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STEELWORKERS RETHINK THE HOMESTEAD STRIKE OF 1892*

THE Homestead strike of 1892 is one of the most widely known and thoroughly researched strikes in American history.¹ It is common knowledge that Carnegie sought the destruction of the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers long before the end of the contract on 30 June 1892. We are all aware of the ethnic, racial, and occupational antagonism among workers, as we are aware of the workers' solidarity, especially when confronted by employers. We are familiar with the course of events of the strike, including the violent confrontation between Pinkerton guards and steelworkers and their families on 6 July. We are familiar with the use of the army and courts to intimidate strikers during the five month strike, and with some of the consequences of this strike: the destruction of the Amalgamated Association and the gradual introduction of absolute control over the process of steelmaking by the company—the famous speed-up.

It is surprising, given the extensiveness of historical information on this strike, that we do not possess any first hand reports by the men who organized the strike, wrestled with tactics during the confrontation, and suffered the consequences of defeat. Herbert Gutman

*I benefited greatly from discussions of an earlier draft of this paper with Jeanie Attie, Mark Beatt, Joshua Brown, Rick Cullison, Sigmund Diamond, Joanna Ekman, Helena Flam, Jack Hammond, Charles Hill, Allan Kurtz, Randolph Petsche, and David Rittenberg.

1. Arthur G. Burgoyne, *Homestead* (Pittsburgh, 1893); Edward Bemis, "The Homestead Strike," *Journal of Political Economy*, 2 (June, 1894): 369-396; James H. Bridge, *The Inside Story of the Carnegie Steel Company* (New York, 1903); J. Bernard Hogg, "The Homestead Strike of 1892" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1943); Henry David, "Upheaval at Homestead," in Daniel Aaron, *America in Crisis* (New York, 1952), pp. 133-70; David Brody, *Steelworkers in America: The Nonunion Era* (Cambridge, 1960); Leon Wolff, *Lockout* (New York, 1965).

noted over a decade ago, in a review of Leon Wolff's book, *Lockout*, (a book Gutman described as the "fullest account to date" of the strike) that "Although Wolff's narrative deals mainly with workers, he does not use a single labor source . . . the workers' view of Homestead is drawn largely from non-labor sources and secondary accounts."² While Gutman noted that Wolff would have done well to look at the *National Labor Tribune*, for example, he did not mention that first hand reports of the strike do not exist in any abundance in the *Tribune*. The fact is, we do not have any extensive first hand documentation of workers' views of the strike.

Histories of this strike depend heavily upon the testimony of some sixty witnesses who appeared before the House and Senate Committees which met in Pittsburgh to investigate the strike and the use of private police forces.³ Although there are few brief assessments made by some of the witnesses about the situation in which the strike took place, there could not have been any notice taken of the entire struggle, since these Congressional reports cover only the first two weeks of the strike.⁴ Furthermore, the range of information contained in these reports is still narrower if we consider the fact that of the sixty witnesses to appear, only nine had any direct knowledge of conditions at the Homestead Works: William Weihe, President of the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers; John Potter, Superintendent of the Homestead Works; Hugh O'Donnell, skilled steelworker and chairman of the Advisory Committee of the union at Homestead; Burgess McLuckie of Homestead; and five skilled steelworkers: David Lynch, William Rodgers, George Rylands, Oscar Colfiesch, and William McQuade.

The discovery of the field notes to John A. Fitch's study of steelworkers in Pittsburgh, conducted as part of the *Pittsburgh Survey* of

2. Herbert G. Gutman, "Lockout," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 90 (1966): 276.

3. U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on the Judiciary, *Investigations of Homestead Troubles*, Report 2447, 52nd Cong., 2nd Sess., 1892-1893; U.S. Senate Committee on the Employment of Armed Bodies of Men for Private Purposes, Report 1280, 52nd Cong., 2nd Sess., 1892-1893.

