

OCEAN STATE Q&A

'A pivotal voice for Rhode Island's workers': URI professor and former transit union president preserves labor history

Once a RIPTA bus driver, professor Scott Molloy created a collection so significant that part of it is in the Smithsonian

By **Carlos R. Muñoz** Globe Staff, Updated September 21, 2026, 5:55 a.m.



A former bus driver and head of the Rhode Island transit union, Molloy (second from right) has also been named a URI Foundation Teaching Excellence Award winner, Carnegie Foundation Rhode Island Professor of the Year, and inductee into the Rhode Island Heritage Hall of Fame. COURTESY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND

Before he was a University of Rhode Island professor and earned a doctorate in American history, Scott Molloy was behind the wheel of a 35-foot [Rhode Island Public Transit Authority](#) bus that he calls “the dragon.” A third-generation bus driver, he rose to become president of the transit union in the 1970s and transformed it into a more democratic organization.

“We did all kinds of innovative and imaginative things, mainly to drive the company crazy, but also to enhance our work lives,” Molloy told the Globe.

Molloy left RIPTA in 1984 to join URI, which was opening a labor research center.



Scott Molloy, former Rhode Island Public Transit Authority transit union leader, and University of Rhode Island history professor, holds a photo of his grandfather with other union members taken during an outing in August 1911. CARLOS MUÑOZ



The Scott Molloy Labor and Transit Collection includes past photos of the Providence public transit system. CARLOS MUÑOZ

Molloy built one of the country's most significant labor-history collections, much of which he passed down to the Smithsonian, while Rhode Island-specific materials were donated to URI. He spoke to the *Globe* about the history of transit and labor in Rhode Island, and the "[Scott Molloy Labor and Transit Collections](#)."

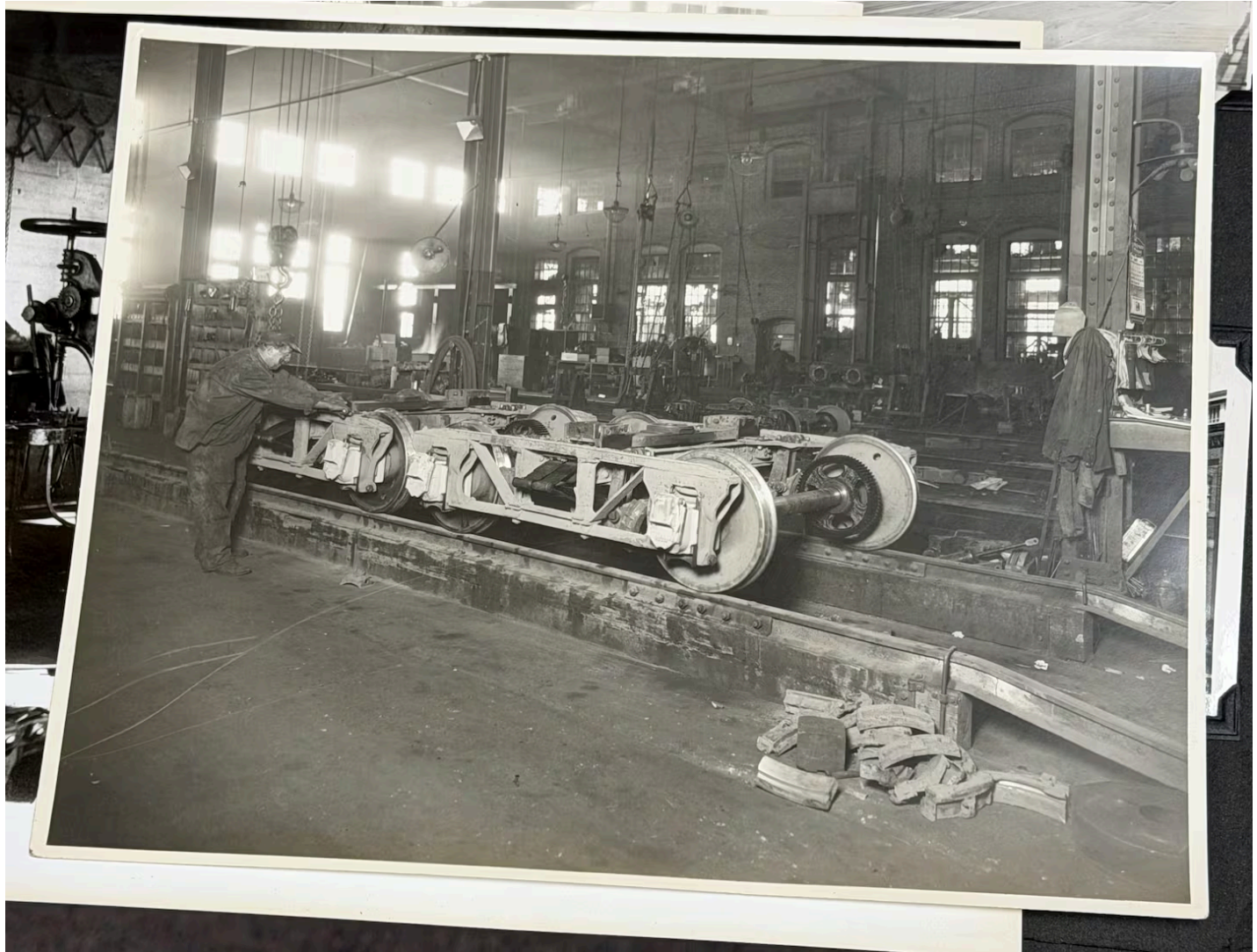
Secretary of State Gregg Amore recognized the [collection](#) in 2024 with a proclamation: "You have been a pivotal voice for Rhode Island's workers through your study of labor history, writings, teaching, and cultivation of this collection. Thank you for your passion preserving the stories of workers for generations to come."

