

Blood In The Streets

Battlefields of
American Labor History

Introduction

Labor history - does anybody know what that is? There is certainly little or no mention of it in contemporary education. Its exclusion from the history books is part of the current pattern of negating any parts of American history that challenge the capitalist-free market system we live in. Look at what's happening around the country now; book censorship, banning the teaching of basic historical and biological facts and a general rewriting of our past. This marginalized view of our heritage carries over into how the public history at sites of historical significance is portrayed and interpreted (or not).

I have been traveling since 2021 to locations around the country where meaningful events in labor history have occurred. Some sites are noted with small markers while others remain completely anonymous. The recognition is almost always slight - in Pittsburgh you can find a small historical marker in the middle of an intersection (if you look hard enough) noting the killing of over forty workers on strike against the railroads. Most often the landscape can't be bothered to deal with its past - a street in Milwaukee where unarmed strikers were shot dead by state militia gives no clue as to the events that transpired there in 1886. That is where my interest lies: in finding out what aspects of our past have been deemed worthy of commemoration, and how does the contemporary landscape at these sites reflect those past histories. What do they say about us, our society and culture? There are stories embedded in these landscapes that delve deep into the ongoing struggle of capital versus labor that continue to define our society and influence how our lives play out today. All we have to do is look. History is a recurring pattern, and my aim is to shine a light on those patterns within American labor history.

First factory strike in the U.S.
Pawtucket, Rhode Island - May 26, 1824



Slater mill in 1897

Mill owners at the Slater Mill decided to increase the workday by one hour and cut wages by 25% for their female workers. In response, 102 women walked out of this mill and shut it down, creating the first factory strike in the U.S.



Slater Mill, site of first factory strike in the United States

Karen Silkwood Death
Near Crescent, Oklahoma - November 13, 1974



Remains of Silkwood's Honda



Memorial for Karen at crash site

Karen Silkwood crashed into a culvert and died after being forced off the road while driving to give a reporter evidence of safety violations at her employer's plutonium plant.



Culvert where Karen Silkwood died

The Battle of Homestead Homestead, Pennsylvania - July 6, 1892



Contemporaneous view of the battle



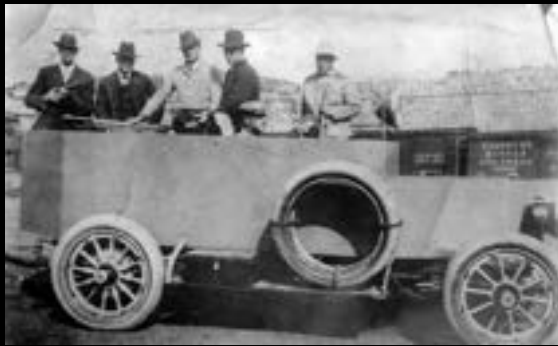
National guard at Carnegie mill

Andrew Carnegie tried to break a strike at his riverside steel plant by bringing in 300 Pinkerton strikebreakers by boat. A gun battle broke out with strikers when they attempted to land here, killing 15 and wounding dozens.



Spot where Pinkerton guards landed

Ludlow Massacre
Ludlow, Colorado - April 20, 1913



Armored car used to harass striking miners



Remains of tent colony after attack

Colorado National Guardsmen fired machine guns into a tent encampment of striking miners at Ludlow and then set it ablaze, killing nineteen, including fifteen women and children huddled in a shelter under their tent.



Basement shelter where 15 women and children were killed by National Guardsmen

Columbine Mine Massacre
Serene, Colorado - Nov. 21, 1927



Serene, Colorado – 1920's

Five hundred unarmed miners marched to the fenced-in mining company town of Serene seeking support for their strike. They were met at the town gates by machine gun fire from mine guards and state militia, killing six and wounding twenty-three.



Site of Serene, Colorado

Bloody Thursday
San Francisco, California – July 5, 1934



Crowd of striking dock workers
witnessing waterfront riot



Strikers marching earlier in July

Striking for union recognition, dock workers picketed and closed docks up and down the west coast. In San Francisco, police charged the strikers and battled them all day long on July 5, resulting in two longshoremen shot to death and over a hundred wounded.



