

THE CHICAGO TRACTION MONOPOLY

By J. RAMÍREZ.

(This is the second of a series of articles to appear in the Voice of Labor on the principal industries in Chicago.—Ed.)

A book could be written about Chicago's traction system—and a long book at that. How many bitter facts

Motormen and Conductors

The following news may interest you: Edward J. Blair has been appointed captain of the Oak Park branch of the Minute Men of the Constitution, the strike breaking organization founded by Gen. Dawes. Who is Edward J. Blair? He is assistant to Britton I. Budd, president of the Chicago elevated roads. We notice that a man by the name of Henry A. Blair is head of the surface lines. Are they related? Looks suspicious, does it not? You have read in the papers that scabs came into town in order to break the expected strike. And perhaps the Minute Man, Edward J. Blair will lead them. That is his job as a Minute Man. The Minute Men intend to assist the bosses in breaking the unions and they would just as soon start on yours as any other. Look out!

come to mind in connection with those 1,100 miles of track and that mass of worn-out equipment that are depended upon to answer the basic transportation requirements of the second largest city in the United States. The Chicago Surface Lines alone, with their 16,000 employees, and their daily load of more than 1,000,000 passengers, form the center of a story which would fill many pages. In spite of the repeatedly expressed desires of the public, Chicago's traction system—a vital need of the entire population—remains the property of a handful of rich men, who operate it solely in the interests of private profits. This means that operations are carried on as cheaply as possible; repairs are neglected; plans for public improvements are combatted; car service on the long distance routes is allowed to remain ridiculously inadequate, while only the lucrative short-haul traffic receives anything like the proper amount of consideration; every effort is made to secure exorbitant fares; fake advertising is carried on; wage advances are never granted except under pressure of a strike or the threat of a strike.

The Fine Art of Juggling.

Getting a decent wage has always been a difficult and wearisome business for the street railway employee. The company opposes every effort of the men with all the power at its command; any means are considered

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CHICAGO TRACTION MONOPOLY WORKERS PARTY, DETROIT CHALLENGE PROLETARIAN

(Cont. from page One.)

fair means in such an emergency—including the juggling of figures on the company's books to prove that the demands of the men cannot possibly be met. About a year ago the question of wages on the car lines was occupying public attention, as it is today. At that time the company tried to force down the wages of its employees to 60 cents an hour, and to do away with the eight-hour working day. In the middle of July, Henry A. Blair, president of the Chicago Surface Lines, offered to "compromise" on 65 cents an hour. Later, he bettered his offer to 68 cents an hour; but he refused to go any higher. It required a joint strike of street railway and elevated employees, involving something like 20,000 men and costing the companies nearly \$1,000,000 for him to change his mind. Under the terms of settlement, the wage-scale was set at 70 cents an hour and the eight-hour day continued in force. The workers would have achieved a much more complete victory had it not been for the treachery of their leaders, notably Quinlan, Taber and Kehoe, of the carmen, who acted at all times under the demoralizing influence of William D. Mahon, international president of the Amalgamated Association of Street Railway Employees of America. The union leaders signed the agreement providing for a reduction from 80 to 70 cents an hour precisely at the moment when the bosses were weakening.

Make Over Million Profit.

Up to the last minute, the company officials brazenly maintained that they could not pay more than 68 cents an hour. The chief auditor was summoned with his record sheets and books and these were placed before the negotiators. Going rapidly over the figures, Mr. Blair "proved beyond the shadow of a doubt" that if the company yielded to any wage above 68 cents it would face bankruptcy. Nevertheless, the 70-cent scale was agreed to—and the company's income account for the year ending January 31, 1923, shows a clear profit of \$1,362,442. This is exclusive of much larger profits accruing to the bosses in the form of interest on Chicago traction bonds, a goodly proportion of which they themselves hold.

Now there is a new fight to be fought. The cost of living has gone up on the average over 1 per cent a month during the last year; wages in other lines have gone up also, although not in proportion—but Chicago's street railway workers are still held to the wage scale of a year ago. They demand an increase and they are willing to fight for an increase. Again Mr. Blair comes forward with books and record sheets. He says nothing about bankruptcy this time, as there is a limit to what even an experienced corporation accountant can do with figures. He does say that the company cannot pay the 80 cents an hour which the men are demanding—cannot in fact pay one cent more than the present scale. "Now, if we could only charge an eight-cent fare," Mr. Blair intimates, "things might be different . . . or better yet, a ten cent fare; people are used to paying 10 cents on the 'L' anyway." And why not a fifteen-cent fare? I am sure Mr. Blair and his associates would like that best of all. The gall of a private capitalist who has his claws on an essential public utility may have its limits, but they have not thus far been discovered.

The Bosses Only Fear Power.

Of course Mr. Blair can be made to change his mind again. Power is the only thing that commands the respect of men like Blair and his lord and master, Samuel Insull. Perhaps another strike will make Blair and Insull and their friends realize where the power lies. The organized might of the street railway and "L" employees has stood them in good stead more than once in the past and it can be counted on to bring results in the future. One thing the workers must be careful of. They must watch their own leaders. They must be continually on their guard against any such betrayal as that which took place last year. The reactionary officials of the two unions are far from anxious to see the fight through.

Arrayed on one side are the thousands of workers of the surface car and "L" lines; on the other, a few well-fed plutocrats whose only function in society is to own. The capitalist theory is that this sort of line-up is best. Private property, we are told, makes for private initiative, and private initiative means efficiency and progress.

