The Role of Labor in the Conversion of the
San Francisco Streetcar System:
The One-Man Streetcar Controversy

Joseph P. Ragen

In 1974, Bradford Snell’s *American Ground Transport* was published. The thesis of Snell’s work was:

that General Motors conspired with bus operators, manufacturers, and suppliers in order to replace competitive electric transit vehicles with less competitive motor buses, thereby causing the riding public to become so dissatisfied with mass transit that they were diverted to GM’s primary product, the automobile.\(^1\)

Reaction to Snell’s thesis has been the centerpiece of the historiographical debate on the conversion of America’s urban transit systems from streetcar to motor bus. Historians have argued mostly against Snell from various viewpoints including economic, public policy, corporate structure and dynamics, and intrametropolitan competition. For the most part, historians have overlooked one of the groups most effected by the wholesale changes in the mode of transport in public transit, the workers themselves. The purpose of this paper is to take a look at labor in this historic controversy and to attempt to discern what role, if any, labor played in streetcar conversion.

The thesis of this paper is that labor, either wittingly or unwittingly, contributed to the demise of streetcars in San Francisco’s urban public transportation network. This thesis is derived partly from a simple look at the numbers involved, and partly from labor’s natural instinct to keep employed. A streetcar had twice the carrying capacity of a bus. In light of declining usage of public transportation in post-war America, the wholesale conversion to bus lines allowed public transit employees the best chance to keep their jobs and, in a best case scenario, to expand employment opportunities. Since each urban locale had its own particular transportation issues and independent local union representation it is necessary to test this thesis on the local level. San Francisco is an excellent case due to its extensive pre-war streetcar system, its mixture of public and private ownership, and its history as a strong labor union city.

The changeover from a mostly streetcar system to a bus and trolley coach operation occurred in San Francisco in the years from 1948 to 1951. However, the causes of the transformation can be found much earlier. In 1918, the United Railroads of San Francisco commenced the limited usage of one-man streetcars. The introduction of these new streetcars was uneventful. On July 13, 1918, a one-man streetcar was involved in a tragic accident that killed eight passengers and injured over seventy. “A few days later the Board of Supervisors passed an ordinance outlawing one-man streetcar operations.”\(^2\) This ordinance stayed on the books until 1954, despite the development years earlier of modern, safe one-man operated streetcars. Given that “labor costs accounted for between two-thirds and three-fourths of operating expenses”\(^3\) of an urban transportation system, the unnecessary expense of two-man
cars was an incentive for the city to convert to one-man operated buses and trolley coaches and merits a closer look.

The first attempt at replacing the two-man car with the one-man was in 1933. At this time, two companies ran streetcars in San Francisco: the city owned Municipal Railway (Muni) and the larger private corporation owned Market Street Railway (MSR), formerly the United Railroads. The Municipal Railway was recently put under the control of the newly created Public Utilities Commission (PUC). "The Municipal Railway's transferal to an appointive commission reflected the influence of the 'non-political' city management reform philosophy and the depression-era revenue decreases." One of the first acts of the new commission and its general manager, E. G. Cahill, was to announce on May 17, 1933 that one-man car operations would commence on the M line within sixty to ninety days. Cahill explained that "the M line has always lost money. The operating loss is $21,000 a year. By changing to one-man cars the operating loss can be cut $7800 a year." Three days later, the Market Street Railway president, Samuel Kahn, followed suit and announced a similar policy for outlying lines. Kahn stated that "with a drop in revenue of approximately $2,000,000 since 1929, with no employees dismissed because of the fact, we shall be forced to the use of one-man cars in so far as we can without laying off men."