4. "It [McKinley tariff of 1890] increased the protection as far as other products, plate, etc., was concerned and decreased the tariff on the identical article (4x4 billets) on which our wages were based, and that is the reason I say it is a gigantic conspiracy assisted by vicious legislation to wrong the workman of what he is entitled to, a fair day's pay for a fair day's work." Quoted from the testimony of Burgess McLuckie, House Report, pp. 99-100.

1908, helps to fill this gap.⁵ Fitch, then a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin in the department of economics, conducted 145 interviews with steelworkers, forty-five of which were with men who had taken part in the Homestead strike of 1892.⁶ Fitch conducted this research both for *Survey* magazine and for his dissertation research under John R. Commons.⁷ Commons was head of the industrial studies section of the *Pittsburgh Survey*, with Fitch and William Leiserson conducting most of the detailed research. As with other members of the research team of this industrial survey, such as Crystal Eastman, Margaret Byington, Elizabeth Butler, Paul Kellogg, Richard Wright, Fitch was to remain active for many years in liberal and reformist politics.

Fitch's notes provide needed detail on internal problems of the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers before the strike in 1892, as well as detail on a number of related issues: workers' views of immigrants, effects of the defeat of 1892 on control of the process of steelmaking, and aspects of work in the steel industry—most notably the twelve hour day and “speed-up.” In the absence of knowing what Fitch thought about unions, strikes, labor and capital, industrial violence and the like, it might seem upon reading these interviews that Fitch believed the union was its own worst enemy. Nothing could be further from the truth.⁸ He used these facts to argue

5. I would like to thank Mr. Charles Hill for allowing me the use of his grandfather's notes. Fitch's volume, *The Steel Workers* (New York, 1911), is one of six volumes which comprise the *Pittsburgh Survey*. The others are: Margaret Byington, *Homestead: The Households of a Mill Town* (New York, 1910); Paul Kellogg and others, *Wage Earning Pittsburgh* (New York, 1914); Crystal Eastman, *Work-Accidents and the Law* (New York, 1910); Elizabeth Butler, *Women and the Trades* (New York, 1909); Paul Kellogg and others, *Pittsburgh District: Civic Frontage* (New York, 1914).

6. The breakdown of the interviews is as follows: of the total of 145 interviews which Fitch conducted in 1907–1908, forty-five were with men involved in the strike or union. Of the forty-five, twenty worked at the Homestead Works and of these twenty, eleven were still there in 1908. Of the twenty-five remaining, three were, in 1908, at Braddock, three at Duquesne, three at the CP mills, three at Brown's mill, two at Nubia, two at Wood's mill, one each at Sharon, Astor, Ashton and Zug, one at the U.S. Glass Co., and four were officers in the union: Jarrett, president, 1880–1884; Weihe, president, 1884–1892; Garland, president, 1892–1898; Martin, secretary, 1878–1890.

7. “Dear Professor Ely: John A. Fitch wishes to submit his book entitled *The Steel Workers*, published by the Russell Sage Foundation, as his thesis for degree of Ph.D. and wishes the action of the Department Faculty with respect to accepting it.” John R. Commons to Richard T. Ely, 16 February 1910. John R. Commons Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.

8. Fitch made remarkably few personal judgments about the men he met. He seems to have been intrigued by and sympathetic towards steel and ironworkers and to have

that the violence of 1892 and the speed-up of 1908 were two effects of the same cause: continuous conflict between labor and capital rooted in an immutable conflict of interests.

I

The immediate cause of the Homestead strike was, according to the men, the decision by the Carnegie Steel Company to crush the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers. Steelworkers understood that their interests and those of their employers were opposed. According to William Thorpe,⁹ a roller at the Homestead Works since its beginning in 1881:

The principle over which the men fought in 1892 was unionism. Frick was determined to kill the union.¹⁰ The wage question could have been settled; no such preparation as the company made was necessary to merely reduce wages. The building of the fence, the port holes, the contract with the Pinkertons, all these were planned before the strike and the arrangements were not preparatory to a simple reduction.

