank of California. Seeking to increase the value of his other properties south of Market Street and hoping to pull business in this direction, Ralston located his luxury hotel well to the south of what was then the center of the central business district. When it opened, the Palace gained a reputation as the biggest, finest, and most luxurious hotel in the West, helping to establish San Francisco’s status as a true metropolis. One of the building’s most notable features was its interior courtyard.

Echoing the “Southern” style of service made popular in the West on the railroads’ Pullman sleeping cars, the Palace’s management decided to hire African-Americans to staff the kitchen and dining rooms, and to work as maids, porters, and bellboys. Initially, the Palace employed around two hundred black workers, many recruited from elegant eastern resort hotels. At the turn of the century, the Palace began to shift away from employing African-Americans, possibly as the “Southern” style of service became less fashionable. By 1896, the last African-American porters and bellmen were discharged. The San Francisco locals of the Hotel and Restaurant Employees and Bartenders International Union opened membership to African-Americans in 1910, but the color line at the Palace Hotel remained unbroken until the 1960s.

The fire following the 1906 earthquake destroyed much of the downtown area of the city. Though the Palace had an elaborate fire control system, Army troops forced the hotel staff to evacuate the building as the fire approached. The original building was gutted, but a new Palace Hotel rose on the same location in 1910, designed by Trowbridge and Livingston of Boston.

In 1918, a strike committee of Palace Hotel workers met with management and, after a night-long meeting, voted to walk out. The hotel agreed to recognize their union and to establish a nine-hour day.

During the Civil Rights era, activists from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE), and other organizations staged sit-ins at restaurants, grocery chains, bus lines, bakeries, auto dealerships, and hotels around the country to force businesses to hire and promote African Americans into jobs above the menial level. In 1964, local activists made the Palace Hotel part of this national civil rights campaign for equality in employment. Negotiations were held with the Palace Hotel in February 1964, but the meeting broke up without substantial concessions. Students from San Francisco State College staged a 17-hour sit-in in the Palace lobby; one hundred sixty-seven protestors were arrested. The Hotel Employers’ Association (HEA) finally reached an agreement with the sponsors of the demonstrations to designate all HEA members as “equal opportunity employers,” and the HEA agreed to increase the number of minorities in its workforce, particularly in those jobs which included contact with the public.

The ILWU played a major role in these actions when ILWU Secretary-Treasurer Louis Goldblatt helped negotiate the Palace agreement and rank-and-file union members participated when the protests moved on to auto dealerships.

Labor’s mark endures on the Palace Hotel; when the building was remodeled in 1996, the Plasterers’ Union, Local 66, did extensive work recreating and renovating the moldings.

6) Mechanics Monument

At Battery, Bush and Market Streets

Five bronze men—representing the cycle of life from youth through old age—struggle to force the blade of an enormous mechanical punch through plate metal in this monument to Peter Donohue, once the premier industrialist of San Francisco. Donohue, a Glasgow-born metal worker of Irish descent, came to San Francisco during the Gold Rush. He cast the first piece of iron molded in the west at his Union Iron Works (established in 1850), began large-scale shipbuilding, constructed the first West Coast built warship, founded the San Francisco Gas Works (which, after several mergers with other companies, became a part of Pacific Gas & Electric), and built the city’s first streetcar. After his death, Donohue’s family wanted to

memorialize him, and James D. Phelan, who was elected mayor in 1896, persuaded them to permit Douglas Tilden to develop a design consistent with Phelan's City Beautiful Movement.

Phelan wanted the architecture and public art of San Francisco to promote an aesthetic of "beauty, order and harmony" in order to instill moral values and civic pride in its residents. As other coastal cities had begun to challenge San Francisco's preeminent position as the major city of the West, the City Beautiful Movement also promoted the city as a site of culture. Thus, the Mechanics Monument was commissioned in 1894 with dual objectives.

Douglas Tilden, a noted Oakland-based sculptor who was born in California, designed the statue. Having studied in New York and Paris, and influenced by European sculptural traditions, Tilden mixed classical idealism with detailed realism. While individual elements of the punch press are accurately rendered (the lever, the fixed pivot and the pivot link), the overall machine is fanciful and unworkable. The monument is meant to suggest the power of both the machine and the men, rather than to document an actual working press. The portrayal of the workers glorifies masculine labor and the work ethic, unlike most monumental sculptures that portray captains of industry or military prowess.