What a joke that is when we apply it to Chicago's transportation system! Efficiency and progress! The only demonstration of efficiency we have witnessed was the sudden stopping of every wheel when the men went on strike last August. The Chicago Surface Lines advertise "the most rapid street car service in the

world," but does anybody believe it? Not if he has ever waited for a car on Center Street, or been held up because of a break in one of the worn-out overhead cables or got caught in a traffic jam in the Loop. The truth is that Chicago has one of the worst, if not the worst, transportation system in the whole world; and the reason for it is poor management and inferior equipment.

Tried to Sell Junk.

Some time ago the street car lines fixed a price at which they were willing to sell out to the city. In this connection even "Investment News," a financial paper, thoroughly in sympathy with the traction kings, was obliged to admit: "It is quite true that much of the property which the traction companies proposed to sell to the Municipality of Chicago for \$50,000,000 was obsolete, including the worn out cable systems and the cars adopted to service on them. It was very well understood at the time that much, if not all of these properties would have to be replaced by entirely new devices of transportation."

"Investment News" goes on to say that part of the \$50,000,000 should be considered as just compensation for the 99-year franchises held by some of the companies; that is, the private interests were in control of the city streets, whether you and I liked it or not. A working class government would pay small heed to such "rights,"—but Chicago has not had a working class government—yet. According to a city ordinance which has since been passed, the municipality now has the extremely doubtful privilege of buying the traction lines, provided it buys before the summer of 1927, the approximate purchase price being set modestly at \$111,000,000.

Morgan Owns the Car Lines.

The street car plan of Chicago is made up of dozens of independent lines, which finally have become merged, through necessity, into two general systems, the Chicago City Railway Co., operating on the south and southwest sides, and the Chicago Railways Co., operating on the north and west sides. While preserving a separate identity in division of the profits, the two systems are actually operated as one, through the operating company known as the Chicago Surface Lines. The Chicago City Railway Co. is controlled by none other than the omnipresent banking firm of J. P. Morgan & Co., who own 84 per cent of the stock of the collateral trust known as the Chicago City & Connecting Railways. The same people own the Hammond, Whiting & East Chicago Railway, the Calumet & South Chicago Railway, the Chicago & Western Railway, and the Southern Street Railway. Under a special agreement, the Commonwealth Edison Co. supplies electric power to all of these lines.

The Commonwealth Edison Co. is the central factor in Chicago traction affairs. In the first place, it has a minority interest in the Morgan-controlled Chicago City Railway Co. In the second place, it has complete control of the Chicago Railways Co., the larger of the two organizations operated by the Chicago Surface Lines. In the third place, it is represented on the directorate of every important traction company in Chicago, and one of its directors, Henry A. Blair, is president of the Chicago Surface Lines. In the fourth place, it has a \$7,000,000 interest in the Chicago Elevated Railways, Samuel Insull chairman and principal boss of Commonwealth Edison Co., being also chairman of the executive committee of the "L" road. In the fifth place, it has agreements for the exclusive supply of electric power to all the street railway and "L" lines. The aggregate business which could be secured by the Commonwealth Edison Co. from the railways in consequence of this guaranty, under long term contracts, was estimated a short time ago at \$100,000,000.

They Make Profits Anyhow.

It is most interesting to note that Insull and his partners of the Commonwealth Edison Co. could operate the Chicago surface and "L" lines at a loss and still make money out of them—because of interest on the traction bonds which they hold and of profits from the great amount of electric power furnished to the lines.

And traction is only a side-line with Samuel Insull. The Insull interests form an inner ring which controls every public utility in Chicago,—and far out of Chicago. The Insull properties cover twelve states and dominate the life of hundreds of American communities. In a future article on public utilities I intend to tell more about them. For the present, I think I have made it clear that an increase of 10 cents an hour in the pay of the street railway and elevated employees will not bankrupt the men behind Chicago's transportation system, no matter what figures Mr. Blair may bring forward to show that it will. The workers have taken the offensive in Chicago's traction game. If they are

The Worker's Party in Detroit has held a number of successful affairs of late. The party participated in full strength in the Foster meeting which was held under the auspices of the Detroit Federation of Labor. The meeting was preceded by a parade in which thousands of Detroit's workers took part. The banners carried indicated that the Michigan Criminal Syndicalist act is in bad repute in the Detroit Federation.

At its last meeting the City Central Committee decided to issue a challenge to the Proletarian Party to debate the question of a Labor Party and certain other points of policy and tactics upon which the two parties differ. This debate, if the challenge is accepted, should prove of more than passing interest and should serve to allay much confusion as to the pressing need of bona fide independent working class political action.

June 2nd, 1923

Local Detroit, Proletarian Party,
140, First St.,
Fraternity Hall,
Detroit, Mich.

Dear Comrades:

The question of Communist Unity in the United States based on the joining of the Workers Party and the Proletarian Party into one organization has been the subject of much discussion, verbal and written, in both organizations. However, the question has never been discussed in a manner to bring all the issues which differentiate the two parties into sharp relief.

We are therefore challenging the Proletarian Party to debate the validity

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resolute and well-led they will win. In addition to the carmen 2,000 track layers and repairmen, who have been receiving only from 54 cents an hour for laborers to 67 cents an hour for section foremen, are up in arms demanding a one-third increase. Assured of the support of the substation electricians, these men should prove a powerful ally for the rest of the workers. If all strike together and stick together until the end, victory is certain.