It appears the men understood Carnegie's intention better than is commonly thought. George Smith, a bottom maker at the National Tube Company and formerly a worker at Homestead, told Fitch that:

Frick came to the Carnegie Company for the purpose of breaking the power of the Amalgamated Association . . . Carnegie was in Scotland at the time of the strike; he went away

romanticized their lives to some extent. Fitch, after all, was 26 years old at the time and at the beginning of a period of great optimism in liberal politics. The few comments he did make about the men were mostly complimentary, occasionally chiding someone for drinking too much. But overall, these personal comments did not interfere with his main task: to trace the conflict between labor and capital, to show how market forces compelled both labor and capital to seek some control over the other—not to judge whether individual workers or employers responded to these conflicts in a morally proper manner. Fitch, pp. 75–119. For more on this and related issues, see Steven R. Cohen, "Reconciling Industrial Conflict and Democracy: The *Pittsburgh Survey* and the Growth of Social Research in the United States," (Ph.D. diss., Columbia Univ., 1981).

9. I have provided names since Fitch did not identify the men by name.

10. "We have . . . seen that Carnegie, after his visit to Pittsburgh in March [1892], had drafted a notice that henceforth the Homestead mills were to run non-union. Frick had set it aside, but used the spirit of it later in his ultimatum of 30 May. Meanwhile, on 21 April, Frick had written Carnegie in New York that if a 'stubborn fight' should arise, it would be 'fought to a finish without regard to cost or time.'" Hogg, p. 59.

purposely to avoid the controversy and leave the trouble on Frick's shoulders.¹¹

Still, some men thought "things could have been different." Members disagreed over the union's problems. Thomas Williamson, a powerful leader in his mill who was on the Advisory Committee during the strike, thought the union's leaders favored their personal interests and ignored the general interests of the men:

Men who were not good steel workers but were able to manage the men to their advantage ran things to favor the few, rather than the many. Some men were making \$50 a day while others who worked harder got \$3 . . .¹² There was a fine group of men in the Amalgamated in spite of certain irresponsible leaders. If this group had been in control things might have been different.

Thorpe disagreed with Williamson. He believed the men had been irresponsible.

I have represented the cause of men who did not deserve help, yet it is a difficult thing for the union to rid itself of this evil. There are many men in any group of workers who are ignorant, irresponsible and unreasonable. There is no way of keeping such men out of the union and their votes count for just as much as those of responsible men, so the policy of the union is dictated somewhat by such men as these.

These comments imply that the organization of the union itself created certain problems, a point made more explicitly by other men. In fact, much needed detail on the theme of workers' control before 1892 emerges from these notes. Conflict arose among workers under the contract system over how wages were to be set for each member of

11. Perhaps the general view about Carnegie's role in the strike is correct: that the leaders of the union or the men or both misjudged Carnegie's intentions. And while Smith may have made this comment as an observation after the facts, it is still the case that some men may have understood better than their leaders the intentions Carnegie had. This possibility is strengthened by the fact that many of the men seem to have doubted the loyalty of their leaders. On misjudgments by the men, see Wolff, p. ix.

12. This comment refers to a time—roughly pre-1887—when the men determined how the entire pay of a crew would be distributed among the individual members. This comment is important in light of recent work which has demonstrated the positive character of workers' self-management. Collective action in the mills in Pittsburgh was not always an unmixed blessing to some of the men. On workers' control in the steel and iron mills, see David Montgomery, "Workers' Control of Machine Production in the 19th Century," *Labor History*, 17 (Fall 1976): 488-489.

the crew, how jobs were to be defined, how workers were to be trained, hired, fired, and how qualifications for membership in the union local were to be set. These issues of workers' control were often settled according to the interests of the most prominent and powerful of the skilled workers: Welsh and to a lesser extent English rollers, heaters, and puddlers. Mike Griswold spoke of the position of Welsh rollers:

The Association was largely composed of Welshmen. A few years back there were very few skilled men who were not Welsh and they always stood together and worked for one of their own race.