At the time of the monument's construction, foundries and machine shops located in nearby South of Market comprised one of San Francisco's largest industries. Working people appropriated the statue early on for their own purposes. The California Labor Federation and the San Francisco Labor Council both used the statue on the cover of publications; marchers have posed against it for photographs during Market Street Labor Day parades, and its seating area provides a welcome resting spot during this Labor Tour.

7) Mechanics' Institute

57 Post Street

The Mechanics' Institute is a nonprofit membership organization open to the public. Founded in 1854, the Institute defined its goals as providing technical education and training for adults, sponsoring lectures for members and the public on technical and cultural topics, and promoting local industry.

From 1857 to 1899, the Institute sponsored thirty-one industrial fairs, exhibiting manufactured goods, scientific apparatus, and agricultural products produced in California. Classes offered by the Institute included instruction in mechanical drawing, wood-working, applied mathematics, iron working, and other technical subjects needed to support California's economic evolution from a gold rush economy to an economy based on industry and agriculture.

Today, the Mechanics' Institute continues to serve San Francisco and the Bay Area with a state-of-the-art, general-interest library, an internationally-renowned chess room, classes, lectures, and literary and performing arts events that support the educational, vocational, and cultural interest of the entire community. Housed in its historic building in the center of the Financial District, the Institute offers tours for members and the public each Wednesday at noon. Only members can use the library.

8) Home Telephone Exchange

333 Grant Avenue

On January 25, 1915, the first transcontinental telephone call from San Francisco was placed from the main offices of the Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company, located at 333 Grant Avenue. Staffing the switchboards was difficult and underpaid work. "The requirements and nervous strain incident to the service are so very severe," a report from the US Commission on Industrial Relations stated, "that experienced physicians have testified that operators should work not more than five hours a day, whereas the regular working hours are seven to nine hours per day," for as little as \$9.00 a week. Consequently, the telephone operators, most of whom were young women, rarely stayed with the job longer than a year. The high turnover rate, combined with intense employer resistance to unions and organized labor's ambivalence towards women workers during this period, made unionization a daunting task.

Initial organizing efforts on the part of a small group of operators quickly fizzled. Then, in 1918, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) began an effort to organize telephone operators on the Pacific Coast. The shortage of workers in a wartime economy and the Wilson Administration's creation of the National War Labor

Board combined to increase organized labor's bargaining power. Also, the national telephone system was put under the control of Postmaster General Albert S. Burluson, who required that the Wage Commission of the Wire Control Board oversee telephone-related labor negotiations.

The women running the switchboards in San Francisco came together as Telephone Operators' Union Local 54a, IBEW, in the spring of 1918. Locals were also organized in Oakland, Sacramento, and Fresno. In June of the same year, representatives of Local 54a contacted Pacific Telephone and Telegraph with the intention of negotiating an agreement that would go into effect at the beginning of 1919. The company not only refused to consider any negotiations with the union, but also tried to ignore the union entirely.

In May 1919, the operators, along with electrical workers employed by the company, voted to go on strike the following month if Pacific Telephone and Telegraph continued to refuse to negotiate. The phone company offered the operators a wage increase of ten cents a day, a tactic that in the past had always quieted employee grumbling. The operators declined the increase. Instead, they put forth a set of demands that included recognition of the union, a wage increase of \$2.00 to \$4.00 per day, and a pay scale that took into account the often-short tenure of telephone operators. They also asked that the contracts for the electrical workers and the operators run concurrently. The strike was set for June 16th.

Two days before the workers were to go out on strike, the IBEW national leadership sent word that all workers were to remain on the job. Postmaster General Burluson had ordered telephone companies nationwide to accept collective bargaining efforts by their employees. Officials from the Local 54a grudgingly agreed. The women at the switchboards, however, decided to take matters into their own hands: on June 17th, 5,000 operators from locals through out Northern California, along with 1,000 electrical workers, walked out. They were joined by thousands of other telephone workers from Southern California to Washington, causing the phone system along the Pacific Coast to come to an almost complete standstill.

Support for the strike in San Francisco was strong and widespread. The San Francisco Labor Council requested donations from its affiliates to bolster the telephone operators' strike fund. Unions such as the

Ship Fitters and Helpers, Local 9 and Bridge and the Structural Iron Workers, Local 31 readily provided contributions to the operators' strike fund. Two meals a day were served at a canteen set up for the operators by the Women's Citizen's Committee. Money was also provided to help pay their housing costs.

