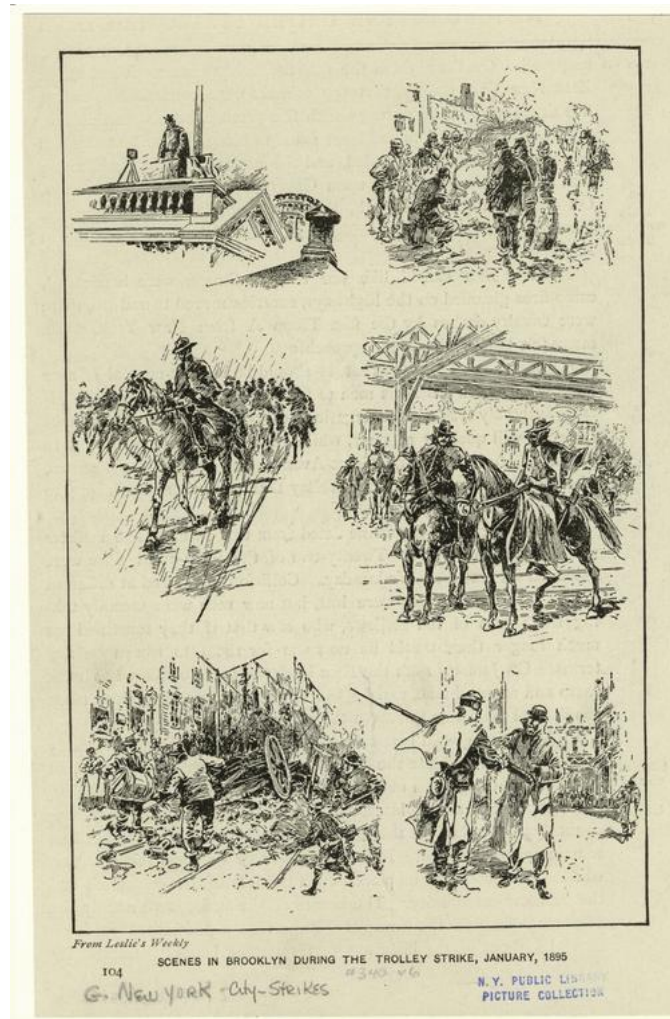


“Death of a Trolley Conductor”:¹

Urban Landscape, Social Mobility, and Cross-Class Coalition in the Brooklyn Trolley

Strike of 1895

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¹ “Death of a Trolley Conductor,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 15, 1895, 7.

² NYPL Digital Collections. “Scenes In Brooklyn During The Trolley Strike, January, 1895,” accessed March 13, 2021, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e1-061e-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.

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³ "Sermons on the Strike," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 21, 1895, 3.



Figure 1: Map of Brooklyn and its Streetcar Lines, 1898.⁴

⁴ “Guide Map of the Borough of Brooklyn, Kings County, New York: Compiled from the Latest Official Maps & Other Sources, Drawn & Engraved Expressly for the Brooklyn Daily Eagle Almanac - Map Collections,” Map Collections, accessed March 17, 2021, <https://mapcollections.brooklynhistory.org/map/guide-map-of-the-borough-of-brooklyn-kings-county-new-york-compiled-from-the-latest-official-maps-other-sources-drawn-and-engraved-expressly-for-the-brooklyn-daily-eagle-almanac/>.

Introduction

On January 23, 1895, Thomas Carney stood on the roof of 444 Hicks Street in the city of Brooklyn. The accounts of what Carney was doing on that roof vary. In a letter to the editor of *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, a resident on nearby Middagh Street claimed that Carney, a repairman by trade, was merely fixing the roof.⁵ In another account, Captain Mayer from the 13th Regiment of the New York State National Guard reported that Carney “approached [the] edge of the roof three times with something in his hands,” possibly to throw at the soldiers defending the recently reopened Hicks Avenue Line of the Atlantic Avenue Railroad Company.⁶ Yet despite these discrepancies, every story ended the same way: Thomas Carney was shot in the leg by a soldier on the street below, and died of the wound later that night at Long Island College Hospital.

Carney was one of two casualties during the Great Brooklyn Trolley Strike⁷ — the first being Henry Ahns, a German immigrant who was shot by National Guardsmen on Halsey Street a day prior — but the circumstances of his death were particularly telling of how dire the situation had become. The strike began the previous week on January 14th when 5,500 motormen, electricians, and other employees from the city’s four most prominent street railway companies refused to report to work,⁸ crippling service for approximately 200 miles of track along 34 lines.⁹ In the coming days, the strikers found widespread support among the people of Brooklyn, transforming the strike into a conflict that played out not only along a picket line, but also on the city’s streets, inside of restaurants and saloons, and — in Carney’s case — on the

⁵ “The Shooting of Kearny,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 24, 1895, 2. Note that Carney’s name is often misspelled as “Kearny” in *The Eagle*. This thesis will only use the proper spelling.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ The conflict has been referred to as the Great Brooklyn Trolley Strike, the Brooklyn Trolley Strike, and the Brooklyn Streetcar Strike. These names will be used interchangeably throughout this thesis.

⁸ “The Tie Up,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 14, 1895, 1.

⁹ “*Report of the Special Committee of the Assembly Appointed to Investigate the Causes of the Strike of the Surface Railroads in the City of Brooklyn: Transmitted to the Legislature April, 1895*” (Albany: 1895), accessed December 9, 2020, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015028310681>, 38. Hereafter, this document will be referred to as the *Report of the Special Committee*.

roofs of residential buildings. By the second week, sympathy and support for the workers was so great that the mayor called for two brigades of the State National Guard to resolve the situation. Troops marched along major thoroughfares with their bayonets drawn, forcibly removing and occasionally injuring strikers and their sympathizers. The National Guardsmen also fired warning shots at the windows of nearby buildings to dissuade Brooklynites from throwing pots, pans, and other furniture at the soldiers below. In this way, the circumstances of Carney's death were a predictable, if tragic, result of the conflict, a final stroke of violence that reaffirmed the soldiers' control of the city's public and private spaces. As a writer for *The Eagle* phrased it, the shooting of Thomas Carney was simply "one of the unfortunate but inevitable results of rioting in the streets."¹⁰ After Carney's death, support of the strikers waned and many employees finally returned to work. None of the workers' demands had been met.

In this light, the Brooklyn Trolley Strike appears to be a classic failed labor dispute. However, there are two major aspects that make the Brooklyn strike unique and deserving of close analysis. The first factor may seem self-evident but is worth noting: it was a streetcar strike. Trolleys were a critical component of urban landscapes in the late 19th century,¹¹ which made a work stoppage particularly effective at forcing different groups of people to be aware of their shared use and relationship to public space. A strike on Brooklyn's streetcar lines not only affected the companies and employees, but also commuters that relied on streetcars to travel to work, and businesses that relied on traffic along streetcar lines to generate business. Geographically, a streetcar strike affected businesses in a city's downtown, communities along transportation arteries, and suburban communities at the ends of line. These effects were particularly potent in a city as large as Brooklyn.

¹⁰ "Letters on the Strike," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 24, 1895, 6.

¹¹ Note that the terms trolley and streetcar are synonymous.

The second unique aspect of the Brooklyn strike was the strikers' goals. Even though the strikers' demands included traditional labor issues such as wages and hours, they were motivated by a larger concern regarding the operation and safety of the city's streetcars. Streetcars switched from horsepower to electric in the early 1890s, making the Brooklyn strike the first major streetcar strike after this change. In many ways, the employees' demands were a response to the new technology. The strikers insisted that the companies change their travel schedules to ensure that conductors could drive cars more slowly and safely without fear of being off schedule or losing their jobs. In essence, Brooklyn's streetcar employees were attempting to make their jobs more professional to improve both their economic and social status, an impulse that won them widespread support not just from labor allies but also from a new professional managerial class that resided in the city's more suburban neighborhoods. This class of working professionals included clerks, doctors, lawyers, journalists, and members of other emerging careers, all of whom sought to solidify their place in American society by professionalizing their fields of work and pursuing government policies that would make their lives and the city's they lived in more efficient. The strikers' similar desire for upward mobility and increased safety and efficiency struck a chord with these new professionals, so much so that the strike became the basis for a larger discourse of progressive politics in Brooklyn. Even though the strike failed to immediately win streetcar employees new contracts, the progressive support it garnered eventually led to reform legislation that met many of the strikers' original demands.

This thesis aims to explore the roles that Brooklyn's landscape and the experience of social mobility played in the 1895 Brooklyn Trolley Strike. More specifically, it aims to examine the ways in which these factors contributed to the formation of a broad, cross-class coalition during the strike's rise, and the subsequent splintering of that coalition during the strike's fall.

The strike's events will be presented in a largely chronological order, with supplementary information and key questions being addressed as the narrative progresses. In so doing, this thesis aims to unravel and explain some of the seemingly contradictory outcomes, both large and small, that make the Brooklyn strike interesting. Despite the economic, social, and political turmoil of America in the 1890s, Brooklyn's streetcar employees were able to amass a widespread base of support from different groups and classes of society thanks to shared experiences of urban space and social mobility. Despite this initial success, the arrival of the National Guard drove a wedge between the strikers and their progressive supporters, resulting in the strike's failure. However, despite the short term failure of the strike, the conflict inspired progressive state legislators to pursue policy that would ultimately meet many of the streetcar employees' original demands and hopes for upward mobility. Support for the Brooklyn Trolley Strike was both geographically and socially expansive yet it ultimately failed and two innocent people died, a duality that makes the conflict a potent example of the uneven transition between the American Gilded Age and Progressive Era.

Chapter 1: The Strike's Rise

A. The Strikers and the Companies

When employees belonging to Brooklyn's four most prominent street railway companies — the Brooklyn City and Brooklyn Heights Railroad, the Atlantic Avenue Railroad Company, the Brooklyn City and Newtown Railroad Company, and the Brooklyn, Queens County, and Suburban Lines¹² — failed to report to work on Monday January 14, 1895, the city's transportation infrastructure was immediately crippled. The strike, however, was not entirely a surprise to those familiar with the matter. Tensions between the four companies and their employees — who were collectively represented by District Assembly No. 75 of the Knights of Labor — had been high since December of 1894, when annual negotiations between the two parties failed to yield contracts for the coming year. A strike had appeared imminent since, with the Knights of Labor submitting the question of a strike to its members on January 9th.¹³

Yet in spite of this anticipation, the strike began after a seemingly sudden incident. On the night of Sunday January 13th, 1895, the night-shift employees of the Brooklyn City and Brooklyn Heights Railroad reported to work at the company's depots to prepare for the next day's travels.¹⁴ Although a strike had not yet been called, the company's president, Daniel F. Lewis, perceived the night-time employees' proximity to the fleet as a threat. In a later interview, Lewis explained that he "felt it was desirable to lay them off that night until [he] knew further what action the men were going to take"¹⁵ The incident proved to be a tipping point, and by the following morning 98% of the city's union-represented streetcar employees voted in favor of a strike. Approximately 5,500 employees — including electricians, conductors, linemen,

¹² Note that the Brooklyn, Queens County, and Suburban Lines are sometimes referred to as the Broadway Line.

¹³ *Report of the Special Committee*, 22, 17.

¹⁴ The terms depot, stable, and powerhouse are used interchangeably.

¹⁵ *Report of the Special Committee*, 21.

track-wirers, and car-cleaners — refused to report to work on Monday morning, marking the beginning of the largest streetcar strike in Brooklyn’s history.¹⁶

It was, however, not the first streetcar strike in Brooklyn. In 1889, a smaller strike occurred when employees of the Atlantic Railroad refused to report to work. The 1889 strike can, ironically, be traced back to a pro-labor law passed by the New York State Legislature in 1888 that reduced the maximum number of hours an employee could work without receiving premium pay from twelve to ten. In response to this so-called ‘ten-hour rule’, the Atlantic Avenue Railroad Company reduced employees’ basic daily wages from \$2 to \$1.70, reasoning that a less demanding schedule deserved less pay. The ensuing work stoppage represented the employees’ knee-jerk reaction to the change, taking the form of a wildcat strike rather than an organized strike mandated by Knights of Labor leadership. The strikers’ forces were rather disorganized, with many employees continuing to report to work and tending to the company’s property (which at that time included live horses). The Atlantic Railroad made no concessions to the strikers and gradually recruited replacement workers until they were able to operate their cars near original capacity. The strategy worked, and the strike ended without addressing any of the strikers’ demands.¹⁷

At the onset of the 1895 strike, *The Brooklyn Eagle* reasserted that the 1889 strikers “were defeated at every turn,”¹⁸ adding that the new strikers, many of whom “suffered from a similar abuse some years ago,”¹⁹ should be wary of repeating their mistakes. It was an apt warning, given that the strategies used by the four companies in the early days of the 1895 strike were reminiscent of those used by the Atlantic Railroad a half-decade earlier. In an open letter

¹⁶ *Report of the Special Committee*, 15, 16, 14.

¹⁷ For writing on the 1889 strike, see chapter six of Brian J. Cudahy, *How We Got to Coney Island: The Development of Mass Transportation in Brooklyn and Kings County* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002).