Moreover, rollers and puddlers often advanced their relatives and friends in the crews to the exclusion and frustration of semi-skilled men who expected to rise through the crew to a position of greater prominence. John Kane, a screwdown at Homestead in 1892, described this frustrating situation:

The union was no good for the men in the semi-skilled positions. These men are better off on non-unionism and have a better chance for promotion. The rollers used to run the union and saw to it that their friends were promoted . . . The contract system by which the rollers used to take charge of the whole mill and hire all the workers allowed them to draw big money.

Griswold continued, saying:

The rollers and heaters ran the Association and drew high wages. Not only were the unskilled men discriminated against with regard to membership, but the semi-skilled who were taken in were held back and not allowed to advance as rapidly as they should.

And Richard Dalton, a veteran ironworker at the Nubia mills, spoke of his experience as a puddler and rollhand:

I had a puddling furnace of my own at age 16. I then became a rollhand, but never worked up to a chance on the rolls. This is largely a matter of favoritism. The roller is in a position to promote whom will.¹³

13. Dalton refers to a tradition by which men advanced up through the crews. But this tradition had, since 1876, run counter to the rules of the national association. "Rollers and heaters having charge of trains of rolls or furnaces shall be compelled to give the next job in line of promotion to the oldest hand, provided he is in good

For more than a decade before the Homestead strike, the union had been trying to establish national work rules, in place of local tradition, by which hiring, paying the crew, defining a “job,” advancement and discipline would be determined.¹⁴ Semi-skilled and many Irish workers, as well as those skilled workers who fought for a more inclusive union (in which even unskilled laborers would be members), were in a different position from conservative skilled workers of Welsh and English origin. Workers with little power in the union local, and workers who could not gain entry into the union, seemed to look toward either the Knights of Labor or the national body of the Amalgamated Association as a means of counterbalancing the authority of their fellow, skilled and more privileged, workers. Fred Pifer criticized the union for its exclusiveness. He told Fitch that he had been rejected from the lodge at Braddock because his job was “too low:”

When the Amalgamated had a union in this plant, I couldn't get in because I had too low a job. This was one of the mistakes of the association; they only took in the tonnage men. When the Knights of Labor organized a local, however, I got into that without difficulty.

James Chandler, a roller and chairman of his mill committee on the 32-inch mill at Homestead, thought:

The Amalgamated Association made a mistake in the beginning by attempting to form an ‘aristocracy of labor.’ They left out the salaried men and laborers . . . The union should have included every man connected in every way with the steel mill.

Semi-skilled, Irish, common laborers, and politically radical skilled workers, looked to the national organization and to other forms of labor organization for support in their struggle to extend power and benefits to more workers.

Transferring power from local lodges to the national organization, however, brought new problems. Indeed, increasing the power of

standing of the association.” Article XVIII. Sec. 9 of the *Constitution and General Laws of the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers*, Fitch, pp. 282-283.

14. On this very important theme, see J. S. Robinson, *The Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers* (Baltimore, 1920) and for a more recent and comparative exploration of the crew system in the steel industry, see Bernard Elbaum and Frank Wilkinson, “Industrial relations and uneven development: a comparative study of the American and British steel industries,” *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 3 (1979): 275-303.

the national for the purpose of ending the domination of the locals by skilled, conservative Welsh workers created the new danger that this new authoritative body might not act for this end, but for some other. Observations in these notes indicate that the men were fearful and suspicious of the workings of the national organization. As one tableman said, "each department had to have a separate lodge and the different lodges had little in common." Alienating power to the national carried the risk that national leaders might suppress or ignore their interests, just as many of their mill leaders had. Chandler told Fitch about an incident at the Homestead plant which exemplifies the tension in the lodges over changing the method of self-regulation, by which workers agreed to handle complaints—both among themselves and with foremen—through a code of honor.¹⁵ Personal grievances, for example, were to be settled by union rules, not by men acting unilaterally against the superintendent:

