

A Working People's History Walking Tour of Boston

Sponsored by LAWCHA at the American Historical Association meeting, January 5, 2000.
Led and designed by Jim Green, LAWCHA Liaison Committee.

(this essay used to be on the LAWCHA website, but is no longer there. Until they repost, I will make it available here)

I organized and conducted the tour with the support of the Labor Resource Center at University of Massachusetts, Boston, and the excellent partnership of Kathleen Banks Nutter, of the Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College Library, who led the tour with me.

The walking tour was joined by 20 AHA convention participants, who received LAWCHA brochures. Luckily, we enjoyed a sunny day with above-average temperatures.

We explained at the start that this walking tour lacked many actual environments for memory, like factories, union halls, and strike zones, but that it would take advantage of Boston's delights as a walking city. As a result, the downtown area would focus mainly on sites of memory.

But even in the realm of public memorials, working class people are hard to find—hardly a surprising fact. There are a few exceptions in Boston for those of plebian origins who were memorialized after they died, notably a few prominent Irish Catholics: John Boyle O'Reilly, who had enlightened views on race relations, Mayor Patrick Collins, who had been a trade unionist, and, of course, James Michael Curley, the "people's mayor" elected four times.

We began the tour with the grandest exception of all: the **statue of A. Philip Randolph** at the new Back Bay Station on Dartmouth St. which also includes six oral history photo panels on the lives of African-American railroad workers—the product of a public history research project I conducted in 1991 with historian Robert Hayden, whose grandfather was a 50-year veteran Pullman car porter.

We then walked to the **corner Columbus and Arlington streets**—one of the sites of labor-management conflict in recent times. I recalled watching as hundreds of building trades union members blocked Greyhound buses, on Arlington St. on Thanksgiving eve in 1983 when they stopped scab buses from rolling on the busiest travel day of the year,

We also saw at the same corner the **First Corp of Cadets Armory**, a massive granite structure that is now called, euphemistically, the Park Plaza Castle. Completed in 1891, it was one of a series of armories constructed in the aftermath of the protests of the great depression of the 1870s culminating in the 1877 railroad strike, and the great upheaval of 1886.

The Armory was used in the Boston Police Strike of 1919 as headquarters for law-and-order strike breaking forces, specifically as headquarters of Motor Transport Corps during the strike. On the second day of the police strike, as the striking officers gathered support from the organized firefighters, carmen, and other unions, machine gun companies began arriving in Boston, and, as Frances Russell wrote in *A City in Terror*: "By evening the city's armories were

humming like militant beehives, and Boston itself with its various strong points began to resemble a besieged fortress."

Next we visited the **Abraham Lincoln School**--one of the sites of the remarkable Boston Trade Union College supported by the Boston Central Labor Union from 1919 to 1929 and staffed by distinguished faculty from Harvard.

Kathleen Nutter, author of an excellent new biography of union activist Mary Kenney O'Sullivan, then described the **Boston Working Women's Club** on Fayette St. in Bay Village and the **Women's Trade Union League headquarters** at 7 Warrenton St. She explained how the WTUL was founded at Faneuil Hall during the 1903 AFL convention and how it acted as an agent for working-class women's empowerment. It served as a force in organizing women workers and aiding strikes of women garment workers and telephone operators in 1912, when the city overwhelmingly supported them, and when the Boston Globe reported on the picketers' "elegance." The WTUL was important again in the massive general strike of 1919 when 8000 women workers at Bell won a great struggle. Settlement house workers at nearby Dennison house (four blocks away on Tyler St. in Chinatown) were champions of unionism as a way to achieve social uplift.

At this point, I referred to Sarah Deutsch's book *Women in the City* in which she describes how this dense pattern of women's institutions altered the "moral geography of the city" by creating new free spaces, which existed in close proximity to working men's gathering places: for example, one block away was the **Boston Trade Union Center** on Kneeland Street.

We then proceeded into **Chinatown** to see a fine mural painted in 1986 depicting the history of the settlers of Chinatown. The first were men who left North Adams, Mass., in 1875 after they were imported from California to replace the Knights of St. Crispin who were on strike in 1870.

Around the corner at No. 93 Tyler St. was **Dennison House**, the famous settlement house where college-educated women aided in the 1894-95 ladies' garment union strike. Later Mary Kenney, who had been AFL organizer, and Mary Morton Kehew formed working women's associations and unions at Dennison House, including some for retail clerks, bindery girls, and waitresses.

We then proceeded down Kneeland St. through the old **garment district**, recalling the militant general strike of the needle trades centered there in 1933, as well as the ILGWU and Amalgamated strikes of 1936 when many workers were arrested on this street. We walked by the old ILG office, at 33 Harrison Ave. now UNITE (formerly ILGWU office), and past the Oxford Street Bell Telephone Exchange (at corner of Essex St.) where residents of Chinatown helped block entrance to keep scabs out.

We took the subway to **Downtown Crossing and Filene's Basement**. There Kathleen talked about "The Clerking Sisterhood" of saleswomen with its strong work culture and tenacious informal group structure, and referred to Mary Van Kleeck's classic study of Filene's employees.