¹⁸ “The Situation Up to Noon,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 15, 1895, 1.

¹⁹ “The Side of the Strikers,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 14, 1895, 1.

published in *The Eagle*, President Lewis announced the company's intention to advertise jobs and hire scabs in Brooklyn and other cities, including New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Chicago.²⁰ Lewis was confident that enough scabs could be hired to operate the company's cars, so much so that he pledged to immediately discharge any employees that "failed to report for orders."²¹ President Benjamin Norton of the Atlantic Railroad issued a similar statement, announcing his intention to hire scabs with the goal of running all of the company's cars by Wednesday.²² On Monday morning, the Brooklyn Heights Railroad was able to run 17 cars with a limited workforce of non-striking employees, including a single mailcar on the Flatbush Avenue line and 16 normal cars on Court Street line in Brooklyn's busy and easily-policeable downtown. The Atlantic Railroad only ran a single car on their 3rd Avenue line. The other two companies opted to run no cars until more scabs were available.²³

Yet while the company's initial strategies harkened back to the 1889 strike, the strikers' demands were different in ways that lent this new dispute a distinctive character and wider appeal. Like Presidents Lewis and Norton, the Knights of Labor's local leaders published a statement in the January 14th edition of *The Eagle*.²⁴ In it, they outlined three major demands that had prevented them from signing new contracts. The first demand was for a simple increase in wages from \$2.00 to \$2.25. The other two demands, however, were more nuanced and intertwined. Although the ten-hour law of 1888 set the length of a workday, the number of roundtrips required by streetcar conductors was still subject to the companies' whims. As streetcar technology improved, Brooklyn's companies introduced schedules that required conductors to make more trips within a single day. As the union leaders explained, these

²⁰ *Report of the Special Committee*, 13.

²¹ "For the Public's Benefit," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 14, 1895, 1.

²² "The Story of the Strike," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 20, 1895, 4.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ "The Side of the Strikers," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 14, 1895, 1.

schedules made work more demanding and dangerous: “Since the introduction of electricity as a motive power trips have been added to the days’ work on nearly all the roads without any additional pay. The strain, mentally and physically, on the men has been increased doubly, and the companies refuse absolutely to shorten the hours or increase the pay.”²⁵ As a result, the strikers demanded that a new agreement should be reached concerning how many trips constituted a full day's work.

Decreasing the number of trips was only half of a solution though. In addition to full-time employees who operated “regular cars” ten hours a day, the companies employed part-time employees to operate so-called “tripper cars” during peak hours.²⁶ Conductors who operated trippers were only paid \$1.50 for a day’s work compared to the \$2.00 earned by those who operated regular cars, and throughout the 1890s Brooklyn’s streetcar companies gradually ran more tripper cars during the day to avoid paying the higher wages. So in addition to decreasing the number of trips required by regular cars, the strikers demanded that the new schedules would establish a fixed ratio between the number of regular cars and tripper cars that the companies were allowed to run in a single day.²⁷

The importance of scheduling issues reflected not only the specific contract concerns of Brooklyn’s streetcar employees, but also larger changes to the streetcar industry during the 1890s. Streetcars were present in American cities since the 1850s, but were subject to ineffective and unreliable energy sources at that time. Horses were the most common motive power used by early streetcars, but the animals were slow, polluting, and severely overworked.²⁸ Underground cables were the most readily available alternative, but required a much greater capital investment

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ *Report of the Special Committee*, 28.

²⁷ The demanded ratio was three-quarter full day cars to one-quarter trippers. *Report of the Special Committee*, 32.

²⁸ In the 1880s, an estimated 15,000 horses died each year on the streets of New York alone. Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 106.

and were still inefficient, difficult to run, and prone to stoppages when underground components malfunctioned.²⁹ Although the cable car found success in some cities (most notably San Francisco), horses remained the norm until 1884 when electric streetcar technology was streamlined and popularized. Electric streetcars were faster, more reliable, and more efficient than horses, but brought along with them new safety issues. Electric streetcars travel at an average rate of 10 to 15 miles per hour, approximately four times faster than the horse-drawn streetcars.³⁰ In some cases, electric streetcars reach top speeds of as much as 20 miles per hour. Higher speeds raised concerns about safety though, and in some cities citizens resisted implementation of the technology for fear of the danger it might cause.³¹ Electric streetcars were clearly more efficient than their horse-drawn counterparts, but the jury was still out on whether or not they were safer.

This dichotomy between efficiency and safety lied at the heart of the strikers' demands in the Brooklyn Trolley Strike. As the Knights of Labor's local leaders explained,

The companies all have schedules posted at their depots which compel the motormen to run cars at a rate of speed averaging from fifteen to twenty miles an hour, in order to make the time as per schedule. Failure to make the schedule has been punished with suspension from work and sometimes discharge. Nearly one hundred fatal accidents have occurred in this city since the advent of the trolley, while hundreds have been maimed for life. These fatalities and maimings have been due almost entirely to the selfishness of the companies.³²

While many 19th-century labor disputes were primarily focused on employees' working conditions and safety within the workplace, the Brooklyn strikers were equally interested in the ways that their labor impacted the safety and wellbeing of other citizens who used the city's public spaces. To achieve these two goals, the strikers positioned themselves as a group of

²⁹ 1 mile of cable cost approximately \$100,000. Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid, 109.

³¹ Kenneth Jackson cites Montgomery, Alabama as an example of initial resistance to electric streetcars. Ibid, 108.

³² "The Side of the Strikers," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 14, 1895, 1.

working professionals rather than an expendable workforce. Union leaders described the strikers as “being practical men in the business world,”³³ and used their contract demands to demonstrate how the employees’ practical knowledge of streetcar technology exceeded that of the companies. Additionally, the strikers explained that scabs would be unqualified and unable to perform the work of the more experienced striking employees. “We think it an outrage that men who are inexperienced should be allowed to run these cars,” explained one striker; “No, there is no chance of our going back now at the old schedule.”³⁴ By using rhetoric that highlighted their expertise and professionalism, the strikers worked to improve their standing economically (by securing higher wages) and socially (by improving streetcar safety). Essentially, the strikers’ demands demonstrated the desire — and seemingly the possibility — for upward mobility among Brooklyn’s streetcar employees.

Yet while the strikers set their sights on upward mobility, the companies they worked for exhibited symptoms of decline that were made even more threatening by a work stoppage. Although the streetcar business had been booming since the introduction of electricity, creating and maintaining a successful streetcar line remained a risky financial venture. While European streetcars were almost universally controlled by governments, American streetcar companies had to seek out the rights to operate an electric railway line along particular city streets. Municipal charters could net streetcar companies wealthy franchises potentially worth tens of millions of dollars, but were commonly granted on the basis of bribery and financial favoritism.³⁵

Consequently, streetcar companies frequently sought to buy out or consolidate with competitors

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ “Cars on Fifth Avenue,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 16, 1895, 1.

³⁵ For example, see S. Wright Kennedy’s account of Atlanta’s streetcars. S. Wright Kennedy, “Corruption and Development of Atlanta Streetcar Lines in the Nineteenth Century: A Historical GIS Perspective,” in *Historical Geography, GIScience and Textual Analysis: Landscapes of Time and Place*, ed. Charles Travis, Francis Ludlow, and Ferenc Gyuris, Historical Geography and Geosciences (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 113–31, accessed February 7, 2021, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-37569-0_7.

in order to gain the rights to construct more lines, resulting in large streetcar syndicates that were burdened with heavy debt from various acquisitions and mergers.³⁶ Such was the case with the Brooklyn City and Brooklyn Heights Railroad, the largest streetcar company in Brooklyn at the time of the strike. Daniel F. Lewis, originally the president of the Brooklyn City Railroad, acquired a lease for all of Brooklyn Heights' lines in February 1893 with the goal of increasing his share of Brooklyn's streetcar market. He then placed both railroads under the control of a third entity, the Long Island Traction Company, a regional railroad syndicate of which Lewis was also a majority shareholder. Although Long Island Traction controlled two railroads in Brooklyn, the company itself was incorporated in Virginia, with its formal headquarters in Richmond.³⁷ Despite its far off location, shareholders expected that Long Island Traction would net them greater annual dividends for their investments in the Brooklyn City Railroad, the Brooklyn Heights Railroad, and the syndication itself. In order to meet these demands, Long Island Traction sold so-called watered stocks that artificially inflated the cost of their shares.

The Panic of 1893 and the economic depression that followed it immediately posed a threat to the continued existence of syndicates like Long Island Traction. This came in addition to rising costs streetcar companies faced to establish and maintain new electric lines. As President Lewis explained to *The Eagle* at the onset of the 1895 strike, "the cost of equipping the railroads with the electric system has to be met with interest and money invested, and that, therefore, the companies cannot afford, at the present time, to increase their burdens."³⁸ While this comment might simply reflect a stubbornness to meet the strikers' demands, knowledge of the traction company's flimsy finances indicates that Lewis was at least partially correct. As *The*

³⁶ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 109.

³⁷ Cudahy, *How We Got to Coney Island*, 19.

³⁸ "The Tie Up," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 14, 1895, 1.

Eagle's opinion staff postulated, "to reduce the trips would shorten their [the companies'] revenue by about the same amount that an increase of wages would add to their expenses."³⁹

In the wake of the 1893 Panic, the strikers' demands posed a genuine threat to Brooklyn's streetcar companies. In this way, the Brooklyn Trolley Strike fits in line with recent historiography about the transition from the Gilded Age to the Progressive Era, a period historian James Livingston refers to as the "great stalemate."⁴⁰ Unlike older historians who viewed the late 19th century as the age of big-businesses' unrivaled power,⁴¹ Livingston highlights numerous factors affecting society's moneyed classes near the end of the century, including a depleted gold reserve, a deflationary economy, rising real wages,⁴² and a decrease in industrial productivity and profits at a time of rising costs for fixed capital. Wealthy industrialists and financiers were experiencing a crisis, struggling to find ways to reinstate their economic and social hegemony while labor forces and other challengers (most notably Populist farmers in the West) were growing larger and more notorious. At the onset of the strike, Brooklyn's Streetcar companies found themselves embroiled in such a stalemate. Already weakened by the 1893 panic, the companies saw the strike as an economic challenge that threatened their continued existence. Additionally, the strikers' attempts to portray themselves as a professional workforce with technological expertise posed an additional social challenge. With no immediate answer to their economic problems, the companies' strategies in the early days of the strike instead focused on combating this cultural threat.

³⁹ "As to the Strike on the Trolley Lines," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 14, 1895, 6.

⁴⁰ James Livingston, *Origins of the Federal Reserve System: Money, Class, and Corporate Capitalism, 1890-1913* / (Ithaca, N.Y.: 1986), 33.

⁴¹ For example, see Matthew Josephson, *The Robber Barons: The Great American Capitalists, 1861-1901*. (New York, 1962).

⁴² Although many strikes failed in the 1880s and 90s, the ubiquity of labor disputes netted long-term victories for workers, including less hours and better real wages. See James Livingston, "The Myth of a 'Second Gilded Age,'" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 31, 2016, accessed March 3, 2021, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-myth-of-a-second-gilded-age/>.

While the strikers attempted to paint themselves as professionals critical to the safety and efficiency of streetcars, the companies worked to leverage cultural knowledge surrounding the labor movement's most public defeats to portray the strikers as violent actors. Most notably, the companies invoked the 1894 Pullman Strike — a massive railroad strike near Chicago during which President Cleveland deployed the military to combat strikers who interfered with the mail — in order to scare the Brooklyn strikers and their sympathizers. Although very few mailcars were run during the first days of the Brooklyn strike, the companies ran “ordinary cars with boards upon it, bearing the words U.S. Mail.”⁴³ In addition to scaring strikers,⁴⁴ this tactic was used to gauge whether federal troops could be brought in to intervene, with *The Eagle* reporting that President Norton wrote to Washington asking “if all cars carrying mail are [...] equally under the protection of the United States.”⁴⁵ The strategy failed in both regards, with the strikers quickly realizing that “they [the companies] were playing a trick”⁴⁶ and a spokesperson from Fort Hamilton in southern Brooklyn denying reports that troops were being sent to “quell any riots which might take place around the mailcars.”⁴⁷

Mailcar shenanigans may have been the most sensational of the companies' strategies, but their general goal of portraying the strikers as a threat to law and order continued. In multiple statements, President Norton expressed his intention to “take advantage of those sections of the penal code which relate to the operation of our cars and care of our property,”⁴⁸ even offering a \$200 reward to Brooklynites who detected or reported anyone interfering with the company's

⁴³ “May Be Trouble To-Morrow,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 15, 1895, 2.

⁴⁴ Discussion about the mailcars often invoked the fate of Eugene V. Debs, a leader of the Pullman Strike and future leader of the socialist party, who was serving a highly publicized prison sentence. “Planned a Rebellion,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 15, 1895, 7.

⁴⁵ “May Be Trouble To-Morrow,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 15, 1895, 2..