San Francisco waterfront area where national guard and strikers confronted each other

The Pullman Strike
Chicago, Illinois - May - July, 1894



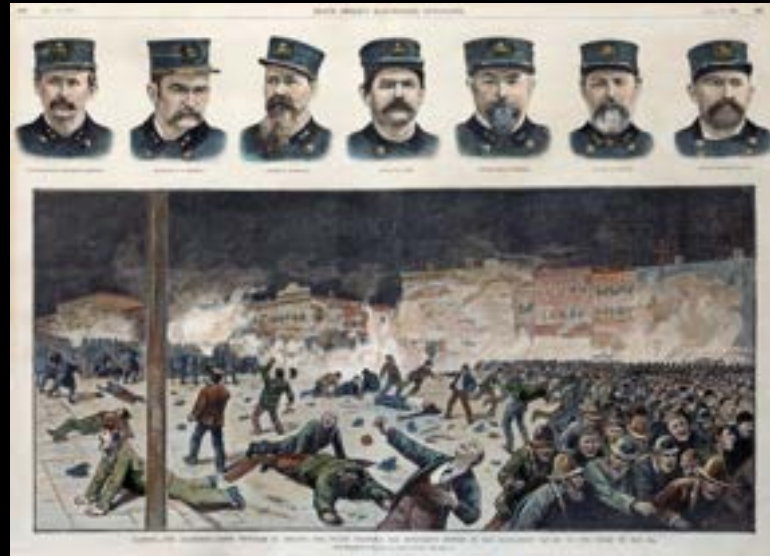
Rail cars destroyed during Pullman strike

Workers at the Pullman factory went on strike after a wage cut. It grew into a national strike that shut down almost all rail traffic in the country. President Cleveland then called in the army, with the resulting violence killing over 70 people.



Remains of Pullman factory where 1894 strike began

The Haymarket Affair Chicago, Illinois - May 4, 1886



Depiction of the bombing from Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper

In 1886 the average workweek in Chicago was sixty hours in six days for \$1.50 per day. A general strike was called to begin on May 1 of that year by the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions to push for an eight hour day.

On May 3, strikers at the McCormick Harvesting Machine Co. plant were confronted by police who fired into the crowd, killing four. To protest the killings, a rally was called for the next evening at Haymarket Square, north of downtown. Less than three thousand people showed up and heard speakers give updates on the status of the eight hour movement. As the last speaker was finishing up, a line of police moved towards the speakers' platform to demand the rally disperse. As they moved forward, a bomb was thrown at the police, killing eleven police and civilians and injuring almost one hundred twenty.

Not having a clear suspect, the Chicago police arrested those who spoke at the meeting and others who held unpopular political viewpoints, in spite of the fact that none of these people could be tied to the bombing. In the end, five people were convicted and sentenced to death, even though there was no evidence of their involvement in the bombing.

The trial and proceedings have been historically considered a travesty of justice, so much so that in 1893 the governor of Illinois pardoned the surviving defendants, calling them victims of "hysteria, packed juries and a biased judge". In 1890, May 1 was established as May Day to honor the victims of the tragedy.

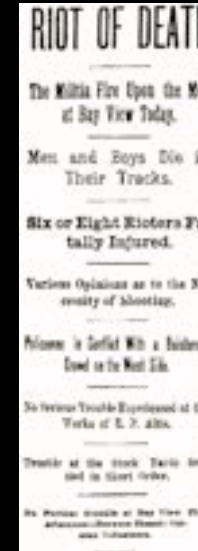


Memorial at the site of the Haymarket bombing

Bay View Massacre
Milwaukee, Wisconsin - May 5, 1886



Militia deployed at Bay View plant



Milwaukee newspaper
day after attack

Striking for an eight-hour day, 1,500 people marched to the Bay View Mill complex and were met by gunfire from the state militia, killing seven and injuring many others.



Site where state militia fired upon unarmed crowd

The Great Railroad Strike
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania - July 21, 1877



Destruction after National Guard troops shot and killed forty strikers

After being urged by the Pennsylvania RR president to give railroad strikers "a rifle diet for a few days", fearful National Guard troops shot and bayoneted angry strikers, killing at least forty people. Strikers retaliated by burning down the roundhouse where the railroad's locomotives were parked.



