

Battle of the Overpass

May 26, 1937



National Archives



On May 26, 1937, four U.A.W. representatives staged a peaceful demonstration to distribute union literature at a primary entrance to Ford Motor Company's River Rouge complex. Accompanying the union representatives were members of the clergy, photographers, journalists, and members of the Women's Auxiliary of Local 174. When they arrived at a pedestrian overpass near the entrance, parties involved in the demonstration were beaten by members of Ford's Service Department, a group employed to maintain control of assembly line workers and to keep unions out of the plant. Photos of the beatings made their way into newspapers and put pressure on Ford to accept unions, which it did in May 1941, the last of the major U.S. automakers to do so.

[Turn the page to learn more.]

First Amendment

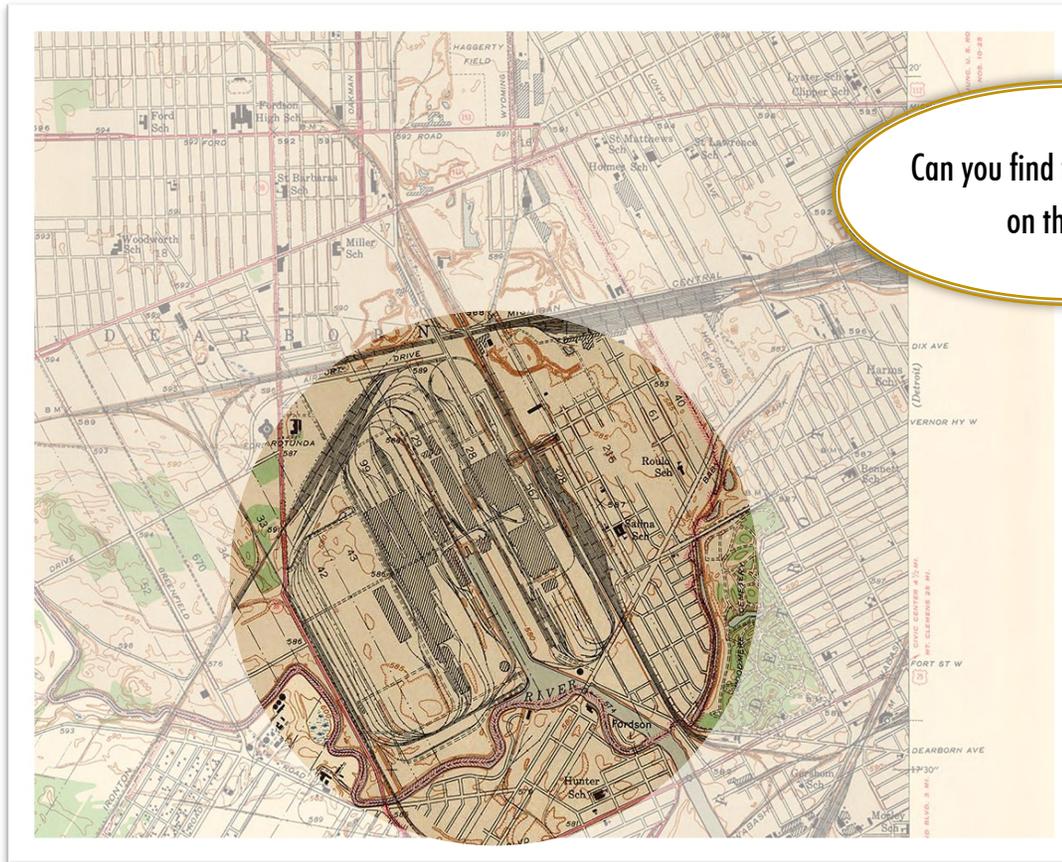
Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or **the right of the people peaceably to assemble**, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

The right to gather peacefully to express or defend beliefs.



In 1937, nearly 100,000 people worked at Ford Motor Company's River Rouge complex in Dearborn. The plant housed everything needed to manufacture vehicles.

Archives of Michigan



Can you find the Rouge River on the map?

A 1927 map of Dearborn with the 15-million-square-foot complex highlighted.

Henry Ford built the enormous complex for efficiency. Raw materials like steel and rubber came in on ships and trains, and finished products, such as tractors and cars, went out.

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Can you find the trains shipping materials and goods?

Postcard of the Ford River Rouge complex, circa 1930–1945; top-right: Henry Ford, 1919.

Manufacturing was dangerous, and many autoworkers wanted better conditions. Some wanted a union to negotiate for them.

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What special equipment is the worker wearing?

A worker pours molten metal into a cast with little protection from the heat.

Ford Motor Company did not want unions. The company employed a private security force, called the Service Department, to control assembly line workers and to stop union organizers.

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Do you think the two groups expected to see each other?

Members of the Service Department (left) approach union organizers.

Even so, on May 26, 1937, union leaders went to the River Rouge complex to distribute pamphlets. They gathered with journalists, clergy, and a women's auxiliary at a pedestrian overpass at the main entrance.



← How would it feel to be this photographer?

A crowd standing on and near the overpass at the main entrance of the complex.

Members of Ford's Service Department stopped the demonstration with physical force. Some union organizers were badly hurt. Photos appeared in newspapers, but Ford did not yield to pressure immediately.

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Photo journalists document encounters between union demonstrators and members of the Service Department.

United Auto Workers (U.A.W.) leaders continued to organize for four more years before Ford accepted a union vote in May 1941. The company became the last major U.S. automaker to recognize unions.

How do you think the workers feel about voting?



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Clockwise from top: Leon Bates distributes union literature; workers deposit ballots; checking ballots in union vote, 1941.