We walked two blocks to visit the new permanent exhibit on Boston's dissenters at **Old South Meeting House**. The exhibit (which costs \$3.00) includes life size statues of African slave poet

Phillis Wheatley and George Robert Twelves Hewes, subject of Alfred Young's *The Shoe Maker and the Revolution*. Hewes was at Old South the night the Tea Party was organized. The exhibit also includes the unforgettable death masks of Sacco and Vanzetti.

Nearby is the **Old State House**, the site of the Boston Massacre, as well as the **Old Corner Bookstore** which later became a press for Ticknor and Fields, publishers of Dickens, Hawthorne and Thoreau, as well as Harriet Beecher Stowe and John Greenleaf Whittier. They were the first publishers to pay authors!

We walked further down School St. past the unionized **Parker House Hotel** where Malcolm X and Ho Chi Minh both worked in the kitchen but not at the same time. Ho worked in the kitchen in 1912 when he was a globe-trotting proletarian. Malcolm Little was a bus boy here in 1941 when he recalled wearing a starched white coat. Malcolm wrote that he expected to be fired one day for being so late, but when he arrived, the whole kitchen was in an uproar because it was the day of the attack on Pearl Harbor. As a result of the war and the conscription of workers into the military, Malcolm won a railroad job through "old man Roundtree," a unionized Pullman porter.

The tour concluded at the **Old Granary Burial Ground**, the burial site of Paul Revere and John Hancock. But here also lie the remains of the Boston massacre victims, Crispus Attucks, the runaway slave, and the Irish apprentice boys, plus those of Christopher Snider, 12-year old boy killed in another anti-British riot in 1770. The grave of Crispus Attucks and these boys, the first martyrs to the Revolutionary cause, lie here right alongside those of Sam Adams, their champion.

From this site we could see across the street the new **Tremont Temple** built by union carpenters in 1895. On the same site was the old Tremont Temple used as a strike headquarters in May of 1886 for the carpenters and others out for the eight hour day.

Participants were then invited on their own to walk up Park St. to Beacon Hill to view the famous **Bronze Relief to the Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and the Massachusetts 54th Regiment**. This site, the starting point of the **National Park Service's African American Freedom Trail**, belongs on a labor history tour because the Massachusetts 54th was, like the Irish and Yankee regiments, a plebeian unit. One quarter of the black volunteers listed themselves as farmers, one third as laborers (compared to 10 percent in the Union army as a whole.) Blacks in the north were more proletarianized than whites, comparable to the Irish. Their listed occupations: 51 barbers, 38 seamen, 34 waiters, 27 boatmen and 24 teamsters. The free black community was a working class society. How many were slaves? No one would tell when they entered the 54th—for obvious reasons. After the war, when the men would speak openly, at least 30 said they had been slaves.

The site of the memorial is also where (on the steps leading down from Beacon St.) countless speakers have addressed countless mass rallies in the 20th century, carrying on a tradition of public protest on the Boston Common that goes back to the colonial era. A particularly notable union protest centered here came on May 1 in 1907 when 100,000 union workers marched up Tremont St. to rally here for the eight hour day and to protest the innocence of Haywood, Moyer, and Pettibone, the mine union leaders on trial for their lives in Idaho—the men President

Roosevelt called "undesirable citizens." Many of the trade unionists rallying in the Common that day wore buttons that said: "I am an undesirable citizen."

We encouraged our tour participants to go on across Beacon St. to the **Massachusetts State House** which now includes a series of reliefs to notable women in Massachusetts history—part of a new **Women's History Trail**, which we hope to emulate with the Working People's History Trail. The important women in Massachusetts memorialized here include trade unionists Mary Kenney O'Sullivan and Florence Luscomb, the worthy subject of a new book by Sharon Hartman Strom.

We also suggested they see the amazing pieta of a Civil War nurse and wounded soldier in **Nurses' Hall** and then look at the beautiful marble mosaic floor in the **Hall of Flags** supervised by Luigi Totino, "Marble and Mosaic Artisan." It was completed in 1892 when Totino was living in the North End. He was born in Italy in 1865. A plaque to honor him was erected just outside the Hall of Flags by his family in 1984. He was a forerunner of the many brilliant Italian immigrant artisans whose work in stone, marble, brick, and metal still graces the Commonwealth.

We explained further that through the efforts of Robert Haynes, president of the Mass. AFL-CIO, there will also be a plaque erected in the State House to honor the President of the State Federation of Labor, Edward Cohen, who was killed by an assassin in this building in 1903—by a bullet aimed at the Governor.

President Haynes is an avid supporter of a labor history landmarking process for Massachusetts. He has asked me to lead another kind of labor history tour in a vehicle for the United Association of Labor Educators whose national meeting takes place in Boston on April 28.

The Mass. AFL-CIO's Union City Press will publish a guide to this tour and our walking tour which should be available in May from the UMass Boston Labor Resource Center care of James.Green@umb.edu