Site where National Guardsmen killed over 40 strikers

Pixley Cotton Strike
Pixley, California – October 10, 1933



Farm owners during their attack on striking farm workers.



Union hall, second from left, where striking farm workers were ambushed by farm owners.

The summer of 1933 saw a series of strikes by farm workers who were frustrated by years of declining wages and living conditions. Farm owners fought back by forming posses to attack any group of striking workers they ran across. This culminated when strikers gathered for a protest were ambushed by a caravan of 40 owners in front of the union hall in Pixley. Two strikers were killed and at least eight wounded as a group of state police nearby refused to intervene.



Site of union hall where farm workers were ambushed by farm owners

Lattimer Massacre
Lattimer, Pennsylvania - September 10, 1897



Strikers marching to Lattimer mine

Nineteen were killed and dozens wounded in Lattimer when a sheriff's posse opened fire on an unarmed group of striking coal miners marching to persuade others to join in the strike. Most were shot in the back.



Site of Lattimer Massacre

The Great Railroad Strike
Reading, Pennsylvania - July 23, 1877



Railroad cut used by National Guard in response to strike

After receiving a 10% pay cut, striking railroad workers and their families gathered at this spot and blocked a train from moving ahead. Seven companies of the 4th Regiment were then sent through this cut, firing at the crowd, killing ten and wounding thirty-nine.



Site of 1877 shooting by National Guardsmen

The National Steel Strike of 1919 September, 1919 - January, 1920



News from a labor point of view



Unprovoked attack upon striker

Steelworkers called a national strike at the end of WWI to solidify gains made during the war. Steel companies turned public opinion against the strike and ended it by using blacklistings, violence and intimidation while painting strikers as communists and immigrants.