Labor reacted quickly to this threat. The Labor Clarion, the official journal of the San Francisco Labor Council, declared in a page one headline that "One-Man Streetcars Are Bitterly Opposed By Organized Workers." The story based its opposition in terms of safety and service, noticeably omitting worker cutbacks. Possibly in response to the outrage of labor, the Muni quietly dropped its plan to convert to one-man cars. However, the MSR continued the fight. It went before the Board of Supervisors' Public Utilities Committee on June 14 and won recommendation by a vote of 2 to 1 that the matter be submitted to the board. Most compelling was the testimony of the safety engineer of the State Railroad Commission, H. L. Engelhardt. He testified that one-man cars "now are being used on 53 per cent of the street railways in the United States" and that "increased safety instead of more accidents has resulted from use of one-man cars." However, Kahn admitted that one-man would cut down on manpower needs, but that "it is the company's plan that as men leave by reason of death, resignation or other causes to replace only one of two each."

The employment question was now on the table. With the country in the depths of a deep depression, the very real possibility of one-man cars contributing to employee cutbacks became the focus for arguments against the repeal of the ordinance when the Board of Supervisors met on June 19, 1933. Supervisor Havenner led the forces against repeal. He declared that:

it appears to me to be a self evident and inescapable fact that the adoption of any legislation, in this critical period of world affairs, which has for its purpose a permanent reduction in the employment of human labor is contrary to public policy and cannot be justified, even on the ground of essential economy.

Organized labor spoke out against repeal at this meeting as well. Edward Vandeleur, president of the San Francisco Labor Council, stated that one-man cars "will increase unemployment" and are "in diametric opposition to the country's policy under the new deal to increase employment and improve economic and social conditions instead of making them worse and involving more
persons in the downward sweep of misery." The repeal was refused passage by a vote of ten to four. Labor scored the first victory in the fight, but a fight that was far from over.

The attention of the MSR was temporarily deflected from the one-man car fight by union difficulties. With pressure from the NRA, the MSR formed a company union in 1933 to provide for worker representation. This solution was found unacceptable and on May 1, 1934, the company entered into an agreement with Division 1004 of the Amalgamated Association of Street and Electric Railway Employees of America. The San Francisco Labor Council repudiated this pact and asked the union’s international to delay recognition pursuant to an investigation of the contract. The main sticking point for the Council was a proposed profit sharing plan in lieu of wage hikes. The profit sharing clause encouraged worker support for any economies the MSR made. To the Labor Council, “this agreement would practically make union labor a party to foisting the one-man car system and increased fares upon the city of San Francisco.” The International did not let the agreement with the MSR stand, resulting in a strike from July 15 until July 26, 1934. The strike ended when both sides agreed to binding arbitration.

On December 14, 1934, the Board of Arbitration rendered its decision. The Labor Clarion declared a complete victory for labor. The MSR was now on a strictly union basis for the first time since 1907. The employees won increases in pay of up to 25 per cent. The Clarion stated that, “In its award the board refused to put the financial conditions of the company ahead of wages and decent working conditions. Thus the award is a recognition of the principle that wages and American standards for workers take precedence over dividends or interest.” However, the board also recognized the difficulty of the company to pay the increase. They “suggested that the union and the company cooperate to the end that an increase in revenue be obtained with either a fare increase or by other means.” That the board contemplated one-man cars as the other means was made evident by the clause in the award that stated, “one-man car operators shall receive 5 cents per hour additional also bus drivers.” Of course, there were no one-man cars operating at the time, but the board’s stance kept the MSR employees from striking over the one-man car issue in the years to follow. In his dissenting opinion, MSR president Samuel Kahn asserted that, “The opinion of the board sustains the position of the company to the effect that it cannot increase wages without increasing carfares and using one-man cars.” It was not going to take long for the one-man car fight to erupt again.

On January 28, 1935, the MSR once again petitioned the Board of Supervisors to permit the operation of one-man streetcar service. The San Francisco Chronicle reported that Kahn pointed out that to pay the increase in labor costs mandated by the arbitration agreement that the company “will have to cut down operating expenses radically and the one-man car seems the only answer.” He estimated that “substitution of that service here would cause the gradual dismissal of only some 400 temporary employees.” In testimony to the Public Utilities Committee of the Board, Kahn raised the specter of bankruptcy if one-man cars were not permitted. The MSR received support this time from among others the Chamber of Commerce, the Down Town Association, the Civic League of Improvement Clubs, and the San Francisco Chronicle. As in 1933, the committee approved submission of the repeal to the full Board.