Q. How did you become a public transit driver?

Molloy: In 1973, that was a time of great stagflation, unemployment, and it was tough to get a job. My family had long been in what's now the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority, but it had many different names before that. My grandfather, who was an Irish immigrant, started there in 1909 as a conductor, and then two of his sons worked there after him, and one of my uncles (Henry Molloy) became the business agent of the transit union. I was a bank teller for about two months. That's all I could stand. I had an interest because I still had that social activism in me and wanting to change the world from the bottom up. My uncle got me on buses a week or two later. I learned how to drive the 35-foot dragon. I look at them now, I go, 'How the hell did I ever drive those things?'



About 70 men of the Elmwood Division went out to Johnson's Farm near Hamilton. Later, about 70 men went to Narragansett Pier. Henry Molloy, uncle of University of Rhode Island professor Scott Molloy, who was a former transit union leader, appears last row left, shoulder on flag. Gift of Richard "Dick" Wonson COURTESY OF RICHARD WONSON



The Scott Molloy Labor and Transit Collection includes past photos of the Providence public transit system. CARLOS MUÑOZ

There was some unrest and deadly violence in Rhode Island's labor and union history. What were some moments that happened while you were in the union?

Even though my uncle had run the union and was a strong man — he got stuff done — he squelched the initiative of the rank-and-file workers. They were scared to death of him. He did things his way but sometimes at their expense. I was trying to rebuild it from the bottom up to get people involved and making it into a real fighting union.

Some of the things we got involved in were seniority issues, which is the heart and soul of labor. One time we had the first and only wildcat strike (an unapproved union strike) in RIPTA's history. We won that struggle, which was not an easy one to put together. When I got to run the union, we passed a resolution and sent a strongly worded letter to the

company demanding the hiring of women and nobody could believe that. We put out our own newspaper, which raised a lot of eyebrows because we weren't afraid to say things. We tried to empower people so that they weren't afraid to take a stand and stick up for the union.

Was it difficult to negotiate with RIPTA at that time?

It wasn't for my uncle. They figured he'd probably knock them all out — and he would have. They came to an understanding and the contracts were some of the best in the country under my uncle's leadership. He and I soured on each other not because of the contracts, but just because of how the union was run very undemocratically. I tried to unleash people's energies and imagination and activism. It was the older World War II generation versus the new hippie mindset.

A box of labor and transit union buttons collected by Scott Molloy and donated to the University of Rhode Island Robert L. Carothers Library's special collections. CARLOS MUÑOZ

The Scott Molloy Labor and Transit Collection includes past photos of the Providence public transit system. CARLOS MUÑOZ

Why did you make the jump from bus driver to professor?

I drove for eight years, was a union business agent for three, and that's when I got my doctoral degree in American history and left. I loved what I was doing but after so many years of fighting in the trenches, we went out and helped other unions. We showed up

without anybody asking us. We won so many victories using old tactics, and we never really were able to light a fire under many other unions.

What will the the transit collection show people?

Most people didn't realize that the union put the bread and butter on their table. They thought it was a democratic politician, they thought it was the benevolence of the company, or something along those lines. Sure, I used to drill into their heads it was the union that did it all, and eventually, I think they saw the light.

As a teacher, what has it been like to pass transit union memorabilia around your classrooms?

Most of them haven't seen antiques or artifacts, and I put the stuff in heavy plastic so it wouldn't rip because it was fragile. It seemed to at least give them a kinetic connection to the the labor history itself, so that they could actually feel and touch it.

Newspaper clippings are among the labor and transit union records donated by Scott Molloy to the University of Rhode Island's Robert L. Carothers Library's special collections. CARLOS MUÑOZ

What are some of the artifacts that you donated to the Robert L. Carothers Library & Learning Commons special collection?

I started collecting memorabilia, artifacts, photographs, buttons, flyers, books, newspaper articles, everything and anything that related initially to mass transit in the state of Rhode Island. I wrote a couple of books. I went around and collected material from people and after a while when you get a reputation like that, people bring things to you. And at some point, it was pushing me out of my apartment.

How does it feel to part with these significant parts of your history?

It felt good to be able to say, regardless of what happens to me, even if we're going through tough times, even if people forget about unions for a while, all this stuff is preserved and people can look what they did back then.

Have the unions been diminished at all?

There are certain government regulations and rules that govern unions in particular, and certainly with the Trump administration, which has basically defanged the National Labor Relations Board, it's made it harder and harder for unions to exist or to organize. For example, they simply summarily fired all those federal workers who were all parts of different unions.

It's a very volatile moment in American history, and during the [upcoming midterms](#), the labor unions are throwing everything and anything they've got into the fray, and they still have a lot of union members out there. If you can mobilize them more than you can mobilize the general population, that gives you a step ahead.

The Boston Globe's weekly Ocean State Q&A features Rhode Islanders who are starting new businesses or nonprofits, conducting groundbreaking research, or reshaping the state's economy. Send tips and suggestions to rinews@globe.com.

Carlos Muñoz can be reached at carlos.munoz@globe.com. Follow him [@ReadCarlos](#) and on Instagram [@Carlosbrknews](#).

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