On one occasion all of the men at Homestead were ready to strike because one of their members had felt himself aggrieved because the superintendent told him to take another job. He was told to work or quit and the man quit. He not only had no grounds, but according to the rules, he lost his right to protest, leaving the mill without first reporting to the mill committee. A meeting was held of all the union men and they voted to stand by the man. I and a few others voted against him and then I secured the floor and brought up the question of the illegality of the action for this man. I asked for a ruling on the part of the chairman of the meeting, who happened to be a vice-president of the Amalgamated Association. The chairman ruled against the man at every point and it became so evident that this case was bad that the action was reconsidered and the man himself withdrew his complaint.¹⁶

15. Montgomery, pp. 489-495.

16. Montgomery describes these two traditions of workers' collective action as "spontaneous" and "deliberative." He argues that the change from one to the other denotes "a shift from . . . a group ethical code to formal rules and sanctions, and from resistance to employers' pretensions to control over them." Montgomery, p. 493. He implies that this change meant a greater degree of control exercised by the men over their working conditions. But it is not so clear that this change would bring greater control to the locals, since there was a long running debate in the union over the details and the importance of these rules. It seems that the greater control which these rules brought also meant that the interests of some locals were threatened. This change involved a struggle within the union as well as one between the men and the companies. It is interesting to note that Fitch described as "conservative" those men

Submitting oneself to rule bound authority might limit the personal power of certain leaders in the local. But it also reduced the degree of *direct* control which the local as a whole possessed.

Ending the regime of English and Welsh skilled steelworkers in the union locals meant, as David Montgomery has shown, ending the contract system.¹⁷ But in order to end the contract system, the national organization had to play a greater role in determining how work was to be done in the local mills. The men saw that ending the contract system did not necessarily mean they would gain more direct control of their work. Instead, they observed that the system of stratification sustained by the contract system extended over into the new, nationally organized, system of labor in the steel industry. Rollers still had the greatest authority in the national, with puddlers and heaters a close second. Semi-skilled workers and helpers still worked under the authority of the skilled rollers and blowers. And common labor remained beyond the pale. As Henry Blowers, a puddler at Brown's mill since 1873, said:

The trouble with the Amalgamated Association was the extravagance and the fact that it was run by a clique . . .

Moreover, the fact that more of the business of the union would be conducted at the national level meant that the interests of the locals in general would be subordinate to the national bargaining position of the union. Removing the contract system ended an old tradition of stratification among workers with regard to power, prestige, and income. It did not solve the problem of stratification among steelworkers as a whole. Indeed, the very means by which workers removed the contract system were also the means by which some older workers maintained their prominent position in the locals and by which still other workers established a new kind of power—that of the union “official.” The steelworkers were to learn of this new kind of political problem during the Homestead strike.

II

The strike was remembered by workers chiefly in terms of the pressure the company put on skilled men to defect from the union,

with an interest in controlling the particular traditions of various locals. See Fitch, p. 103 and accompanying footnote.

17. Montgomery, p. 495.

of the mistakes and corruption of the union, and of economic constraints and opportunism. Richard Hotchkiss, a roller at Clark's mill in 1892, told Fitch of an offer made him by the manager:

I was rolling in Clark's mill in 1892 at the time of the big strike. I struck with the others and the manager came and offered me \$1,000 down and a salary of \$2,000 per year 'work or play' if I would come back as a strike breaker. I refused the offer. My father was employed in the same mill as foreman of a department. Because of his position he was not one of the strikers and he was threatened with discharge if I did not accept the offer of the manager. I then went south and worked in Alabama until the strike was over.