⁴⁶ “The Situation Very Grave,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 15, 1895, 1.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ “May Be Trouble To-Morrow,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 15, 1895, 2.

property or non-striking employees.⁴⁹ Along the other companies' lines there were additional reports that Pinkerton Detectives were "at work among the strikers,"⁵⁰ invoking memories of the Homestead Strike of 1892, another notorious labor defeat in which Pinkerton agents engaged in a violent gunfight with striking iron and steel workers. These tactics all came in addition to the companies' pre-existing strategy of hiring scabs and gradually running lines (with protection from the Brooklyn police force) until they were able to break the strike. In summation, the company's early strategies worked to portray the strikers as a threat to law and order and as an expendable workforce that could be easily replaced.

As for the strikers, their early strategies represented a mixture of classic strike techniques and tactics that specifically made use of their technical knowledge. In front of the companies' depots, workers established picket lines to dissuade non-striking employees from reporting to work. Union leadership worked to diminish the public's fear about these picket lines, issuing statements urging their men to remain peaceful and announcing that they had no intention to disrupt the mail's "speedy transmission."⁵¹ Beyond the picket lines, the strikers utilized additional strategies that leveraged the employees' understanding of streetcar technology. Along several streets, the strikers overturned wagons and placed other obstructions (sometimes referred to as barricades by the local press⁵²) that prevented operational streetcars from continuing along a certain route. In other instances, strikers placed ash barrels along lines, filling the street with white smoke that obscured a conductor's vision and forced them to travel slowly.⁵³ Most commonly though, the strikers targeted streetcar infrastructure itself, cutting overhead wires to render entire lines non-operational.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ "President Norton's Opinion," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 17, 1895, 1.

⁵⁰ "On Fifth Avenue," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 17, 1895, 1.

⁵¹ "Mail Cars Moving Promptly," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 15, 1895, 2.

⁵² "The First News of Violence," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 14, 1895, 1.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

Yet as was clear with the strikers' concerns about schedules, their goals were not solely centered around labor in the workplace, but were also about their role and function within the city. As the strikers drew larger crowds near depots and along the various lines that ran through Brooklyn's streets, they began to attract support from labor allies and various other communities who relied on streetcar service. The strikers' unique ability to mobilize throughout the expansive city and gain widespread support from the many different groups living within it proved to be their greatest success.

B. Brooklyn and Her People

Although it would not combine with Manhattan as part of Greater New York until 1898, Brooklyn was already a geographically large and diverse city in its own right by 1895.⁵⁵ Like other major northeastern cities, Brooklyn's downtown bore the marks of a European-style walking city that were commonplace in the early American Republic,⁵⁶ with crowded streets that facilitated a mixture of commerce, artisanal production, and residential living.⁵⁷ Throughout the latter half of the 19th century though, Brooklyn grew dramatically thanks to a series of annexations that brought smaller neighboring towns — such as Bushwick and Williamsburg — into the city proper. The annexations of these largely rural areas coincided with the development of Brooklyn's streetcars, facilitating a boom in real estate development. In this way, Brooklyn's growth was similar to that of other streetcar suburbs that developed throughout the U.S. during

⁵⁵ U.S. Census data for Brooklyn is available from both 1890 and 1900. Throughout this thesis, the 1890 data will be cited, with the understanding that the city's population grew throughout the decade. Brooklyn had a population of 838,547 in 1890, making it the country's fourth largest city. U.S. Census Bureau, *Total Population, 1890*, prepared by Social Explorer, accessed February 3, 2021, <https://www.socialexplorer.com/a9676d974c/explore>.

⁵⁶ In Brooklyn, this downtown area was paradoxically located on the city's northern tip, directly across the East River from downtown Manhattan.

⁵⁷ See chapter 2 of Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*.

the late-19th century.⁵⁸ However, Brooklyn was unique because it functioned both as a city in its own right as well as a suburb to the even larger Manhattan across the river.

Streetcar infrastructure was therefore doubly important to Brooklyn's wellbeing, as it facilitated commercial activity in the city's own downtown districts and brought suburban commuters to jobs in Manhattan (see Figure 1).⁵⁹ The streetcar system was particularly large and critical to the city's functions, two points that made a streetcar strike especially potent. As *The Eagle* noted, it was "impossible to guard every block of [the] 135 miles of streets that are occupied by tied up railroad,"⁶⁰ meaning that the work stoppage was capable of affecting the many different areas of Brooklyn that relied on streetcar service. The strike affected commercial activity in the downtown area at one end of the streetcar lines, businesses along the arteries of streetcar lines, and commuters who typically lived near the ends of lines. Therefore, the strikers' rise and ability to gain widespread support can effectively be studied by following the physical geography of Brooklyn's streetcar system, starting with the downtown commercial district, continuing along major transportation arteries, and then concluding with suburban neighborhoods.

Brooklyn's downtown was the most centralized and easily policeable part of the city, yet businesses in this area were immediately affected by the strike. Some of the first Brooklynites to suffer economically were the dry goods merchants on Fulton Street, who used Monday as their principal bargain day. When the streetcar strike began on Monday, January 14th, *The Eagle* reported that the "crowds in these stores were diminished to mere handfuls,"⁶¹ resulting in a

⁵⁸ See chapter 5 of Stuart M. Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁵⁹ Most lines terminated near the entrances to ferry terminals that continued commuters' journeys to Manhattan. A cable car was also in operation on the Brooklyn Bridge in 1895, but was owned by an independent company that did not strike.

⁶⁰ "Before All Things, Order!," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 21, 1895, 6.

⁶¹ "The Tie Up," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 14, 1895, 1.

noticeable impact on sales. The city's downtown was not the only area to suffer economically though, as a great number of merchants along major transportation arteries voiced similar concerns. During the first week of the strike, Mayor Charles A. Schieren was visited by two separate delegations, one consisting of businessmen from Fifth Avenue and the other consisting of businessmen from Third Avenue.⁶² Representing two of the city's longest thoroughfares, these delegations voiced similar sentiments about decreased sales due to limited traffic. As one Third Avenue businessman lamented, "[we have] lost all of the trade from Bay Ridge, Bensonhurst, and West Brooklyn, as well as other parts of the city."⁶³ Brooklyn, although large, was usually able to sustain its commercial activity through a streetcar system that connected its widespread neighborhoods. The streetcar strike severed this interconnectivity, resulting in tangible economic effects.

Interestingly, the affected businessmen were generally supportive of the strikers' cause. Multiple of the affected dry goods merchants began collecting subscriptions to support the strikers financially, and in their meeting with Mayor Schieren, the businessmen of Fifth Avenue openly expressed their intention "to contribute money and aid to the strikers."⁶⁴ The most publicized display of business support came from Peter H. McNulty of the firm Weschler & McNulty, a dry goods market on the corner of Bedford Avenue and Fulton Street. McNulty stated that he had invested \$150,000 into his dry goods business with the "assurance and understanding that the electric cars on Fulton street, on Nostrand Avenue, Franklin Avenue and Putnam Avenue, which are in the immediate neighborhood, should continue to be operated."⁶⁵ When the strike interfered with McNulty's business, he applied to court for a writ of *mandamus* that would

⁶² "Mayor Schieren's Views," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 18, 1895, 1.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ "Mayor Schieren's Views," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 18, 1895, 1.

⁶⁵ "The Situation is Becoming Alarming," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 15, 1895, 1.

compel the Brooklyn City and Brooklyn Heights Railroad to run their streetcars, claiming that the company was refusing to do so “simply and solely because it will not pay a fair market rate to its motormen.”⁶⁶ Streetcars were critical to the commerce and real estate of Brooklyn, so much so that McNulty believed their continued operation — and the work of streetcar employees for that matter — was essential and should be required by law.

The sentiments of McNulty and other business owners took on a decidedly pro-labor character that extended beyond economic self-interest, raising the question of why they were supportive of the strikers. Their support was likely due in part to preexisting skepticism towards the city’s streetcar companies, as many Brooklynites were quick to point to the “foreign” traction company and its “watered stocks” as causes of the strike.⁶⁷ However the full answer, as was the case with many things in Brooklyn, is both geographic and social. In addition to servicing communities and businesses along transportation arteries, Brooklyn’s streetcar employees were themselves members of those communities. Take for example the neighborhood of Gowanus which was home to “the car stables of one of the largest companies in the city” and to “the men who struck and their sisters, cousins, aunts, and sympathizers.”⁶⁸ In a particularly vivid article, *The Eagle* reported on the air of support that was pervasive in Mulgrew’s saloon, a Gowanus establishment where “a number of the strikers and their earnest sympathizers, the members of ‘de gang,’ sought the warmth and social atmosphere.”⁶⁹ “If I was Mayor Schieren,” proclaimed one patron, “I’d give an order that every stockholder in the trolley roads of Brooklyn, musht put on a uniform an’ a cap, an’ on a night like to-night let him play mothorman from Greenwood to the ferry an back.”⁷⁰ In spaces such as Mulgrew’s, the strikers’ cause fit neatly within a wider

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ “Business Affected,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 22, 1895, 2.

⁶⁸ “The Gowanusians,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 20, 1895, 19.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid. This quote has been copied verbatim from the original text, including the problematic, ethnically-charged typos. This element of bias will be addressed in section 2B of this thesis.

discontent for society's moneyed classes held by Brooklyn's working-class community. In neighborhoods like Gowanus, Greenwood, East New York, Flatbush, and Bay Ridge, large crowds of sympathizers joined the strikers at their picket lines, further restricting the company's access to their depots and nearby streets. As *The Eagle* described, "there [was] a rough element in lower Third avenue [approximately the neighborhoods of Gowanus, Greenwood, and Bay Ridge], and it was considered political not to antagonize the angry people living there."⁷¹

The fervor of support the strikers received in these areas was not only the result of working-class solidarity, but also immigrant solidarity. By 1895, Brooklyn was home to large Irish and German populations, including employees of the streetcar companies and sympathizers of the strike.⁷² While many members of Brooklyn's Irish and German communities held union jobs, others owned businesses with their own staff of employees, affording them something closer to middle-class status.⁷³ This immigrant middle class included some of the business owners who visited Mayor Schieren (who was himself born in Germany),⁷⁴ the owners of larger markets such as McNulty's (himself the son of Irish immigrants),⁷⁵ and the owners of other miscellaneous saloons and restaurants. Throughout the city, local businesses became hotbeds of support, offering shelter and food to the strikers and their sympathizers as the strike grew tiresome for the city's police force. In Flatbush, for example, police officers "were unable to get anything to eat" because "restaurant keepers, butchers, and grocers refused to sell [to] them".⁷⁶ Local businesses also organized fundraisers and meetings in support of the strikers, including an

⁷¹ "The Situation Very Grave," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 15, 1895, 1.

⁷² Approximately 32.54% of Brooklyn's population was foreign born in 1890. U.S. Census Bureau, *Nativity, 1890*, prepared by Social Explorer, accessed February 3, 2021, <https://www.socialexplorer.com/a9676d974c/explore>.

⁷³ In this case, the businessowners aligned with the traditional, artisanal conception of the middle class that was pervasive during the early republic rather than the new professional managerial middle class that was emerging in the late 1800s. For writing on the artisan middle class, see chapter 1 of Bruce Laurie, *Artisans into Workers* (Toronto: Collins Publishers, 1989).

⁷⁴ "Ex-Mayor Schieren and His Wife Dying," *The New York Times*, March 9, 1915, 4.

⁷⁵ "Death List of the Day," *The New York Times*, September 6, 1902, 9.

⁷⁶ "Flatbush Line Opened," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 15, 1895, 2.

event at Ballinger's Hall that was "open to all the residents of the town,"⁷⁷ a fitting invitation given how widespread the strikers' support was in many neighborhoods.

In addition to the sympathy they received from the interconnected communities downtown and along transportation arteries, the strikers gained much support from commuters who lived in Brooklyn's suburban reaches. The strike had "practically cut off communications" from some of the city's outermost wards, and prevented many commuters who were "ready and willing to pay the fare" from reaching their places of work.⁷⁸ Yet rather than blaming these hardships on the strike, Brooklyn's commuters were also quite sympathetic to the streetcar employees. "The trolley car is one of the most convenient improvements," explained one commuter, "it would be a greater blessing to the people if the men in charge of these cars were not treated as perpetual machines."⁷⁹ Commuting Brooklynites, however, stood somewhat separate from the overlapping sentiments of labor and immigrant communities that fueled support in other parts of the city. Rather, these commuters were members of a new version of the American middle class that was emerging during the late 1800s who had different reasons for supporting the strike.

In the second half of the 19th century, a number of new professions and fields of work emerged that did not fit within a traditional dichotomy between artisanal, skilled labor and unskilled labor. This included clerks, accountants, advertising agents, corporate middle managers, and others with strong professional aspirations in fields such as medicine, law, economics, social work, journalism, and architecture. Although their work encapsulated a wide range of subjects, historians have collectively referred to this group as a professional managerial

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ "The Situation Very Grave," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 15, 1895, 1.