Braddock, PA steel plant that took part in the strike

Battle of the Overpass
Dearborn, Michigan – May 26, 1937

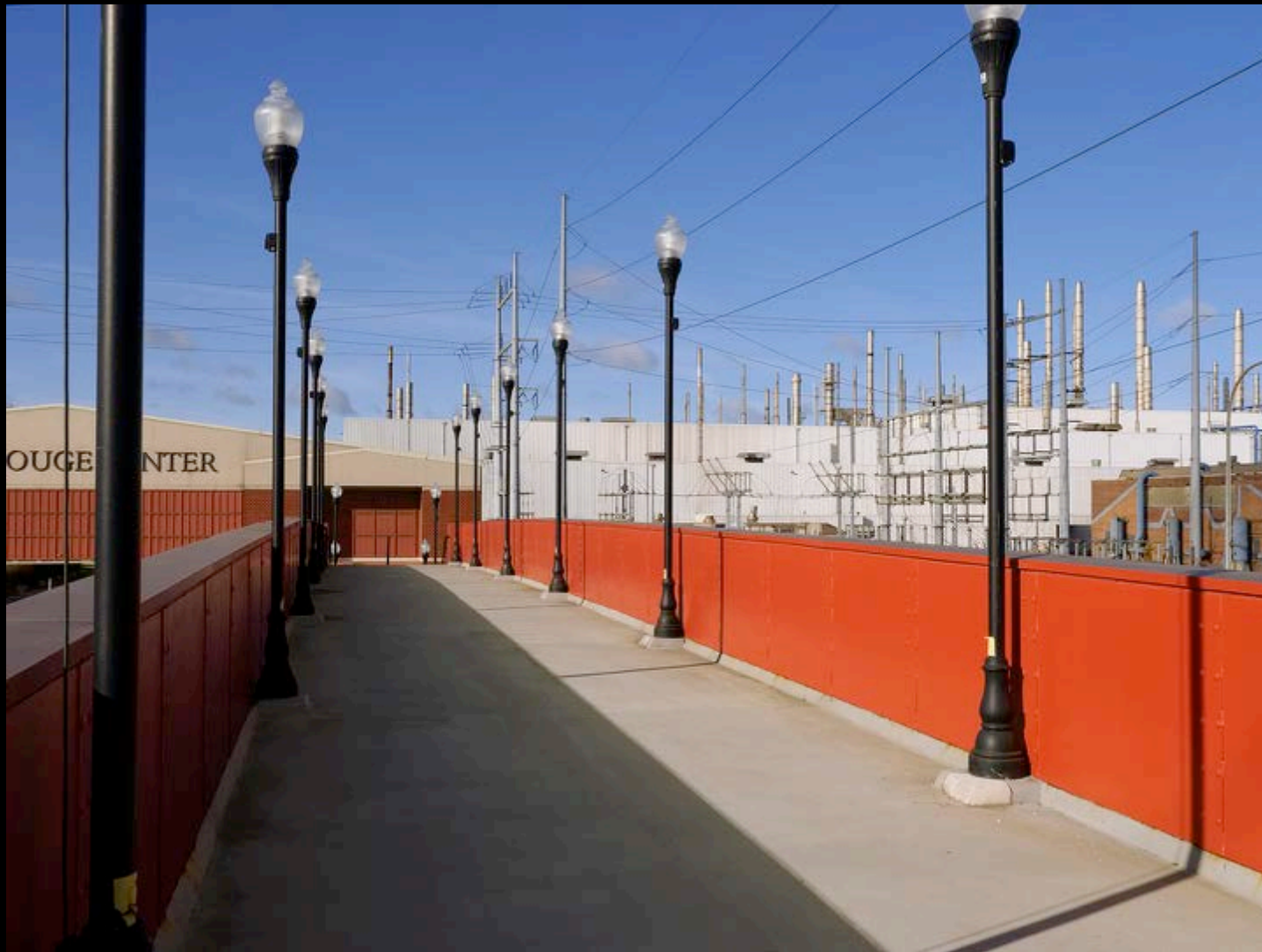


Ford security enforcers attack UAW organizers



Union organizers after the attack

As Ford workers crossed an overpass to the auto plant, four UAW union organizers passed out handbills encouraging union membership. More than a dozen of Henry Ford's security team confronted them and proceeded to beat them and throw them down the stairs, continuing a pattern of intimidation and violence to keep the union out.



Overpass where Ford security attacked union organizers

Bloody Thursday
Honea Path, South Carolina - September 6, 1934



Local account of the strike



Wounded bystander

Textile workers on the east coast went on strike in 1934 to protest poor working conditions and low pay. In Honea Path the mayor and mill superintendant Dan Beacham ordered an armed posse to fire into a crowd of strikers, killing seven and wounding thirty.