Chandler's case illustrates the power at the hands of the steel companies:

During the strike, I was a member of the Advisory Committee. Potter tried to get me back to work. He offered me a contract for five years at \$3,500 per year, to roll in the armor plate department, my position to be secure whether the mill ran or not.¹⁸ I put him off by saying that I wanted to go on vacation. He offered me money for my vacation. This money I also refused and I went on vacation at my own expense. After I came back, Potter offered me the same five year proposition. I told Potter to 'go to a warmer climate.' This was Friday; that night a friend came to me and told me that unless I had \$20,000 to put up for bail, I had better get out of town. I left that night on a freight train for Philadelphia. I had a letter which showed I was one of the Homestead strikers, requesting railroad men to extend me courtesies. With this letter I was able to travel anywhere I wanted. I was indicted with a number of others, for conspiracy, treason, riot and murder.

Hotchkiss' and Chandler's observations imply that the companies sought to buy off the most highly skilled workers as a means of fragmenting workers. As we will see later, after the strike had been won by the companies, they continued to engender political moderation among workers by using this method.

18. "Superintendent John Potter was removed and Charles Schwab brought over from Edgar Thomson [Braddock] to replace him. . . . Potter had made promises of permanent employment to the strike breakers that would be awkward to fulfill when the old employees return to their jobs." Hogg, p. 113; Burgoyne, p. 296.

Again, however, disloyalty, corruption and interference by national leaders of the union were the problems most often discussed concerning the strike. Thorpe recalled the interference of President Weihe:

The 1892 strike could have been won if the men had held out three weeks longer. The machinery was being ruined; there was no discipline among the non-union men who were trying to operate the mills . . . the men gambled during work hours. If the national officers had kept out the strike would have been won, but President Weihe came out and discouraged the men, telling them of the condition of the finances of the association. Weihe pulled both ends. He was going out of office and had his future in mind.

Chandler accused David Lynch of stealing from the strike fund:

The Homestead strike was sold out to the company . . . David Lynch had no money at the beginning of the strike. He had a \$1,400 mortgage on his house and he was in debt \$40 to a friend of mine. He was appointed a member of the committee which took charge of the supplies and monies that were sent in from the outside for the relief of the strikers. Within two weeks he paid the \$40 and at the close of the strike, he paid off the mortgage. Soon after this his two daughters went to college and it was common talk at the time that Frick paid their tuition.

George Smith spoke of corruption in the union more generally:

There was something wrong about the management of the Homestead strike. Money and supplies were misappropriated in some way or another. Great quantities came into Homestead all the time, yet I never saw any of it. I got nothing but my regular strike benefit. Someone made a lot of money out of it, although I think O'Donnell and Weihe were alright . . . Dave Lynch was no good. He betrayed the interest of the men.

The most ringing indictment of union officials came from David James.

The strike of 1892 could have been won. The curse of laboring men is that they can't trust each other. It has been the treachery of the higher officials that has killed the Amalgamated Association. All of the prominent leaders of the Amalgamated Associa-

tion who are now living have good jobs either with the government or with some corporation.¹⁹ In 1892, at the time the strike was called off, the men had the company locked to a standstill. The company was making a bluff with non-union labor. They were pretending to run the mills, but when the old men went back after the strike, they found the plant practically reduced to a junk heap. The company could not have continued operations in this way much longer . . . word came from Pittsburgh calling off the strike. It looked suspicious and one would be justified in thinking that Weihe and the others had been tampered with. At any rate they have good jobs now.²⁰

In addition to corruption of union officials, there were other forces which undermined workers' solidarity. Two of these—economic constraint and opportunism—may be glimpsed at, through statements made by steelworkers about the famous strike at the Braddock Works across the river from Homestead only six years earlier. Dennis Reilly, a heater in the Edgar Thomson mills, spoke of the 1886 strike:

Captain Jones offered to start the mills at a 10% reduction, and promised that the former scale would be restored as soon as times got better . . . the men felt strong in their unionism and refused. The mills were out for several months and the men were compelled to yield. During this time many of the men, while pretending to be good unionists were secretly signing statements to abandon the union. When the mill started again, it was a non-union shop and this was the end of unionism . . .