⁷⁹ "The Motorman's Friend," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 14, 1895, 5.

class (henceforth abbreviated as PMC⁸⁰) on account of their shared values and experiences. The PMC did not exist in any coherent form in the 1880s, yet by 1910 it comprised approximately one-tenth of the national workforce,⁸¹ placing the class's formative years during the tumultuous 1890s.⁸² On a surface level, the biggest through line connecting these disparate new professions was their payment model: yearly salaries as opposed to wages. Beyond that, the PMC were united by a desire to professionalize their fields and make their work more efficient, mainly through the establishment of professional organizations and formal entry requirements that made their careers more prestigious through exclusivity.

The Brooklyn strikers' scheduling demands demonstrated a concern for efficiency, safety, and professionalization, mirroring the goals of the PMC. On account of these demands alone, the PMC were already primed to support the strike. They supported it even more, however, because of just how critical streetcars were to their daily lives and place within society. Brooklyn's professionals lived in the city's more suburban areas, and relied on streetcars to commute to jobs downtown and across the river in Manhattan. They also relied on streetcars for leisure and consumption, as Brooklyn's transportation system connected suburbs to parks, theaters, and other attractions throughout the city (including the growing amusement parks at Coney Island).⁸³ Therefore, a streetcar strike posed a threat, economically and socially, to the livelihood and identity of the PMC. This was especially true in the post-1893 world, when many groups of Americans — including new professionals — feared a life of downward mobility. As a letter to

⁸⁰ This abbreviation is borrowed from the writings of Richard Ohmann and Robert Weibe, both of whom have written extensively about class in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. See Richard Ohmann, *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Verso, 1996), and Robert Weibe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967).

⁸¹ Ohmann, *Selling Culture*, 118.

⁸² In 1890, 13.8% of Brooklyn's workforce were office workers, firm members, or clerks. U.S. Census Bureau, *Manufacturing Employees By Type of Work, 1890*, prepared by Social Explorer, accessed February 3, 2021, <https://www.socialexplorer.com/a9676d974c/explore>.

⁸³ Coney Island's development was intrinsically tied to Brooklyn's evolving streetcar infrastructure. See Cudahy, *How We Got to Coney Island*.

the editor of *The Eagle* bluntly explained, businesses were considering “discharging many of [their] clerks on account of the strike.”⁸⁴

The PMC had the same goals of efficiency and professionalization and the same understanding of social mobility as the strikers. As a result, they supported the strikers both because they agreed with the employees’ demands and because they needed their services. It is worth noting that alternative modes of transportation were available during the strike, including bicycles, makeshift ride shares, and walking.⁸⁵ However, these alternatives (especially walking) were not ideal due in large part to snowy and cold January weather, with one commentator stating that “[he wished] these fellows had waited till summer to make their strike.”⁸⁶ Brooklyn also had two elevated streetcar lines in 1895, the Brooklyn Elevated Railroad and the Union Elevated Railroads, but they covered a much smaller area and population than the four major street railway companies.⁸⁷ These limited alternatives did little to mitigate the strike’s impact, with *The Eagle* estimating that “at least a million people are seriously inconvenienced by the present stoppage of the cars.”⁸⁸ Alternative modes of transportation also did little to resolve overarching concerns about the safety and efficiency of streetcars. There were frequent reports that the scabs hired to replace strikers were inexperienced and ill-equipped to operate Brooklyn’s streetcars, resulting in “one or two very narrow escapes and more than one serious mishap.”⁸⁹ Yet even still, the companies’ were unable to hire enough workers to run their cars at full capacity, with *The Eagle* estimating that it would take them about 40 days to do so.⁹⁰

⁸⁴ “Business Affected,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 22, 1895, 2.

⁸⁵ “Flatbush Residents Rode,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 14, 1895, 7. “Guarding a Power House,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 14, 1895, 7. “The Benefits of Walking,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 14, 1895, 6.

⁸⁶ “No Attempt to Cut Wires,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 14, 1895, 1.

⁸⁷ “Many Assaults,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 19, 1895, 1.

⁸⁸ “Brooklyn Trolley Strike,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 17, 1895, 5.

⁸⁹ “Cars on Fifth Avenue,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 16, 1895, 1.

⁹⁰ “The End is Near,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 17, 1895, 1.

Like other supporters of the strike, Brooklyn's professionals perceived the strike as a threat to their economic and social livelihood. Unlike those groups though, the PMC felt that it was their duty, as proponents of efficiency and professionalism, to find and propose solutions to the problems of the strike. As one Brooklynite explained, "the public must find its own surety against accidents in aiding these men in their endeavor to acquire what is righteous to them and safe for us."⁹¹ The proposed solutions came in many different forms and from many different sources. Supporters organized fundraising events and meetings that were attended by a wide range of professionals, including doctors, lawyers, and others whose work was "paralyzed by the strike."⁹² In some cases, musicians and actors from Brooklyn's theater district (which was also hurt by the strike) supplied entertainment.⁹³ Preachers and other community leaders also used their positions to speak out on behalf of the employees, publishing statements and holding events to discuss the strike (for example, Rev. Dr. Cartwright of St. Barnabas' Church in Bushwick offered a lecture titled "Work and Wages: on Lessons from the Strike").⁹⁴

The discourse generated by Brooklyn's professionals, while almost universally critical of the streetcar companies, suggested various means of resolving the conflict. Rev. Robert J. Kent of Lewis Avenue congregational church called for peaceful negotiations between the companies and strikers by comparing their conflict to the biblical story of Abram and Lot.⁹⁵ Other Brooklynites, such as Abraham Abraham of the department store Abraham & Strauss suggested that "a board of arbitration [should be] appointed on all questions between men and their employees," and that "it's decision should be final."⁹⁶ Others believed that the government should take an even more active role in resolving the strike, suggesting that New York State

⁹¹ "The Motorman's Friend," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 14, 1895, 5.

⁹² "The Situation Up to Noon," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 15, 1895, 1.

⁹³ "At Strikers' Headquarters," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 23, 1895, 1.

⁹⁴ "Coming Events," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 20, 1895, 7.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ "Business Affected," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 22, 1895, 2.

should revoke its charters to Brooklyn's streetcar companies and instead license the streetcar employees as public or quasi-public employees. This idea was inspired by Mayor Hazen S. Pingree's solution to the Detroit Streetcar Strike of 1891, when he forfeited the franchises of multiple street railway companies and incorporated the employees' union as a means of preventing further strikes and the widespread discharges of employees.⁹⁷ Brooklyn's sympathizers called on Mayor Schieren to emulate these actions, comparing the streetcar business to other trades that already followed a model of municipal employment (such as gas and electric lighting).⁹⁸ "The state of New York regulates the fares, why does it not regulate the wages of the men," wrote one Brooklynite in a letter to the editor.⁹⁹ As some Brooklynites believed, however, the only lasting solution to the strike was the full municipal ownership of railroads. Government ownership was among the most radical solutions proposed — extending far beyond the initial demands of the streetcar employees — but generated a fair amount of support, so much so that a meeting was held in the 17th ward to solely discuss it.¹⁰⁰ One letter to the editor of *The Eagle* described the idea:

Complete relief will come when our railroads are controlled by the municipality. [...] This is a necessity of our complicated social life. We should not think of committing the transportation of our mails to private corporations. Our children will laugh at our folly in permitting the transportation of our persons to private corporations. The service will then be better rendered, the men will be better paid, and strike will become a thing of the past.¹⁰¹

While some of Brooklyn's professionals expressed a simple desire to grant streetcar employees a livable wage, comments like the above demonstrate how the PMC's thoughts on the strike extended far beyond the strikers' demands. Rather, the PMC was focused on making society

⁹⁷ "Mayor Pingree's Method," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 16, 1895, 7.

⁹⁸ "Government Ownership," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 17, 1895, 5. For writing on other municipally-employed trades, see chapter 6 of Christopher F. Jones, *Routes of Power: Energy and Modern America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014).

⁹⁹ "Have Labor Men in Legislature," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 13, 1895, 3.

¹⁰⁰ "Conference at The City Hall," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 23, 1895, 1.

¹⁰¹ "Sermons on the Strike," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 21, 1895, 3.

more efficient through government policy, an impulse that reflected the philosophy of progressivism emerging at the end of the 19th century. As historian Robert Wiebe defines it, “progressivism was the ambition of the new middle class to fulfill its destiny through bureaucratic means.”¹⁰² This explanation offers a better framework for understanding the many different solutions proposed for the Brooklyn Streetcar Strike and for distinguishing between the goals of the PMC and strikers. Take for example Franklin M. Horton, a Brooklyn retailer, who understood how disputes between capital and labor “made men Populists and the like throughout the county” but fervently believed that “the government should own every steam road in the country and the surface lines in the cities should be owned by the municipalities.”¹⁰³ Progressive-minded Brooklynites understood why the streetcar employees were striking and often agreed with their demands, yet that did not mean they fully supported the strike as the means to meet those demands. Rather, they were in favor of using government solutions to resolve the employees’ issues (multiple letters to the editor fully supported McNulty’s application for a writ of *mandamus*) while simultaneously hoping to make strikes “a thing of the past.” Or as one Brooklyn merchant explained it, “if the law is not sufficient then, through your representative at Albany, you must seek to have it put in the shape which will be more efficient — if its inefficiency has been disclosed in practice now.”¹⁰⁴

As the action of the Brooklyn Streetcar Strike travelled throughout the city’s landscape — from picket lines near depots, along avenues and streetcar lines, and finally to suburban homes — it gained the support of the various groups that lived, worked, and played in these areas. In the process, the strike became a means for Brooklyn’s diverse population to express their thoughts on how the city’s streetcar system and the strike’s resolution should be handled.

¹⁰² Wiebe, *The Search for Order*, 161.

¹⁰³ “Business Affected,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 22, 1895, 2.

¹⁰⁴ “Conference at The City Hall,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 23, 1895, 1.

Did this widespread support, with its varying strands, constitute a cross-class coalition? And if so, was it capable of sustaining itself?

C. Towards a Coalition?

Throughout the 1880s and 1890s, economic, political, and social turmoil led individuals from America's different classes into new, and sometimes tense, coalitions. Most famously, Farmers' Alliance members and other Populists joined forces with the Democratic party, culminating in William Jennings Bryan's fusion presidential ticket in 1896 (a campaign that ultimately failed).¹⁰⁵ The seeds of similarly expansive coalitions were also present in New York and Brooklyn, as can most notably be seen in the 1886 New York mayoral campaign of Henry George and the rise of the Central Labor Union (CLU). George, the author of the widely influential book *Progress of Poverty* and a major proponent of the single tax system, ran on a ticket that combined progressive ideology with a sweeping program of reform offered by the CLU. His ambitious strategy brought together a wide variety of actors — unionists, reformers, Irish land radicals, German socialists, artisans, and other craft workers — to pose a genuine challenge to New York's status quo. As David Scobey explains in his seminal article on the George campaign, "only an organization which exploited the local economic and cultural interconnections within New York's working-class community could create a class-wide agency capable of contesting the authority of 'the moneyed ruling classes' at every point of contact."¹⁰⁶ Although George eventually lost the election, the CLU managed to gain widespread support in New York, Jersey City, and Brooklyn during its short lifetime,¹⁰⁷ demonstrating that a mix between labor insurgency and mainstream political participation was possible in these locations.

¹⁰⁵ For writing on the Populist Movement, see Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F. D. R.*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 1955), and Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

¹⁰⁶ David Scobey, "Boycotting the Politics Factory: Labor Radicalism and the New York City Mayoral Election of 1884," *Radical History Review*, May 1, 1984, 292.

¹⁰⁷ At its height, the CLU encompassed 12 unions in New York, Brooklyn, and Jersey City. *Ibid.* 286.

Like George's Mayoral Campaign, the Brooklyn Trolley Strike succeeded in gaining a widespread base of support by appealing to the various groups who lived throughout the city's landscape. The comparison is particularly apt, however, because George experienced the 1886 New York Streetcar Strike (which *The Eagle* described as the only other streetcar tie-up to approach the "magnitude" of the Brooklyn Strike¹⁰⁸) in the midst of his campaign.¹⁰⁹ The New York strike was a potent manifestation of George's call for labor-reform solidarity, for as Scobey argued, "the community *was* the capitalist workplace: streetcar corporations, backed by the police, had turned apparently public space into private property."¹¹⁰ Other labor historians, such as Herbert Gutman, have written extensively about how labor insurgency in smaller cities benefitted from more personal relationships between working-class communities and middle-class merchants and consumers.¹¹¹ Scobey's work demonstrates how a significantly impactful event — a Mayoral campaign, aided by a streetcar strike — could inspire similarly strong cross-class bonds in a much larger city.

So was the 1895 Brooklyn Streetcar Strike significant enough to inspire a cross-class coalition as strong as the one sparked by George? In a word, yes, but there were certain key differences between the two events that altered the way relationships between actors formed. The Brooklyn strike lacked an ideological leader like George and a comprehensive reform program like that of the CLU, yet was occurring at a time when hegemonic Gilded Age institutions — Wall Street and the Tammany Hall political machine — were weakened. As traditional economic

¹⁰⁸ "The Tie Up," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 14, 1895, 1.

