Decatur Labor Day a century ago

With union banners flying, dressed in starched shirts and blouses and wearing union emblems, Decatur workers marched on Labor Day a century ago from downtown to Fairview Park.

There were three divisions in the parade, totaling 1,700 marchers, with railroad operating and repair Shops crafts filling a whole division. Besides the Building Trades, local unions of cigarmakers, streetcar men, tailors, bookbinders, interurban trainmen and others filled another section. On their float Boilermakers rang a locomotive bell and pounded sledges with heavy hammers. There had been allegations of this railroad craft sleeping on the job. Their float carried a banner that read, “Who the H\_\_\_ can sleep in a noise like this?”

The Women’s Union Label League had a float adorned in purple and white, with the ladies singing and twirling purple parasols as they passed. The Goodman Band led the march, with the *Herald* Drug and Bugle Corps enlivening the second division. The Painters and Paperhangers’ float featured a small house, the members wearing solid white uniforms.

AT Fairview Park there was a concert, a baseball game with the building trades facing the railroad allied crafts, foot races, speeches and a dance, which lasted late into the night.

At the picnic, George Lakey, Carpenters’ second Vice-President, addressed the throng, noting that “This day, dedicated and consecrated to labor, should be one of festival and joy, and will be more fully appreciated by those who worked, suffered and bled in the cause of labor that at least this bit of recognition be given them.”

Lakey spoke in support of stronger workers’ compensation laws and noted that a Congressman had given Lakey a tour, taking him to the U.S. Senate. he had once visited the U.S. Senate. The Congressman told Lakey which Senators represented particular business interests. Lakey asked his guide who represented “the plain people” and was met by silence. “What we must do, is get men into Congress who will represent the interests of the common people,” he declared.

1920 marked the passage of the 19th amendment, women winning the right to vote nationally. Lakey welcomed women’s electoral involvement, hoping it would help uphold decent standards and end child labor. “Cheap politicians will do well to remember they cannot buy a woman’s vote with a drink of cheap whiskey or a cabbage leaf cigar,” he counseled.

The holiday was celebrated through Illinois. In Clinton, where Illinois Central railroaders dominated the population, a Labor Day Picnic was held at Weldon Springs, with special trains carrying 1,500 celebrants to mark the holiday.