With increased public support for the repeal, labor felt a need to act. The Law and Legislative Committee of the San Francisco Labor Council felt that “there seems to be a disposition on the part of the members of the Board of Supervisors to favor the Market Street
Railway Company in its desire to repeal the ordinance providing for two-man operations of streetcars.” Perhaps to deflect the influence of non-labor pressure groups on the Board, the committee recommended “that the Council and its affiliated unions take steps to submit the question to a referendum of the people.”

In three meetings from February 11 to February 25, the Board debated the repeal. It was finally defeated on February 25 by a vote of 9 to 2. Much of the debate centered on safety, service, and employment. The possible bankruptcy of the MSR did not come up reflective of the Labor Clarion opinion that “the time will never come in San Francisco when cars will have to be tied up in the barn because they (MSR) can not pay.”

During this time the general manager of utilities for PUC, E. G. Cahill told the Labor Clarion that “there had been no consideration of the subject (one-man cars), but that he personally thought one-man cars could be used in the ‘thinner’ districts.” The possibility that Muni might switch to one-man cars kept the idea of a referendum alive. As the San Francisco Chronicle opined, “They know it (the referendum) mean nothing as far as the Market Street Railway is concerned. They think, however, that it might prevent one-man cars on the Municipal Railway.” The majority of the supervisors backed labor’s election plans. On March 26, by a vote of 9 to 2, the Board recommended submission of the referendum on the ordinance prohibiting the operation of one-man streetcars and put the proposition on the ballot (after an affirmative opinion from the City Attorney), thus circumventing the need for petition signatures. On April 3, 1935, the Board voted 8 to 2 in favor of supporting what was now Proposition 0. Supervisor McSheehy laid out the basic arguments for support. They were that one-man cars would put 1000 men out of work, result in slower service, diminish property values, and endanger life. The election was held on May 2, 1935, and resulted in an overwhelming victory for labor. The two-man ordinance was upheld by a vote of 99,707 to 34,076.

While the overwhelming vote for two-man cars possibly prevented Muni from running one-man cars, it did not stop the MSR. On March 12, 1935, the MSR was granted a temporary injunction from Federal Judge Harold Louderback that restrained the city from interfering with the operation of one-man cars. He did so, the San Francisco Chronicle reported, “because of the immediate, irreparable injury, loss, and damage which the company might suffer and further ‘is suffering a daily loss.’” This decision marked the beginning of a nearly four year battle through the courts. Labor was to participate in this battle as “friends of the court.” The court battles hinged on the questions of safety and convenience. The first round went to the MSR when on April 1, 1936, Judge Louderback concurred with the opinion of the court-appointed special master, H. M. Wright that the “one-man operation (was) safer than operation by two men and equally convenient to the public.”

While the city and labor went through the appeals process, the MSR expanded its operations of one-man cars. Eventually the company had a total of 174 one-man cars operating over eighteen routes. The effect on employment numbers is unclear, but we can speculate that a number of “extras” were no longer needed. The MSR claimed savings of $84, 751 for the fiscal year ending March 31, 1937 due to the operation of one-man cars.

The city and labor won a major victory over the MSR on July 7, 1938. The United States Circuit Court of Appeals unanimously overturned the previous decision of Judge Louderback. The court ruled “in effect, that whether the line can make money with two-man cars or whether it
cannot is immaterial. The only issue at stake is the right of the people of San Francisco to pass a safety ordinance under the police power.” The court believed that the two-man car was safer. Judge Derman said that “more lives will be saved and fewer persons injured if all these manifold duties of the conductor are not thrown upon the motorman.”31 The MSR appealed the case to the Supreme Court. On January 31, 1939, the petition for a rehearing was denied by the court. It was estimated by the Chronicle that employing additional men for the streetcars would cost the MSR $300,00 a year. 32 The city was quick to enforce the ban of one-man cars, and by the end of February they were all gone.