¹⁰⁹ For a fictionalized account of the 1886 New York Streetcar Strike, see William Dean Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (Project Gutenberg: 1889), accessed January 13, 2021, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4600/4600-h/4600-h.htm>.

¹¹⁰ Scobey, "Boycotting the Politics Factory," 294.

¹¹¹ Gutman wrote case studies on smaller cities such as Paterson, New Jersey and Sedalia, Missouri, where workers fought against a largely absent industrial elite and enjoyed tighter commercial and personal relationships with the cities' middle-class consumers. See Herbert Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815-1919* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1966).

and political powers reeled from the 1893 panic, the door was left open for new political, social, and economic alliances more so than it had been a decade prior. This facilitated the rise of labor insurgency and populism, the growth of a new professional managerial class with progressive impulses, and — in the case of the Brooklyn Streetcar Strike — a coalition that combined members from these two groups. So although Brooklyn was large,¹¹² the conditions of post-1893 America highlighted the overlapping experiences and values of its disparate classes enough that a streetcar strike could facilitate the formation of tight-knit cross class alliance.

In addition to straightforward labor insurgency and progressive solutions, Brooklynites offered critiques of the strike that straddled the line between these two ends, highlighting the flimsiness of class distinctions in the city. Some of these critiques harkened back to the philosophy of Henry George, with one writer to *The Eagle* urging Brooklyn to “adopt the single tax” so “there would be no such thing as an involuntary idle man.”¹¹³ Others distanced themselves from the George school, with one critic explaining that he was writing “not as a social reformer of the Count Tolstoy or the Henry George school, much less a political economist, with vague and visionary ideas about tariff revision and financial legislation [...] but rather as a philosophical student of human nature and natural history.”¹¹⁴ Some critics strayed even further from genteel reform by suggesting the usage of European labor strategies, such as the boycott (an Irish technique).¹¹⁵ Others flirted with the idea that the U.S. “must change [it’s] form of government” entirely to resolve “continued violence or continued indifference to the

¹¹² In 1890, Brooklyn was 69.3 square miles while New York was only 38.49 square miles. U.S. Census Bureau, *Total Area in Square Miles, 1890*, prepared by Social Explorer, accessed February 3, 2021, <https://www.socialexplorer.com/a9676d974c/explore>.

¹¹³ “The Folly of Striking,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 17, 1895, 5.

¹¹⁴ “Sermons on the Strike,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 21, 1895, 3.

¹¹⁵ “Thinks it Contemptible,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 23, 1895, 3. For writing on Irish labor techniques in America, see “Class, Ethnicity, and Radicalism in the Gilded Age: The Land League and Irish America” in Eric Foner, *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

appeals of the distressed,”¹¹⁶ taking cues from European models of socialism. “Someone may suggest that this [municipal ownership of railroads] leads to socialism,” wrote one Brooklynite, “but, if so, what is the granting of the franchise but a distinctive socialistic act? [...] If society puts labor into the control of a corporate person, may it not regulate that person’s control?”¹¹⁷

While reform-minded Brooklynites were exhibiting their willingness to adopt some terminology and thinking from labor and immigrant communities, working class and immigrant Brooklynites were inversely sharing ideas that resembled progressive policy solutions. For example, Police Commissioner Leonard R. Welles openly expressed interest in the idea of licensing streetcar employees. In fact, the entire police force and many other municipal employees (such as electricians and firefighters) were quite sympathetic to the strikers.¹¹⁸ In one comical instance, two policemen guarding a car on Fifth Avenue noticed that the replacement conductor had made a wrong turn (likely because he did not know the city’s layout well enough) but did not inform the driver of his mistake. “My duty here is to preserve the peace and see that there is no damage to the property of the company.” said one of the officers; “It is not my duty to tell you how to run the car or tell where you are.”¹¹⁹ The employees also found strong proponents within the city’s government (which included some immigrants), some of whom supported progressive legislation as a means of ending the strike. Democratic and Republican officials both spoke out in support of the strikers, and the city’s Alderman discussed the possibility of proposing a bill that would license streetcar employees.¹²⁰ Even Mayor Schieren himself expressed support for the strikers and interest in passing an ordinance to license them, but was quick to note that he would only consider doing so after the strike was over.¹²¹

¹¹⁶ “The Spirit of Mercy,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 23, 1895, 3.

¹¹⁷ “Letter to the Editor,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 23, 1895, 3.

¹¹⁸ *Report of the Special Committee*, 65.

¹¹⁹ “On Fifth Avenue,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 17, 1895, 1.

¹²⁰ “Action by the Aldermen,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 21, 1895, 1.

¹²¹ “Mayor Schieren’s Views,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 18, 1895, 1.

Ideology and rhetoric aside, the strikers and their widespread base of sympathizers had gained nearly universal control of Brooklyn's landscape by the end of the strike's first week. Picket lines near depots blocked non-striking employees from reaching the workplace, crowds throughout the city's streets placed obstacles and cut wires that prevented cars from running, and angry commuters in the city's suburbs offered critiques and organized fundraisers that socially and financially supported the workers' cause. In so doing, the strikers subverted the streetcar company's two main strategies from earlier in the week. While the companies tried to demonize the strikers as threats to the mail and society as a whole, the strikers gained widespread support because of their overarching goals of professionalism, safety, and efficiency. While the companies attempted to portray striking employees as expendable, their failure to hire and train enough replacements was compounded by the strikers' successful ability to block non-striking and replacement employees from reporting to work. In fact, *The Eagle* reported that the strikers successfully convinced 247 scabs to abandon their posts, supposedly because many of them had not been informed that they were hired to take the strikers' place.¹²² On the whole, the employees and their sympathizers had an organizational capacity greater than that of the companies in the early days of the strike. By the end of the first week, only 10,000 of Brooklyn's 17,000 cops were still on duty, as many officers had called in sick due to the cold weather and their lack of food and sleep.¹²³ At that same time, Local 75's Executive board boasted about the amount of money they had collected in a common fund to support the striking employees.¹²⁴

For all intents and purposes, the employees were 'winning' the strike by the end of the first week and even managed to score some concrete victories. On Wednesday the 16th, the Atlantic Company failed to run all of its cars as promised, ripping the fangs out of one of the

¹²² "Many Assaults," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 19, 1895, 1.

¹²³ "The Situation Very Grave," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 15, 1895, 1.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

companies' biggest threats.¹²⁵ The Brooklyn City and Brooklyn Heights Railroad was able to run a similarly limited fleet of cars, while the Brooklyn City and Newtown Railroad Company, and the Brooklyn, Queens County, and Suburban Lines continued to run none at all. When asked, President Lewis blamed the situation on a lack of protection from the city's police.¹²⁶ The biggest sign of success came on Friday the 18th when President John N. Partridge of the Brooklyn City and Newtown Railroad met with his employees and reached an agreement that would see them return to work. Partridge offered no increase in pay or official changes to the employee contract, but assured his men that the tripper issue would be resolved and that new schedules would be created. The successful negotiations highlighted the primacy of the strikers' scheduling concerns once again, and offered a genuine spark of hope for employees belonging to the city's other three major street railway companies.¹²⁷

Yet even with this victory, the seeds of the strike's ultimate defeat were already in place. With the Brooklyn City and Newtown Railroad standing as an exception, no action was made by either the companies or the employees to meet and arbitrate during the strike's first week. Members from the New York State Board of Arbitration were sent to Brooklyn during this time to speak with both parties, but lacked the power to force a resolution. The board's members quietly left Brooklyn on Friday, January 18th, without the ability to take any more action.¹²⁸ Additionally, despite the sheer volume of progressive solutions suggested during the strike, no action was taken to adopt any of these measures during the conflict's early days. The Board of Alderman's bill to license streetcar employees came the closest to immediate fruition, but Mayor Schieren was resolute in his belief that such a measure should only be implemented once the

¹²⁵ The first car the Atlantic Railroad ran on Wednesday morning was guarded by onboard officers and mounted escorts, but was ironically one of the few cars the company had the capacity to run at that time. "Cars Running," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 16, 1895, 1.

¹²⁶ "An Exciting Day," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 18, 1895, 1.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

strike had concluded. However, there were even more deeply rooted problems that would begin tearing apart the streetcar employees' diverse base of support in the coming days. While the strike's first week saw the rise of a cross-class coalition facilitated by Brooklyn's interconnected landscape and shared experiences of social mobility, the strike's second week would test that coalition with the introduction of new factors that highlighted the differences between its various groups. The results were disastrous and deadly.

Chapter 2: The Strike's Fall

A. The National Guard Arrives

On the night of Friday, February 18th, Mayor Schieren and Commissioner Welles sent a messenger to Albany asking for the State National Guard to be mobilized and brought to Brooklyn.¹²⁹ The request was approved, and by the following morning the full Second Brigade of the New York State National Guard (approximately 3,000 men) arrived in the city. It was the first time that a full brigade had been mobilized since the National Uprising of 1877 and marked the first time since the Civil War that the military had been on active duty in Brooklyn. Mayor Schieren explained that the National Guard was called in to ““relieve the police force from the heavy strain under which it has been for more than a week.”¹³⁰ At the time, Schieren made no mention of any additional effort to peacefully resolve the strike. When he was later questioned by the New York State Assembly’s Investigation of the strike, Schieren simply explained that ““there was no use of negotiating the matter further.”¹³¹

Schieren’s thoughts on the strike and possible resolutions were seemingly contradictory. On the one hand, his comments about the strike’s “heavy strain” were practically an admission that the strikers and their sympathizers were more organized and well-supported than the companies and the city police. On the other hand, though, Schieren was willing to call upon the State National Guard to defend the companies’ property and break the strike. The decision was, perhaps, a rhetorical move by the mayor, transforming the strike from a local issue that the employees could win into a regional issue that necessitated the use of military force. This is likely not the case, though, as Schieren had previously ignored the companies’ attempt to demonize the strikers (i.e. running mailcars). Rather, the mayor believed that streetcars were a

¹²⁹ “Many Assaults,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 19, 1895, 1.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Report of the Special Committee*, 25.

necessary municipal function that should be run efficiently (in line with the beliefs of McNulty and many others). However, he was willing to leverage the powers of the state government to fulfill this belief, including the use of a military force that could intensify the situation.

The mayor's actions could be chalked up to apathy, but the contradiction between his beliefs and actions shined a spotlight on a greater division emerging amongst the strikers' wide range of supporters. The arrival of the National Guard highlighted a growing divide between progressive ideology (wanting to use efficient government to manage society) and labor insurgency (wanting to 'win' a strike) that would prove critical in the strike's collapse. More immediately, though, the military force of the National Guard diminished the strikers' control of locations throughout the city and along its streetcar system. Similarly to how the strike's growth could be examined by following its spread through the city — streetcar depots, major thoroughfares, private homes and businesses — its fall can be followed by observing how the strikers and their sympathizers lost control of these spaces.

The National Guard's first goal was to break the picket lines. On Saturday the 19th the National Guard stationed its troops at seven key streetcar depots throughout the city, mainly in neighborhoods where crowds had been the most troublesome.¹³² Using only their clubs, the National Guard succeeded in dispelling crowds near powerhouses and breaking picket lines that allowed more replacement employees to report to work. Yet this did little to dispel the strikers' support in other parts of the city. While the National Guard focused its attention on streetcar depots, the work of protecting running cars was still left to Brooklyn's exhausted police department. The force swore in an additional 200 officers,¹³³ but it was still not enough to

¹³² Ibid. The locations of the seven defended depots are as follows: Fifth Avenue and Twenty-Third Street, Seventh Avenue and Twentieth Street, Bush Street, Bergen Street and Albany Avenue, Tompkins Avenue and Fulton Street, Halsey Street and Broadway, Flatbush Avenue.

¹³³ "Special Policeman," January 23, 1895, 2.

prevent groups of strikers and their sympathizers from blocking tracks, cutting wires, and sometimes forcibly removing drivers from cars. Even with the arrival of the National Guard, Brooklyn's Streetcar Companies were still only able to run less than half of their usual fleet. When asked, President Norton blamed the snowy weather.¹³⁴ Breaking a picket line was simply not enough to break the base of support the strikers had amassed in Brooklyn's streets, so the National Guard evolved its tactics.

On Sunday, January 20th, the Second Brigade took over the police's duty of protecting operational streetcars during their trips. To ensure such protection, the troops marched up and down major thoroughfares throughout the city, including Third Avenue, Fifth Avenue, and Montague Street, areas that were home to many businesses and communities that supported the strikers.¹³⁵ Small skirmishes between troops and the strikers and their sympathizers erupted throughout the city, many of which involved the use of clubs by the troops and the throwing of stones and other small objects by the crowds. In some instances the violence escalated much further. The worst episode transpired in the East New York section of the city, a hotbed of support for the strikers. The strikers' rhetoric had turned more confrontational after the National Guard's arrival, with the East New York crowd constantly insulting the troops as "boys out for the holiday" and sarcastically asking if their guns were real. Tempers also ran high within the ranks of the National Guard, as the troops reportedly had not been given food since their arrival. Somewhere between the hours of 9 and 11 at night, tensions flared and the National Guard organized a charge with fixed bayonets on the mob. Multiple people were injured, including a painter and a printer (none of the injuries were fatal, thanks in part to the work of "temporary doctors" who helped victims at the scene). After another two charges, orders were given to clear

¹³⁴ "Many Assaults," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 19, 1895, 1.