Local fervor for the strike contrasted sharply with the tentative approach of the national leadership. On July 18th, Julia O'Connor, president of the IBEW's Telephone Operators' Department, sent a telegram to the local leadership ordering all operators to return to work. In a conference in Washington, D.C., Postmaster Burluson made clear his position that the Federal Wire Control Board would not act in arbitrating an agreement until the strike ended. In a vote of 366 to 46, strikers in San Francisco voted to disregard O'Connor's order to return to work, with the understanding that the local strike committee would have the final say. On July 23, 1919, the chairman of the Committee announced that the operators would return to work. Talks concerning agreement on a final contract began. In the meanwhile, the operators received a nominal wage increase, recognition of the union, and equal representation on a permanent arbitration board.

Unfortunately, the talks quickly broke down. The Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company refused to consider an additional wage increase and continued to discriminate against unionized employees. PT&T formed a company controlled union to compete with the Telephone Operators' Union, promising many of the benefits Local 54a had tried to secure, but without independent representation. In February 1920, the members of the Telephone Operators' Union, Local 54a, again went out on strike. This time, though, they had to compete with the company-controlled union. Public opinion of and government support for organized labor were quickly changing as the post-war economy began to slump and unions came to be equated with un-American activities. Pacific Telephone, whose profits had soared in 1919, was able to wait out the union. By the spring of 1920, the Telephone Operators' Union was destroyed. Not until 1935, with the passage of the Wagner Act, which guaranteed workers the right to collective bargaining by representatives of their own choosing, did telephone operators again effectively organize the phone company.

9) Votes for Women Club

315 Sutter Street

In 1911, a group of middle-class women founded the Votes for Women Club in a large loft in the Newberry Building. Dedicated to broadening support for women's suffrage, the club included a reading room and lunchroom for women only. Clerks and office workers from nearby Financial District offices and Union Square department stores spent their lunch hours at the club, where meals cost 15 cents and organizers plied visitors with suffrage literature.

Although suffragists were active in California since the 1870s, suffrage for women had been defeated on a statewide ballot in 1896 after intense lobbying by the liquor industry, which feared women would vote for prohibition. The success of the 1911 campaign was due in significant part to the mobilization of working-class women by groups like the Votes for Women Club and the Wage Earners' Suffrage League—and to their ability to persuade labor organizations and working-class men to vote for enfranchising women.

And a little further afield are the:

Coit Tower murals

1 Telegraph Hill Boulevard

Coit Tower was built in Pioneer Park atop Telegraph Hill in 1933. The art deco tower, 210 feet (64 m) of unpainted reinforced concrete, was designed by architects Arthur Brown, Jr. and Henry Howard with murals by 26 different artists and numerous assistants. The Coit Tower murals were carried out under the auspices of the Public Works of Art Project, the first of the New Deal federal employment programs for artists. Ralph Stackpole and Bernard Zakheim successfully sought the commission in 1933, and supervised the muralists, who were mainly faculty and student of the California School of Fine Arts (CSFA).

After Diego Rivera's *Man at the Crossroads* mural was destroyed by its Rockefeller Center patrons for the inclusion of an image of Lenin, the Coit Tower muralists protested, picketing the tower. Sympathy for Rivera led some artists to incorporate leftist ideas and composition elements in their works. Bernard Zakheim's "Library" depicts fellow artist John Langley Howard crumpling a newspaper in his left hand as he

reaches for a shelved copy of Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* with his right, and Stackpole is painted reading a newspaper headline announcing the destruction of Rivera's mural; Victor Arnautoff's "City Life" includes the *The New Masses* and *The Daily Worker* periodicals in the scene's news stand rack; John Langley Howard's mural depicts an ethnically diverse Labor March as well as showing a destitute family panning for gold while a rich family observes; and Stackpole's *Industries of California* was composed along the same lines as an early study of the destroyed *Man at the Crossroads*.

Most of the murals are open for public viewing without charge during open hours, although there are ongoing negotiations by the Recreation and Parks Department of San Francisco to begin charging visitors a fee to enter the mural rotunda. The murals in the spiral stairway, normally closed to the public, are open for viewing on Saturday mornings at 11:00 am with a free San Francisco City Guides tour.

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