The effect of the ruling on the operations of the MSR was to cause a rapid transition to motor coaches which could legally be operated by one man. The number of motor coaches owned by the company rose from 11 in 1938 to 125 by the end of 1942.33 The switch to buses enabled the MSR in part to decrease operating expenses by 3.94 per cent in 1940 and a further 2.55 per cent in 194134, thus circumventing the dire financial consequences predicted by the Chronicle.

By 1942, eleven of the MSR’s 32 streetcars lines were converted at least partially to bus lines.35 None of these conversions were protested by labor. In an interesting side note, in order to reduce operating costs, the money-losing shuttle cars of the M line, which operated only from West Portal outward, were replaced in 1939 by bus route 10.36 This development begs the question as to whether Cahill and PUC were awaiting the outcome of MSR’s battle to decide to convert the line to bus or, as originally intended, to one-man streetcar operation?

World War Two heavily impacted public transportation in San Francisco. Both the Muni and the MSR ran at full capacity and were forced to delay maintenance and forego capital improvements. On September 29, 1944, the city acquired the MSR, further compounding the problems of developing a modern transit system for post-war San Francisco. In preparation for the purchase of the MSR, the Board of Supervisors asked E. G. Cahill for PUC’s plans for the future improvement of transportation in light of this eventuality. Cahill’s response, in a letter to the Board dated April 29, 1944, was an eye-opener and proved to be the basis for future PUC transportation policy. Three of his six points are most illustrative of PUC future intentions toward the streetcar:

1. The widest possible use will be made of modern motor coaches and trolley buses....
3. The Commission contemplates no expenditures that will tend to perpetuate the streetcar beyond the date when practicable substitutes can be obtained.
4. The Commission is not contemplating proposals for subways, elevated railways or other types of grade separation and does not intend to make any such proposals until, by the employment of modern equipment, the most efficient use is made of the City’s street surfaces. No funds have been set aside for the purchase of streetcars and no additional purchases of streetcars are contemplated other than necessary replacements pending conversions to other forms of transportation.37

Cahill’s plans were those of a political realist. He saw labor defeat his plans to institute the usage of economic one-man cars on Muni. He also was defeated, by popular vote in 1937, in plans to construct a three line rapid transit system. This defeat was not helped by labor’s belated
and half hearted support of the measure.\textsuperscript{38} To improve the dilapidated condition of most of the streetcar lines necessitated an enormous outlay of capital. Bus and trolley conversion was cheaper.

In the next few years numerous reports were presented on San Francisco’s public transportation’s problems and future. These reports came from PUC, the San Francisco Planning Commission, the Administrative Planning Commission, Western Bus Lines, and the office of the Mayor. These reports variously emphasized streetcars, trolley coaches, and motor buses. PUC was able to ignore all of them and followed the plan outlined in the Cahill letter.

In 1947, the people of San Francisco passed a bond issue to aid Muni in its modernization of the transit system. The plan presented to the voters by PUC called for the retention of a core of trunk streetcar lines.\textsuperscript{39} However, PUC used the moneys from the bond issue to begin a wholesale conversion of the streetcar lines to trolley coach and bus lines. From 1948 through 1951, twenty of the twenty seven streetcar lines existent in 1947 were converted including two of the most heavily used lines, the 14 Mission and the F Stockton.\textsuperscript{40}

Neighborhood community activists attempted to enlist the support of labor in stopping these wholesale conversions. In a letter to the Labor Council president John F. Shelley, the Alemany District Council of Improvement Associations urged Shelley to join them in attending a Board of Supervisors meeting on December 6, 1948 to protest the conversion of the 14 Mission line to trolley buses. The letter argued that the 14 was one of Muni’s best revenue producers and that “at peak hours at least 150 passengers are crowded into a single streetcar, and nine or ten streetcars pass through within 15 minutes. It would require at least 25 buses to handle the same traffic.”\textsuperscript{41} There is no record of a response from Shelley, but with the addition of at least five jobs with the conversion to trolley, labor was understandably silent.