Remains of Chiquola Mill where striking workers were shot

Rayon mill workers strike
Elizabethton, Tennessee - May, 1929



Striking mill workers engage with
national guardsman



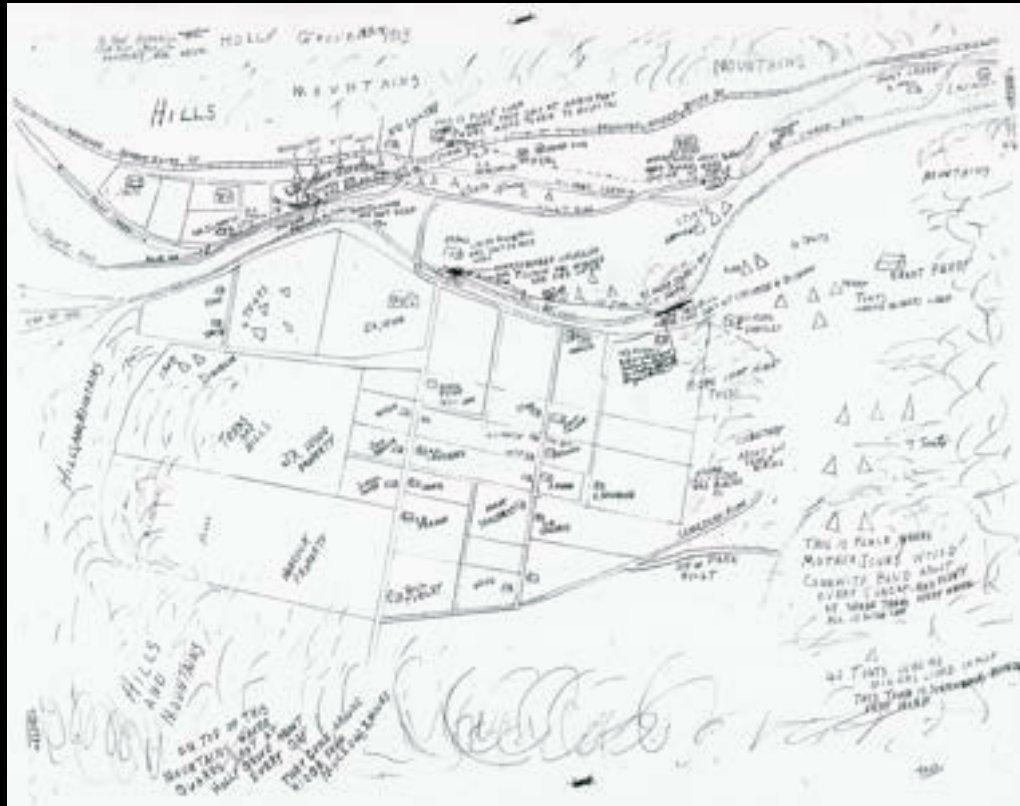
Preparing for a strike

Female workers at the Bemberg and American Glanzstoff rayon plants led a strike for better working conditions and equal treatment of women. Management refused to negotiate and had the governor send in National Guard troops to intimidate the strikers. When a settlement was reached, strikers and union members were blackballed from working again.



Remains of the Bemberg rayon mill

The Paint Creek Massacre Holly Grove, West Virginia - February 7, 1913



A survivor of the Paint Creek shooting drew this map detailing the incident

Striking mine workers erected a tent city next to railroad tracks in Holly Grove after the mine companies evicted the miners and their families from their company homes. A train with armor plating outfitted with machine guns was driven through here at night by the sheriff and the mine operator, firing into homes and tents, killing three and wounding many.



Site where striking miners tents were shot at from the sheriff's armored train

Teamsters Strike Minneapolis, Minnesota - July 20, 1934



Police confront strikers



An overall view of the scene

Teamsters in Minneapolis went on strike on May 16, 1934 to expand union membership to those who worked inside of the warehouses and docks in addition to all truck drivers. After much violence and mayhem, an agreement was reached to settle the strike. Soon after, the employers reneged on the agreement, forcing the union to resume the strike.

On Friday, July 20 a single truck escorted by fifty policemen broke through the picket lines to make a delivery at 3rd St. and 6th Ave. N. After picketers cut off the truck, police opened fire on the strikers, killing two and wounding at least sixty-seven. A governor's commission later concluded that the police fired to kill, with no threat to their own safety. Governor Olson then declared martial law and had the national guard patrol the city. On August 21 an agreement was reached with the help of a federal mediator, ending the strike. This was a pivotal event in removing employer resistance to unionization in Minneapolis.