Peter Flaherty, a steel pourer at Duquesne in 1908, had worked at Braddock before the strike of 1886:

Many meetings of the union were held through the winter, and great protestations of loyalty to the cause of unionism were

19. John Jarrett, second president of the union (1880–1884), told Fitch he became secretary to the sheet manufacturers association in 1893. William Martin, national secretary between 1878 and 1890, became a labor agent for the Carnegie Steel Co. He compiled statistics for them on wages. He did say that the company wanted him to hire scabs in 1892, but he refused and quit his position. He also said that, except for himself, all officers of the national union had held political jobs.

20. To my knowledge, no one has ever considered seriously that the strike could have been won or settled differently from how it was settled. Perhaps these men are expressing bitterness here rather than accurate memories. But it is true that the strike ended abruptly in the middle of November, after four months of great resistance. Perhaps the quickness with which the strike fell apart is what looked suspicious to these men. See, Burgoyne, pp. 215–222.

made; meanwhile the foreman and assistant superintendent, who were on strike with the rest of the good men²¹, were working effectively, and it was well known that after some of the most hearty assertions of loyalty to the cause of organized labor, the men were making their way to the mill by a secret route, and were signing agreements to abandon the union. In April 1887, the mills opened up again, non-union.²²

III

The Amalgamated Association had lost; the company had won a great victory. Just before the strike ended, Frick wrote to Carnegie that “The mills have never been able to turn out the product they should, owing to being held back by the Amalgamated men.” Carnegie saw a non-union industry as one with a “chance to re-organize the whole affair . . .”²³ Fitch’s notes provide detail concerning the meaning of this “reorganization” from the workers’ point of view—the speed up. By removing the union, its rules, its control over the determination of jobs, promotion, hours of work, output, hiring and training, the company was able to make use of its employees in whatever manner it saw fit. As Chandler put it with respect to the twelve-hour day:

In former years, a good many horses and mules were used about the mills and quite a good many are still being used. At no time, either in the past or at present have horses and mules worked longer than eight hours per day. But horse flesh is more expensive and harder to get than men.

21. The Knights of Labor had a lodge at Braddock at this time in which all positions in the mill were included.

22. Andrew Carnegie too had a notion of loyalty. In what appears to be his side of the story of this strike, Carnegie says, “I felt if men could break an agreement there was no use in making a second agreement with them . . . Addressing the chairman of the mill committee, I said: ‘Mr. MacKay . . . have we an agreement with you covering the remainder of the year . . . ? Gentlemen of the Blast-Furnace Committee, you have threatened our firm that you will break your agreement and that you will leave these blast furnaces . . . unless you get a favorable answer to your threat by four o’clock to-day. . . . The grass will grow around them before we yield to your threat. The worst day that labor has ever seen in this world is that day in which it dishonors itself by breaking its agreement. You have your answer.’” See his *Autobiography* (New York, 1920), pp. 240–242.

23. Brody, p. 53.

Before the strike, the union was strong enough to determine a method of setting wages, hours, work rules and the like through its control of skilled positions. The company had agreed to a sliding scale of wages, a fixed set of rules governing the workplace and a contract which ensured a voice to the union in making changes in any of these matters. But in the absence of a union to police these arrangements, they became a means by which the company enacted its policies unilaterally. Without a union, scales of wages and rules governing the workplace became convenient and mutable contrivances of management, where once they had been the cornerstone of workers' security and solidarity.

To Conn Strott, a soaking pit heater, this "reorganization" meant a great reduction in wages:

Before 1892 I made \$10 to \$12 a day. After the strike wages went down to \$7 and by 1903 they were \$3. At the same time, the work load increased and my hours of work were increased.²⁴

John Seft had been a water carrier during the Homestead strike and worked as a roller on the 38-inch blooming mill at Homestead:

. . . a big engine has been installed and it can handle more material with the same effort. There is more power and the ingot is squeezed down more at each pass. Sunday work came in after the strike . . . wages have gone down several times in the last ten years. I lost \$30 per month in 1904.