The people from Alemany never did get a chance to speak their piece at the December 6 Board meeting. The first order of business at the meeting was the question of the abandonment of the 40 line. This line ran from San Mateo to Daly City and was thus able to operate one-man cars. The President of the Board, J. Joseph Sullivan was puzzled why PUC was bringing the matter before the Board for approval or disapproval, whereas in the past they had not. He asked Deputy City Attorney Walker Peddicord for an ruling. “Mr. Peddicord stated that an off-hand opinion would indicate that previous action by the Public Utilities Commission in removing street car lines reflected but a change in service and not an actual abandonment.”\textsuperscript{42} Whether this “off-hand opinion” was an intended political ploy by the Board of Supervisors is debatable. The result was that the Board took themselves out of any controversy surrounding the conversion of the streetcar lines. PUC was enabled to continue the conversions virtually without public hearings. This practice was ruled illegal by the courts in 195, but “by then, of course it was too late.”\textsuperscript{43}

PUC’s conversion intentions were made even clearer with the hiring of Marmion D. Mills as a full time Transit Consultant and Expediter on February 15, 1950. Mills had been regional sales manager for General Motors Yellow Coach bus manufacturing and the first president of National City Lines, a company notorious for killing off streetcar lines.\textsuperscript{44} Mills first public report, some three weeks after taking the job, called for the conversion of all the remaining streetcar lines except for three, the K, L, and M. These three were saved because of the Twin Peaks Tunnel.\textsuperscript{45} Mill’s plans for Muni were to finally bring a protest against streetcar conversion from labor.
In August, 1950, the San Francisco Labor Council demanded that PUC cease any further streetcar conversions. The reasons given were that “the public is opposed to replacing the B, J, K, L, M, and N streetcars” and that “many present employees would lose their jobs by the change from two-man streetcars to one-man bus operation.” At a hearing before PUC on October 2, Union Secretary James L. Wilson expressed labor’s wish that all conversions should cease until the citizens “had an opportunity to express themselves at the ballot box.” He went on to explain that “one hundred to two hundred men now running streetcars would be too old to drive buses and would be thrown out of work.”

Apparently, as the number of streetcars declined, the older drivers were shunted on to the remaining lines. Muni had now run out of lines to put them to work on, thus provoking labor’s concern over conversion. The Carmen’s Union threatened to strike over the matter, the immediate concern being the conversion of the F Stockton line. President Phillip F. Landis countered, “Refusal to work will be considered strike action, Civil service rules prohibit strikes under penalty of loss of job rights.” Labor was forced to back down and the streetcar conversions continued.

On April 13, 1951, Mills submitted his formal report to PUC. He recommended the conversions of both the Geary and Church streetcar lines and the repeal of the two-man car rule. Mills stated that “the largest unnecessary cost is the two-man streetcar.” His report was the impetus for a ballot proposition challenging two-man operation. The proposition was defeated in the November election by less than 3,000 votes. The victory was probably due more to labor’s activity on behalf of their mayoral candidate, Elmer Robinson, than on the merits of the proposition itself. Robinson also won a narrow victory.

Another attempt to end the two-man ordinance was made in a primary election in June of 1954. San Francisco Labor, the successor to the Labor Clarion, argued against the proposition stating that it “asks you to slash the Safety and Service of the Municipal Railway by bringing back the one-man car.” The argument seemed old and tired, especially since no other city was running two-man cars and that the city bought one-man cars and converted them to two-man operation for years. The voters thought so to, opting for one-man car operation by a vote of 82,667 for to 70,992 against. The one-man car was finally here to stay.