¹³⁵ "Bayoneted!," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 20, 1895, 1.

“not only the space immediately in front of the stables but the neighboring streets [as well].” The crowd was thoroughly broken up, with the strikers “scattered, finding a shelter, panic stricken, in saloons and stores on the opposite side of Jamaica Avenue.” When asked about the events, Major Cochran of the Second Brigade replied, “I think we’ve given them a pretty good dose.”¹³⁶

The events at East New York were a battle, harkening back to notorious labor confrontations like the Pullman Strike, Homestead Strike, and National Uprising. Unlike previous confrontations with the police, the strikers’ spatial control had been completely dismantled, their picket lines broken and their crowds dispersed. Such a defeat would have seemingly attracted support from the strike’s many sympathizers. However, the National Guard had triggered multiple reckonings for the people of Brooklyn. In the wake of the troop’s arrival, progressive Brooklynites began to reassess their thoughts on the increased violence of the strike and the overarching ideological challenges it posed. The strikers were not just losing control of the city’s spaces, but also the critical middle-class support that had been vital to their rise.

B. “When was there ever a peaceful strike?”¹³⁷

Even though the Knights of Labor ordered employees to avoid violence, the strikers used certain forceful strategies that had earned the ire of critics since the conflict’s early days. In addition to blocking tracks and cutting wires, the strikers often removed replacement workers and the policemen from cars in the middle of a route. For example, during an episode on Wednesday, the 16th, members of a crowd on Flatbush Avenue boarded a car and threw a conductor and policeman from it as it continued to run.¹³⁸ Such instances of striker violence were not limited to running streetcars. On at least two occasions, non-striking employees were

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ “Sermons on the Strike,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 21, 1895, 3.

¹³⁸ “Cars Running,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 16, 1895, 1.

harassed and assaulted by strikers.¹³⁹ In another episode, a non-striking motorman's wife was confronted at the door of her home by two men, believed to be former motormen from the Third Avenue line.¹⁴⁰ There was some evidence that episodes of the strikers' violence were not solely the work of streetcar employees themselves, but rather rowdy sympathizers. For example, *The Eagle* observed that some of the most violent members of the East New York crowd were young boys, who seemingly had no affiliation with the strikers.¹⁴¹ Yet to some observers of the strike, the presence of any violence was enough to condemn the entire work stoppage as a threat. As Rev. Cortland Myers of the First Baptist church in Pierrepont Street explained: "Even if the strikers' cause be a worthy one, the moment he resorts to violence and plays the part of a brute then the voice of man is raised against him and the forces of heaven are withdrawn from his support."¹⁴² In a letter to the editor of *The Eagle*, another disgruntled observer simply asked, "when was there ever a peaceful strike?"¹⁴³

The streetcar employees had gained widespread support from the city's professional middle class because their demands were consistent with the PMC's goals of professionalization, efficiency, and safety. The employees largely lost that support, however, because the tool they used to fulfill their demands — a strike — was inconsistent with the progressive impulse of the PMC. While the companies' mailcar antics had failed to inspire the use of military force, the increased violence of the strike's second week made progressive Brooklynites more welcome to the presence of National Guardsmen as a means to quickly resolve the conflict. As one observer noted, "it will be well for us to discuss such matters [the strikers' demands] in the future, but our

¹³⁹ "Assaults and Arrests," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 15, 1895, 2. "Beaten by Four Strikers," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 20, 1895, 4.

¹⁴⁰ "The Court Street Line," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 16, 1895, 7.

¹⁴¹ "Bayoneted!," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 20, 1895, 1.

¹⁴² "Sermons on the Strike," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 21, 1895, 3.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

present duty compels us to give attention first to the public peace.”¹⁴⁴ Such calls for order and public peace were not only a condemnation of the Brooklyn strike, but rather part of a larger, progressive questioning of the viability of labor insurgency. The question was not only if strikes could be won, but rather if successful strikes could bring about the sort of sweeping, rational reform that the PMC desired. “During the past week we have been involved in another of those social revolutions which are becoming periodic and epidemic among us,” wrote one disillusioned Brooklynite, “and which are most detrimental in their influence and results, whether considered financially or socially.”¹⁴⁵ In the eyes of the PMC, labor disputes were not a solution to the economic, social, and political ills of late 19th-century America but rather a contributing factor to them. Therefore, as one Brooklynite put it, “the strike should be voted an obsolete weapon.”¹⁴⁶

Yet even though the PMC preferred progressive policy over labor insurgency, they still needed the strike to be resolved as soon as possible. The longer the strike lasted, the greater chance it had of ruining the livelihoods of Brooklyn’s professional middle class. As one banker explained,

[...] if the strike should last a week or ten days longer it would mean bankruptcy for many business houses which are now regarded as being very strong financially. They are loaded up with goods which they expected to sell quickly, but customers have been kept away and their stock is now, much of it anyway, practically value-less, as it is getting behind the styles.¹⁴⁷

Even though the strikers’ demands and the PMC’s progressive beliefs were largely compatible, the PMC’s priority was to first end the strike and restore streetcar service, and *then* address the overarching issues that streetcar employees faced. Like the mayor before them, the PMC viewed the National Guard as a means to that first end, and were willing to accept the troops so long as

¹⁴⁴ “In the Possession of a Mob,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 19, 1895, 2.

¹⁴⁵ “Sermons on the Strike,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 21, 1895, 3.

¹⁴⁶ “An Absolute Weapon,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 19, 1895, 2.

¹⁴⁷ “The Story of the Strike,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 20, 1895, 4.

they could promptly restore streetcar service. In an op-ed for *The Eagle*, one writer explained that “when public convenience is interfered with to this extent it is difficult for people to feel much sympathy for either party to the interference.”¹⁴⁸ Progressive Brooklynites still condemned the streetcar companies’ for their poor management and treatment of employees, but they were also largely apathetic towards the strike’s ultimate success or failure. In the long term, the PMC agreed with the strikers’ goal of improving the city’s streetcar system. In the short term, the PMC disagreed with a strike that indefinitely halted streetcar service, with no apparent end in sight.

These concerns were not entirely without merit, however. While the PMC preferred to end the strike through legislation, the union representing streetcar employees — the Knights of Labor — possessed a well-documented ambivalence towards government intervention. Knights of Labor historian Leon Fink notes that, with some exceptions, the union avoided any direct entry into politics or lobbying for legislation and policy changes. As Fink explains, the Knights possessed a “politically ambivalent strain of folk republicanism” that often placed them in “the anomalous position of advocating workers’ political rights without offering a way to take advantage of those rights.”¹⁴⁹

The rift that formed amongst the supporters of the Brooklyn Trolley Strike was not necessarily a dispute between streetcar employees and their sympathizers, but rather a dispute between the Knights of Labor — with their disregard towards government as a tool for change — and reform-minded progressives. In the later days of the strike, some of the most biting critiques were those directed at the Knights a Labor, who were referred to as “low browed demagogues,” “deluded fools,” and “high toned and unpatriotic.”¹⁵⁰ Some critics went so far as

¹⁴⁸ “Too Large to Last Long,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 19, 1895, 2.

¹⁴⁹ “The Uses of Political Power: Toward a Theory of the Labor Movement in the Era of the Knights of Labor” from Leon Fink, *Working-Class America: Essays on Labor, Community, and American Society* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 109.

¹⁵⁰ “One Indignant Citizen Hits Hard at the Knights of Labor,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 17, 1895, 5.

to blame the strike entirely on the Knights of Labor, claiming that the union was a “privileged class [that wanted to] plunder the taxpayers in the payment of wages about double or triple what is earned.”¹⁵¹ Other writers cut to the heart of the PMC’s discontent with the Knights of Labor. “We have no use for unions or Knights of Labor in this country,” wrote one commentator, “and they will never succeed because they are contrary to the golden rule, public opinion, and the good and welfare of the people.”¹⁵² Like the labor strike, the PMC saw the Knights of Labor as an inefficient and unproductive part of society. Therefore, it was undeserving of support.

Ironically though, the union made concrete strides towards resolving the strike in the final days before its collapse. On the day the National Guard arrived, the Knights of Labor leadership released a statement reducing their demands to those solely focused on scheduling.¹⁵³ The change mirrored the agreement reached by the Brooklyn City and Newtown Railroad and its employees in the hopes of retaining support and inspiring hope that the larger strike could still succeed. Additionally, after being rejected by Judge Edgar Cullen on the 19th,¹⁵⁴ McNulty’s application for a writ of *mandamus* was reconsidered by the progressive Judge William Gaynor on January 24th.¹⁵⁵ Gaynor made a decidedly pro-labor decision and issued a writ of *mandamus* that compelled the Brooklyn Heights Railroad to run all of its cars the following morning.¹⁵⁶ Yet the decision came too late, as by that time the companies had almost fully returned to their original capacity.

The divide between the PMC and the strikers was not only due to their ideological differences regarding labor disputes and the role of government, but also the sometimes active

¹⁵¹ “Wants This Strike Stopped,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 20, 1895, 12.

¹⁵² “Order God’s First Law,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 24, 1895, 4.

¹⁵³ “Many Assaults,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 19, 1895, 1.

¹⁵⁴ “Application Denied,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 6, 1895, 6.

¹⁵⁵ On the 22nd, another application for a writ of *mandamus* was filed by Joseph Loader, a furniture dealer on Fulton Street. “Applies for a Writ,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 22, 1895, 2.

¹⁵⁶ “Judge Gaynor’s Mandamus,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 24, 1895, 2.

actions taken by members of the middle class to distinguish themselves from the strikers. In addition to the arrival of the National Guard, the transition from the work week (when the PMC relied on streetcars to get to work) to the weekend (when the PMC relied on streetcars for leisure and consumption) further highlighted differences between Brooklyn's professional and working classes. During the strike, access to sites of leisure and consumption — theaters, boxing matches, skating rinks, and amusement parks — was restricted. *The Eagle* highlighted this in its Sunday edition, with a satirical article about the city's horse-drawn carriages:

The carriage horse of Brooklyn felt the effects of the streetcar men's strike even more than other inhabitants. [...] During the strike they were required to rise early, just as the plebeian cart or truck horse; to submit to being hurriedly groomed and harnessed and then to carry the master of the household downtown to his daily labors. [...] Ugh! The aristocratic carriage horse has always been in favor of arbitration in the matter of streetcar strikes.¹⁵⁷

During the weekend, the strike was no longer an obstacle to the PMC's financial survival, but rather an obstruction to various means of consumption.¹⁵⁸ In some cases, the strike became an object of consumption itself. As *The Eagle* noted, on the weekend a great number of people "dressed in the heights of fashion" walked over the Brooklyn Bridge from Manhattan to watch the strike, "expecting to behold those thoroughfares running with gore."¹⁵⁹ These patrons were disappointed to find that the downtown portion of the city was relatively calm, but the point stands: when the strike no longer posed a financial threat to professionals, it either became an obstruction to consumption or a point of curiosity. While the above articles clearly demonstrate this sentiment in *The Eagle*, an indifference towards the strike was also apparent in regional newspapers and magazines that enjoyed an amount of distance — spatially and temporally — from the conflict. For example, the *Philadelphia Press* misinterpreted the strikers' demands as a

¹⁵⁷ "Walks about the City," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 20, 1895, 10.

¹⁵⁸ For writing about consumption and the growth of mass culture in the late 1800s, see William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993).

¹⁵⁹ "The Bridge Crowded," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 22, 1895, 2.

call to raise the longstanding 5¢ for trolley cars, and promptly condemned the entire strike.¹⁶⁰ Similarly, *The Street Railway Journal* (a trade publication for industry insiders and enthusiasts) wrote a scathing article a month after the strike's conclusion, condemning Justice Gaynor's "unfortunate and to a certain extent demagogic" decision to issue a writ of *mandamus* and the strikers for threatening the economic livelihood of the streetcar companies.¹⁶¹

Press biases were not only along class lines, however. In many articles, op-eds, and letters to the editor, nativist Brooklynites distinguished themselves from the strikers and their sympathizers according to ethnicity. Throughout the course of the strike, *The Eagle* followed multiple problematic editorial standards, including the purposeful misspellings of quotes from Irish Brooklynites (such as the depiction of Mulgrew's saloon cited in section 1B of this thesis). Additionally, *The Eagle* often implied or explicitly stated that many strikers were drunk throughout the strike, often with no evidence. Take, for example, the following description of a picketing striker: "'Say missus,' he said in a [...] tipsy mumble, 'you musn't ride in the trolley cars just now. You must walk. If you ride in the trolley cars before the strike is over you'll be taking bread from children's mouths. You'll be defeating labor and helping capital.'"¹⁶² Despite the cogency of his message, the striker's words are portrayed through the baseless lens of inebriation. However, such literary techniques were in line with larger efforts by some Brooklynites to portray all labor insurgency as a foreign and unacceptable practice. In addition to using slurs like "sheeny,"¹⁶³ some commentators declared all of the Knights of Labor to be "un-American."¹⁶⁴ "I cannot think the men who commit such lawless acts as I have read about in the papers for the past few days are native born American citizens,"¹⁶⁵ stated one letter to the

¹⁶⁰ The article was syndicated in *The Eagle*. "The Brooklyn Strike," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 19, 1895, 2.