Site of clashes between police and striking Teamsters

Auto Lite Strike
Toledo, Ohio - April-June, 1934

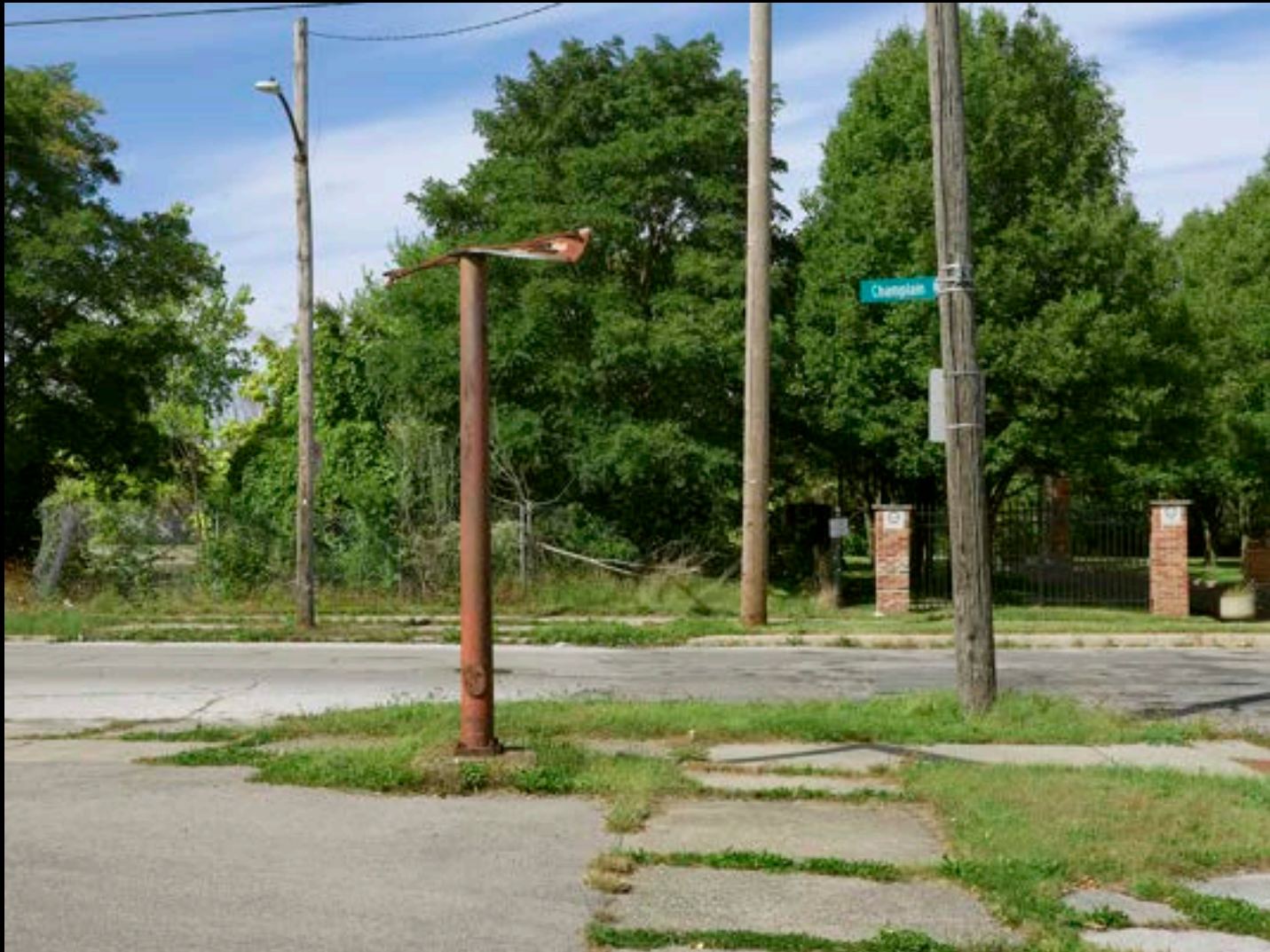


Gas used as crowd control



Local reporting

Striking workers at the Electric Auto Lite plant were incensed when management hired 1,500 strikebreakers to run the factory. As the crowd of strikers around the plant swelled, Ohio's governor ordered the National Guard to intervene. The ensuing chaos resulted in the death of two strikers and over 200 injuries.



Site where Auto Lite strike confrontations took place

Dubuque Packing Co. shutdown
Dubuque, Iowa - 1891 - 2001



Dubuque Packing Company, 1970's

The Dubuque Packing Company shut down operations and put hundreds out of work less than a year after securing major concessions from its union and the city to keep its operations going. It is now a pile of rubble on a parcel of contaminated land that the city has been unable to redevelop.



The remains of the Dubuque Packing Company

Delano Grape Strike
Delano, California – September, 1965 – July, 1970



Cesar Chavez and Robert Kennedy meet in 1968 as Chavez broke his 25 day fast

Thousands of farm workers in the Delano area went on strike to secure union representation and pay equal to the minimum wage. Growers responded by harassing and intimidating the strikers. Cesar Chavez headed the United Farm Workers union, espousing a tactic of non-violence. After almost five years of confrontation and boycotts, the United Farm Workers achieved all their demands.



Cesar Chavez's headquarters during the late 60's grape strike

Dedication

I grew up in a family that went from squeezing by to enjoying a middle class life with possibilities after my dad joined a union at the local John Deere plant. Without that union card, our life would've been quite different. I told dad before he died that I was going to undertake a photo project that would highlight the struggle of those who went before him to provide for a life with dignity and means. It is to him and his predecessors that I dedicate this work.