San Francisco’s labor movement played a key role in the demise of most of the city’s once vast streetcar network. Their insistence on two-man streetcars led directly to the conversion of many of the lines of the MSR before World War II. After the war, the powers that be took it as a given that they would have to work around labor intransigence on the subject of one-man car operation, even after the development and acceptance of safely operated cars of that type throughout the rest of the nation. Of course, those other cities also rid themselves of streetcars in favor of buses. It is problematic to envision to what extent San Francisco would have preserved its streetcar lines in the face of the onslaught of the then almighty bus, but the two-man rule began the process and made it easier to later convert the busier lines. Labor in San Francisco acted in its perceived best interests to preserve employment in the public transportation field by accepting conversion to buses. However, when that best interest changed to streetcar preservation, they were unable to stem the tide. The position of power that PUC was able to establish proved unassailable. In the end, what saved the five remaining streetcar lines was simply an accident of geography - the hills of San Francisco.
Joseph P. Ragen has completed the Master of Arts program in history at San Francisco State University. His primary concentration was on American history with a particular interest in policy history. Upon graduation Joe will continue at his present occupation as a member of the Pacific Stock Exchange, albeit in a more enlightened state. Those with better suggestions are encouraged to contact him at the soonest possible date.

5 San Francisco Chronicle, May 18, 1933, 5.
6 Ibid., May 21, 1933, 5.
7 Labor Clarion, vol. 32, no.19, June 9, 1933, 1.
8 San Francisco Chronicle, June 15, 1933, 4.
9 Journal of the Proceedings, The Minutes of the Board of Supervisors, City and County of San Francisco, June 19, 1933, 1208
10 Ibid., 1210.
12 Labor Clarion, vol. 33, no. 16, May 18, 1934, 1.
13 Ibid., vol. 33, no. 47, December 21, 1934, 1.
14 Smallwood, 32.
17 Ibid., January 31, 1935, 1.
18 Ibid., February 9, 1935, 4.
22 San Francisco Chronicle, April 27, 1935, 8.
23 Journal of the Proceedings, March 26, 1935, 368.
24 Ibid., April 3, 1935, 397.
28 Ibid., April 1, 1936.
29 Smallwood, 21.
31 San Francisco Chronicle, July 8, 1938, 1.
32 Ibid., 1.
33 Smallwood, 21.
34 Ibid., 37, 39.
35 Ibid., 309, 310.
36 Perles, 109.
37 Letter from E. G. Cahill, Manager of Public Utilities, to David A. Bocay, Clerk of the Board of Supervisors, April 29, 1944, from the San Francisco History Archives, San Francisco Public Library, folder- History of the Market Street Railway.
38 The bond issue was endorsed by The Labor Council by a vote of 182 to 112 on October 1, 1937. The affirmative action followed four months of debate, with the MSR’s union leading the argument against based on possible loss of employment. San Francisco Labor Council Records, Bancroft Library, University of California, folders- Street, Electric and Motor Coach Employees, Division1004, San Francisco, carton 17, Law and Legislative Committee, 1936-37, carton 25.
39 Perles, 141.
40 Arthur C. Jenkins, Report on the Economic and Organizational Features of the Municipal Railway of San Francisco to the Honorable Board of Supervisors, (Published by Arthur C. Jenkins, 1949), Appendix.
41 San Francisco Labor Council Records MSS, Letter from A. L. de Surville, Secretary, Alemany District Council Improvement Associations, Inc. to John F. Shelley, President of the San Francisco Labor Council, November 25, 1948, folder- Carmen’s Union #1380, 1949-50, carton 60.
42 Journal of the Proceedings, December 6, 1948, 860.
43 Perles, 141.
44 Ibid., 111, 141.
45 San Francisco Chronicle, March 4, 1950, 1.
47 Ibid., news clipping from unknown source, date stamped on, October 3, 1950.
48 San Francisco Chronicle, September 29, 1950, 1.
50 San Francisco Labor, November 16, 1951, vol. 1, no. 5, 2.
52 San Francisco Chronicle, June 9, 1954, 1.