¹⁶¹ "The Brooklyn Strike," *The Street Railway Journal*, volume 11, no. 2 (February 1, 1895): 104.

¹⁶² "The First News of Violence," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 14, 1895, 1.

¹⁶³ "All Quiet at Ridgewood," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 14, 1895, 6.

¹⁶⁴ "Eagle Correspondents," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 21, 1895, 3.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

editor. “Boycott comes from Ireland, a country whose people cannot govern themselves,” wrote another observer, “and they come here, meddle with our laws, dictate terms to us and try to overthrow our government and create riots.”¹⁶⁶ These attacks were directed at strikers, the Knights of Labor, some sympathizers, and even the Mayor, with one writer hoping that the strike would “teach the poor man a lesson, to elect an American born citizen, instead of a foreigner.”¹⁶⁷

These identity-based attacks were often tied to political ideology, as German and Catholic communities were commonly associated with socialism and anarchy by the local press.

“Socialism and anarchy in high places has become one of the gravest dangers that threaten this country,” wrote *The Eagle* in an op-ed; “There was too much socialism and too much covert incitement to anarchy in Brooklyn churches.”¹⁶⁸ Some critics extrapolated even further, asserting that the strike and greater labor movement posed an existential threat to American society. One concerned Brooklynite wondered what would happen, “if all the thieves and burglars of New York and Brooklyn, joined by those of Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, should conspire and march into Brooklyn and begin their operations.”¹⁶⁹ Another fatalistic commentator stated that “if law and order cannot triumph over anarchy and disorder, then it were better we were all wiped off the face of the North American continent, the birthplace of individual liberty, with subjection to law.”¹⁷⁰ Such fears not only harkened back to American labor history, but also to global events initiated by labor movements, socialists, or Marxists of any kind. As the *New York Herald* simply stated, the Brooklyn Strike could be the “Paris Commune all over again.”¹⁷¹ With this reading in mind, some Brooklynites saw the use of the National Guard not only as a means of

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ “The Mayor Called on the Militia,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 23, 1895, 3.

¹⁶⁸ “Unwisdom of the Pulpit,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 23, 1895, 3.

¹⁶⁹ “Letters on the Tie Up,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 24, 1895, 4.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ “Like an Armed Camp,” *The New York Herald*, January 20, 1895, 4.

ending the strike, but as a means of combating assaults to the American way of life. “It is a civil war, it is treason,” wrote one observer; “If clubs will not do, then bayonets.”¹⁷²

The National Guard’s arrival cost the strikers their control over public space, hindering their ability to retain cross class alliances with progressive Brooklynites who shared similar beliefs about professionalization, efficiency, and safety. Additionally, the National Guard highlighted the ideological and social differences between people who supported the strike because of the workers' demands and those who supported the strike because of the streetcar’s importance. Especially after the East New York battle, the Brooklyn strikers lost a great deal of control over Brooklyn’s expansive landscape and support from the city’s diverse people. As support dwindled, the Knights of Labor issued a vitriolic statement claiming that “local newspapers, subsidized by traction stock issued by a foreign corporation, in order to swindle the state out of taxes, have persistently misrepresented our position and exaggerated every offense committed in our name.”¹⁷³ Despite these accusations, the strikers’ relationship with the PMC continued to fracture. The final nail in the strike’s coffin, however, would come from fracturing within the labor and immigrant communities that were at the center of its support.

C. Death of a Roofer

The morning after the confrontation in East New York, *The Eagle* reported that “Brooklyn resembled an armed camp.”¹⁷⁴ Although nothing came to rival the violence of East New York, the military situation continued to become more severe in the city throughout the coming days. On Monday, January 21st, the First Brigade of the State National Guard was called upon to offer increased support. In addition to soldiers, the First Brigade arrived with four cannons, which were strategically placed at intersections so that “every avenue of approach to

¹⁷² “Sermons on the Strike,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 21, 1895, 3.

¹⁷³ “An Appeal to the Public,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 23, 1895, 2.

¹⁷⁴ “Mobs at Bay,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 21, 1895, 1.

the stables was guarded.”¹⁷⁵ Mayor Schieren contributed to the military effort by declaring partial martial law, issuing a “proclamation to the people to keep off of the streets.”¹⁷⁶

As the National Guard strengthened its control of the city’s spaces, the streetcar companies continued to hire more replacement employees, now from cities as far away as Cincinnati and Santa Fe.¹⁷⁷ While the strikers originally succeeded at convincing some scabs away from the workplace, the continued economic toll of the strike began revealing cracks within the core of the strikers’ base of support. Although a vast majority of streetcar employees belonged to the Knights of Labor, some union men had always resisted joining the strike for fear of consequences. “There is only one mob that I fear, there are five of them and my wife,” said one non-striking motorman; “I have been out of work for five months, and cannot afford to stand on ceremony.”¹⁷⁸ The fear of downward mobility that was pervasive in the 1890s affected nearly every class of American society, and was a driving force for many non-striking and replacement employees. In an interview with *The Eagle*, President Partridge spoke out against the strikers by highlighting the struggles of less well-to-do employees: “He was young German, recently married, who said he had not a cent in his house and he would soon need coal...he never haunted saloons.”¹⁷⁹ In another interesting account, a Brooklyn bookkeeper — a career that could be classified as part of the PMC — explained that while he “would rather work at a desk than on a car platform,” he was pursuing employment as a scab because it was one of the few jobs available. “These men are no more desperate than I am, and God help the striker who gets in front of the car I am running,”¹⁸⁰ the bookkeeper stated. The economic and organizational strength of the Brooklyn Streetcar Strike was an anomaly in the economically and socially

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ “The Strike is Coming to an End,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 24, 1895, 1.

¹⁷⁸ “As to Arbitration,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 16, 1895, 6.

¹⁷⁹ “Unwillingly on Strike,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 14, 1895, 7.

¹⁸⁰ “As to Arbitration,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 16, 1895, 6.

turbulent 1890s, facilitated by Brooklyn's size, diversity, and the strength of its labor and immigrant communities. However, this unique strength ultimately proved to be a weakness.

While the streetcar employees were able to endure a long strike of their own, other professions in Brooklyn and nearby cities did not have that luxury. Despite some rumors, employees from other trades in Brooklyn — including electricians and employees of the two elevated railroads — never called strikes in sympathy with the surface railroads.¹⁸¹ Additionally, despite a meeting with the Grand Master Workman Sovereign, the Knights of Labor never ordered a general strike for the other trades the union represented in Brooklyn.¹⁸² In Jersey City, employees of the Consolidated Traction Company expressed their support of the Brooklyn strikers, but were noncommittal to the idea of a sympathy strike.¹⁸³ Across the River in Manhattan, rumors swirled about a sympathy strike, yet were ultimately squashed when New York increased its police patrol and circulated fliers dissuading a strike.¹⁸⁴ The Brooklyn streetcar strike was a resounding short term success because it could leverage the city's unique physical and social geography, but began to falter when it was unable to inspire long term support from employees in other trades and other cities who could not endure a long labor stoppage.

It is also worth noting the demographics of Brooklynites who were largely absent or not included in strike's action. Despite their noted participation in crowds throughout the city, women were not placed in leadership positions during the strike, an additional base of support that could have potentially strengthened the employees' effort.¹⁸⁵ Much the same could be said for Brooklyn's Black communities. Although Black workers had been key actors in prior labor disputes and coalitions throughout the country,¹⁸⁶ accounts of Black contributors to the Brooklyn

¹⁸¹ "Many Assaults," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 19, 1895, 1.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ "Situation in Jersey City," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 21, 1895, 3.

¹⁸⁴ "Brynes Orders Out His Force," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 20, 1895, 4.

¹⁸⁵ "Don't Get Mixed Up with Them," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 21, 1895, 6.

¹⁸⁶ This includes the Henry George campaign. Scobey, "Boycotting the Politics Factory," 292.

strike were conspicuously missing from the historical record (including newspapers, the *Report of the Special Committee*, and preexisting secondary literature) despite compromising 2% of the city's population in 1890.¹⁸⁷

By the strike's second week, the strikers had lost support from broad swaths of people and had lost control of the companies' depots and the city's streets. Even still, sympathy for the strike endured in the local business that had long been hotbeds of support. As *The Eagle* described, "the strikers were not out in force, but the saloons, halls, and restaurants in the neighborhood could tell their own story."¹⁸⁸ After the fireworks in East New York, the strikers and their supporters had taken shelter in these indoor spaces, prompting the National Guard to focus their final efforts on flushing them out. The troops began to "lockout [...] saloons in the vicinity of car stables," with the stated belief that it was "extremely necessary that not a drop of liquor be sold to the strikers."¹⁸⁹ More often than not though, this new policy took on the form of a 'lock-in'. When cars were ready to be run, soldiers took their place in front of salons and "no one was permitted to leave until the car was well out of sight."¹⁹⁰ In one instance, a group of 200 strikers holding a meeting in a Ridgewood saloon were prevented from leaving the building by a regiment of troops. In retaliation, the strikers used a telephone (another new technology) to call a lawyer, who in turn contacted Justice Gaynor. The judge issued a writ of *habeas corpus* requiring the 200 strikers to appear in court immediately, meaning the troops would be in contempt of court if they retained them any longer.¹⁹¹

It was, again, a decidedly pro-labor decision, but one that did little to remedy the strikers' larger issues. Now confined to their homes and businesses, supporters threw pots, pans, and other

¹⁸⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, *Race, 1890*, prepared by Social Explorer, accessed February 3, 2021, <https://www.socialexplorer.com/a9676d974c/explore>.

¹⁸⁸ "East New York," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 21, 1895, 1.

¹⁸⁹ "To Enforce the Excise Law," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 21, 1895, 4.

¹⁹⁰ "Saber Strokes," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 23, 1895, 1.

¹⁹¹ "Prisoners at Ridgewood," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 23, 1895, 2.

small items at soldiers marching in the street. The National Guard ordered warning shots to dissuade the practice, resulting in damages and injuries (J.H. Eckhoff of 1571 Broadway reported multiple bullet holes in the windows of his confectionery store).¹⁹² With this, the National Guard's strategy entailed shooting at anyone who could be perceived as a threat. It is not surprising, then, that the strike's two casualties were people with unknown or misunderstood intentions. Late at night on Tuesday, January 22, Henry Ahns walked on Halsey Street. Troops commanded Ahns to stop, and "for some reason which no one seems to know,"¹⁹³ he disregarded the warnings. A soldier shot him. Ahns was carried to the nearby drugstore of Dr. Frank E. Wilson, who restored him to consciousness. Ahns took a pencil and wrote in German, "tomorrow I want to go home."¹⁹⁴ He died the following morning at St. Mary's Hospital. It is possible that Ahns, a German immigrant,¹⁹⁵ did not understand the soldier's commands. Commentators were unsympathetic to this possibility. "It is rumored that Ahns belonged to the socialist labor party,"¹⁹⁶ *The Eagle* postulated the following day. "If Henry Ahns left his home in New York [...] to help out the roughs and thugs of Brooklyn he got just what he deserved," argued another commentator.¹⁹⁷ Later on the 23rd, Thomas Carney was shot. He died on the 24th.

The Brooklyn Trolley Strike's demise appeared imminent by the time Henry Ahns and Thomas Carney died, yet even still, the circumstances of their deaths were thematically resonant with the strikers' struggle. Ahns and Carney died not because they took any particularly threatening actions, but because they could potentially do something threatening. Similarly, even

¹⁹² "Sentries Shoot and Kill," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 23, 1895, 1.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ New Jersey Department of State, *New Jersey, U.S., State Census, 1895*, prepared by Ancestry.com, accessed February 5, 2021, https://search.ancestrylibrary.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv=1&dbid=1054&h=726108&tid=&pid=&queryId=ef4f976c3d781c4157da8b5e693704b6&usePUB=true&_phsrc=YLK16&_phstart=succesSource.

¹⁹⁶ "How Mitchell was Shot," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 24, 1895, 2.

¹⁹⁷ "Order God's First Law," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 24, 1895, 24.

though a large number of groups — labor and immigrant communities, business owners, and the PMC — supported the strikers' demands, supporting a long strike could potentially threaten their own financial and social livelihoods. As the conflict wore on, violence increased, sympathy strikes never manifested, and immediate solutions seemed unlikely, all of which made supporting the strikers an even more undesirable proposition. As a result, the strikers and their sympathizers lost control of the companies' depots, Brooklyn's streets, and finally private businesses and homes by the end of the conflict's second week. A streetcar strike may have been well suited for making Brooklyn's disparate citizens aware of their similar goals and experiences, but by the end of the second week it was clear that a labor dispute was not well suited to bring about immediate change in the political, economic, and social climate of 1895.

Conclusion: The Strike's Legacy

After the National Guard's arrival, the dramatic events in East New York, and finally Ahns' and Carney's deaths, the strikers' support dwindled, with many striking men finally returning — or attempting to return — to work. Conditions continued to be harsh for returning workers, especially for employees of the Atlantic Railroad who endured new, targeted policies. In addition to giving permanent seniority to new and non-striking employees, President Norton announced that anytime a rehired striker harassed another worker, five rehired workers (determined at random by a lottery) would be immediately dismissed.¹⁹⁸ The 1895 Brooklyn Trolley Strike was officially called off on February 9th to little fanfare,¹⁹⁹ with none of the strikers' demands having been met. In theory, the strike was a failure.

The story of the strike, however, does not conclude with its end. Although the State Board of Arbitration was unable to take any action during the strike, a separate investigation was launched by the New York State Assembly in late January to determine the causes and offer analysis of the strike.²⁰⁰ Throughout late January and early February, the committee conducted interviews with striking employees, non-striking employees, company leadership, labor leadership, Mayor Schieren, Police Commissioner Welles, and other Brooklynites. The investigation committee met in Albany during March to discuss their findings, and submitted a formal report in April. The proceedings were led by William M. Ivins Sr., a reform politician and a future Republican candidate for mayor of consolidated New York City.

Like the reform-minded Brooklynites who sympathized with workers during the strike's action, Ivin's investigation was understanding of the streetcar employees' struggle yet sought to remedy it through legislation rather than strikes and arbitration. Like other commentators of the

¹⁹⁸ Cudahy, *How We Got to Coney Island*, 23.

¹⁹⁹ "Police Justices Called Up," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 9, 1895, 1.

²⁰⁰ *Report of the Special Committee*, 10.

strike, the investigation was quick to point out the centrality of scheduling issues and the effect they had on the safety and efficiency of Brooklyn's streetcars.²⁰¹ The investigation also criticized and questioned the legality of the Long Island Traction Company, a "foreign corporation" that they blamed for "failing to properly estimate the cost of construction of their roads."²⁰² In terms of proposed solutions, the investigation considered compulsory arbitration for any labor dispute within the state, but determined that such action would not directly address issues from the Brooklyn strike. Instead, the investigation proposed and later passed two pieces of legislation that they felt did. The first was a law to "make it impossible for the stock of transportation companies to be held by foreign corporations," a direct remedy to the financial practices of the Long Island Traction Company.²⁰³ The second was an act "to provide for the licensing of employees on railways within the State of New York" as "quasi-public employees,"²⁰⁴ a realization of the licensing solution long-proposed during the strike.

With the acknowledgment of scheduling issues and the proposal of these laws, the strikers' demands were finally being met, albeit in a roundabout fashion. However, this apparent 'victory' only came after the strike's failure and the death of two innocent people. The investigation was largely apathetic to these deaths, referring to them simply as "accidents" and claiming that it was impossible to accurately assess damages inflicted by the National Guard.²⁰⁵ Like the PMC before them, members of the investigation supported the strikers' goals more than they supported the strike itself. As a result, their retroactive discussion of the strike focused more on how progressive legislation could prevent deployment of the State National Guard for future

²⁰¹ *Report of the Special Committee*, 72.

²⁰² *Report of the Special Committee*, 63. This critique of "foreign corporations" was similar to critiques of "foreign capital" written by debt-ridden populist farmers during the same time. See Jane Taylor Nelsen, *A Prairie Populist: The Memoirs of Luna Kellie* (Iowa City, IA: University Of Iowa Press, 1992).

²⁰³ *Report of the Special Committee*, 92.

²⁰⁴ *Report of the Special Committee*, 75.

²⁰⁵ *Report of the Special Committee*, 69.

labor disputes rather than the impact that the National Guard had on the Brooklyn strikers. Yet after proposing legislation to resolve the streetcar situation in Brooklyn, the investigation questioned whether their actions would make enough of an impact. The investigation had considered the prospect of municipal ownership, but wrote the idea off as a “revolution” that they were “not ready to take on yet.”²⁰⁶ When more broadly addressing conflicts between capital and labor, the investigation simply explained that “they grow out of social facts and economic conditions which are too deep for a radical cure by legislation.”²⁰⁷

Although a “radical cure” was not immediately produced in the strike’s wake, the economic consequences of the conflict set the stage for greater, long term changes to Brooklyn and its transportation infrastructure. While the strike proved to be of economic benefit to a select few groups (including bicycle dealers and owners of the elevated railroads),²⁰⁸ it continued to be financially burdensome to many Brooklynites long after the employees had returned to work. The city of Brooklyn had to pay \$15,000 a day for the National Guard, leaving the government with a sizable debt.²⁰⁹ The strike also proved to be the last nail in the coffin for the Long Island Traction Company, who continued to return less and less to investors. Later in 1895, Brooklyn Rapid Transit (BRT) — a new streetcar syndicate incorporated in New York State — acquired stock in both the Brooklyn City Railroad and Long Island Traction, giving them control of both companies and resulting in the unceremonious retirement of Daniel F. Lewis from his various positions.²¹⁰ The BRT went on to buy majority shares in Brooklyn’s three other major surface streetcar companies, as well as the elevated railroads and the Brooklyn Bridge cable car. The

²⁰⁶ *Report of the Special Committee*, 88.

²⁰⁷ *Report of the Special Committee*, 94.

²⁰⁸ “The Story of the Strike,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 20, 1895, 4.

²⁰⁹ This included the \$4.50 daily pay for about 6,0000 troops, plus additional expenses. “Mobs at Bay,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 21, 1895, 1.

²¹⁰ Cudahy, *How We Got to Coney Island*, 33.

BRT's rise was the crescendo of streetcar consolidation in Brooklyn, yet to consumers, the complex series of purchases, leases, and other transactions simply meant a more efficient and interconnected transportation system that allowed for easier transfers. On December 31, 1918, the BRT was acquired by the Brooklyn-Manhattan Transit Corporation (BMT), which was then acquired by the New York City Board of Transportation (a predecessor to the Metropolitan Transit Authority) in 1940.²¹¹

Consolidation was the guiding principle not only for Brooklyn's streetcars, but also for the city itself. On January 1, 1898, Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, and Staten Island were combined with Manhattan to form the City of Greater New York. Calls for Brooklyn's consolidation into New York had circulated for years, including during the 1895 Trolley Strike. "If the two cities were consolidated a sufficient number of men would be detailed from the New York police force to preserve order and enforce law," wrote one critic of the strike, "and who can doubt what consolidation means for the economy."²¹² The push for municipal consolidation was consistent with the progressive impulse present in Brooklyn during the Trolley Strike, with another concerned writer explaining that the strike would have been much smaller "if it weren't for the foolish division of cities."²¹³ The Trolley Strike was evidence to some Brooklynites that their city's independence was a root cause behind its inefficiency, and that a large metropolitan consolidation was a valid solution to this problem. Brooklyn's vote to consolidate with New York was ultimately very close, and the 1895 Trolley Strike was clearly a factor that influenced voters and led to the measure's passing. Additionally, progressive politicians saw consolidation as a means of breaking the Democratic political machine that dominated New York by adding working and middle-class voters in outlying boroughs to the city electorate. In this regard

²¹¹ Ibid, 35.

²¹² "Consolidation and the Brooklyn Police," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 23, 1895, 3.

²¹³ "Consolidation as a Strike Cure," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 23, 1895, 3.

consolidation was a success, resulting in the mayorship of Seth Low — a Brooklynite — in 1902 and later William Gaynor (the pro-labor judge from the Brooklyn strike) in 1910.²¹⁴

This theme of consolidation was also economically and politically present on the national scale, as the 1890s ushered in the Progressive Era. Economically, a new model of corporate consolidation supplanted the classic liberalism of Gilded Age robber barons as capitalists embraced a more regulatory government, resulting in changes to the money supply, tariffs, and eventually the creation of the Federal Reserves in 1913.²¹⁵ Politically, consolidation was evident in the fusion of the Populist and Democratic parties during William Jennings Bryan's 1896 presidential campaign. Moving forward, progressivism and reform were embraced by both parties, resulting in multiple progressive presidencies and amendments.²¹⁶ In the decades after the Great Brooklyn Trolley Strike, the goals and ambitions of the strikers and their sympathizers were largely fulfilled. Transportation became more efficient, professional, and safe, and reform-minded individuals found a foothold in local and national politics. Yet for the striking employees of Brooklyn's streetcar companies and for the two innocent casualties of the conflict, these developments came too late.

Prior writing about the 1895 Brooklyn Trolley Strike is limited. The most substantial secondary source on the strike is Sarah Henry's article *The Strikers' and Their Sympathizers*, which served as a foundation for this thesis's inquiries.²¹⁷ While thorough, Henry's article primarily explains who the strikers' supporters were rather than exploring the mechanics of how the streetcar employees garnered such widespread sympathy. However, the strike has also been

²¹⁴ Low ran on a fusion ticket with support from both the Citizens Union and Republican party, garnering a base of support reminiscent of those accrued by Henry George and the Brooklyn Streetcar Strikers.

²¹⁵ Livingston, *Origins of the Federal Reserve System*.

²¹⁶ As Leon Fink notes, labor and social movements throughout the 20th century became more willing to embrace the reform powers of government as a supplement to insurgency (i.e. the New Deal, the Civil-Rights Movement, Labor Law Reform, and the War on Poverty). Fink, *Working-Class America*, 120.

²¹⁷ Sarah M. Henry, "The Strikers and Their Sympathizers: Brooklyn in the Trolley Strike of 1895," *Labor History* 32, no. 3 (June 1991): 329–53.

featured in works of fiction. Theodore Dreiser's classic novel *Sister Carrie* tells the story of the titular Carrie (an aspiring actress) and her partner George (a floundering business owner) as they rise and fall amidst the economic and social uncertainties of late 19th-century America. Near the narrative's climax, an unemployed George reads a newspaper advertisement for replacement streetcar conductors in Brooklyn. Although his sympathy lies with the strikers, George pursues the opportunity to help pay the couple's mounting bills. After minimal training, he is scheduled to run a car. Despite a police escort, a band of strikers boards the vehicle and injures George, prompting him to abandon his post and return to his apartment.²¹⁸

Although the novel contains some inaccuracies (including the suggestion that dozens of people died during the strike rather than just two), Dreiser shines a spotlight on a key aspect of the Brooklyn Trolley Strike: the discrepancy between its widespread support and its failure to bring about immediate change. The strike was able to rise and flourish in its first week because Brooklyn's expansive geography and diverse peoples were connected by an advanced streetcar system and common experiences of social mobility. The strikers' success in controlling streetcar depots and lines along major thoroughfares earned them the support from downtown businesses, communities along transportation arteries, and suburbs at the ends of lines. Additionally, their goals of professionalization, efficiency, and safety struck a chord with members of an emerging professional managerial class who hoped to cement their own economic and social position during the turbulent 1890s. Yet when the National Guard arrived, the strikers lost the spatial control and ideological continuity that allowed them to rise. The increased military presence drove the strikers away from streetcar depots, removed them from the city's streets, and finally flushed them out of private businesses and homes. The National Guard also drove a wedge between the strikers and their critical middle class supporters, mainly regarding the role of

²¹⁸ See chapter 41 of Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (Waiheke Island: The Floating Press, 2009).

violence and the power of government in resolving the dispute. The Brooklyn Trolley Strike succeeded on a local level because of the shared experiences and beliefs of Brooklynites but failed when the National Guard highlighted the differing beliefs its supporters had on the level of regional and national politics, economics, and culture.

In broad strokes, the 1890s was a decade defined by a number of tumultuous transitions. Capital was just beginning to transition from classical liberalism to a model of corporate consolidation in the wake of the 1893 panic, labor organizations such as the Knights of Labor were still reeling from epic defeats and trying to reassess their strategies, traditional distinctions between skilled and unskilled labor were being challenged by the emergence of a new professional managerial class, all while cities and suburbs were expanding thanks in large part to the switch from horse-powered to electric streetcars. So upon returning to the central questions of this thesis, the contradictions of the Brooklyn Trolley Strike can be understood as symptoms of the uneven transition between the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era. However, this thesis's goal was not merely to explore the possibility of a cross-class coalition, but rather to highlight the brief reality of it for a week in Brooklyn. The events that transpired in January of 1895 are evidence that 19th-century American class relations were not static, but rather constantly shifting on account of people's spatial and societal experiences. The cross-class coalition that formed in Brooklyn rose and fell within a matter of days and weeks, yet still managed to have a substantial impact on the city's physical, political, and social development for years to come. It is fair to say that the Brooklyn Trolley Strike was both a success and failure, improving the working and living conditions of streetcar employees and the people they serviced in the long term, while resulting in failure and the deaths of two innocent people in the short term.

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