In addition to a reduction in wages and the introduction of Sunday work, this "reorganization" meant a twelve-hour day and repression. Henry Baynes, a heater in the soaking pits at Homestead, told Fitch

24. "To balance the advanced costs of living [between 1892 and 1908], wages should have advanced in proportion. The average wage paid in all industries throughout the country should have advanced 22 per cent over the prevailing wage of 1892 to give the wage earners in 1907 as great a purchasing power as they had at the earlier date." Fitch, p. 152. Recognizing the fact that the wages Strott speaks of are not average, we still are left with the fact that wages of skilled men were cut drastically from their level in 1892. The extent of this reduction varied considerably from position to position, but the general range of decline seems to be between 25 percent and 60 percent. The trend was also widespread: the rate per hundred ton at Braddock was cut from \$1.25 to 90¢ in 1894 and from 82¢ to 60¢ in 1904 [Fitch did not indicate the position referred to in this case]; Richard Dalton described the situation at the Nubia mills: "In 1892, heaters were cut from \$6.25 per hundred ton to \$5.85, in 1894 it went to \$4.85 and in 1903 to \$3.65." At Carnegie's Upper Union mill it was much the same: "Before the strike a straightener got about \$7 a day, now he gets \$2.50. Before the strike 60 tons was a big day, now 120 tons is sometimes gotten out."

of some of the changes after the strike: "The 12-hour day and seven-day week were the rule. Whenever there was any attempt to unionize the mill, leaders were blacklisted." Charles Young could not get his job back as a roller at Homestead, but did get a job at Carnegie's 29th Street plant. But there too Sunday work had been introduced. William Botts did get his job back at Homestead:

There has been very little improvement on the 119 inch mill in the last ten years, yet the output has increased. In the 72 inch mill latest ideas in furnaces were installed last year. The checkers and dampers are so arranged as to produce a greater heat, so it is a faster furnace than the others and gives a larger output. The 84 inch mill is now run at its greatest capacity. The men work constantly to get out as big an output as possible. The bigger the tonnage they get the more their pay amounts to; but I say they're cutting their own throats this way. They get to making too much and their wages get reduced.

As David James said: "It is not the intention of the company that a roller should make more than about \$6 per day and they wish to equalize all the jobs as much as possible."²⁵ Before the strike the sliding scale of wages had been the basis of securing the agreed upon worth of a worker's labor. After the strike that same system was used to force workers to work harder and harder for less real income.

"Reorganization" meant similar things with regard to machinery. Before the strike, the use of new machinery had been determined in

25. An excellent illustration of how tonnage rates were used by the company as a means of *both* increasing effort and maintaining a low wage bill was given by Tom Crockett, a charger at the Duquesne works: "Twice a year the Carnegie mills have a record month. Any month of 31 days is selected, and the mills do not stop from end to end of the month. Sundays and Saturday nights they run full blast. The best material is saved for this month, and an attempt is made to break the record [of output]. If wages are changed at the end of the year, the new scale is based on the output of the "record month." Since these "record months" provided the *basis* of new rates, normal work in the following year would be paid less than the previous year; hence, the "normal" work of the new year would have to be more strenuous for the same compensation as the previous year. Another means adopted by the company for making the tonnage rates a spur to increased work without any increase in labor costs was to tie the rates to freight costs. Dennis Reilly explained how this system worked: "In the case of a foreign order, say from Japan, at the regular price of \$28.00 per ton, the net return on the order is cut down considerably because the company pays the freight. In such cases the wages are determined, not on the basis of \$28.00 per ton, but \$28.00 minus the freight costs."

part by the men themselves; after the strike it was introduced unilaterally by management—regardless of its effect upon the men.²⁶ William Shea, a roller who stayed on at Homestead, asserted that, although Carnegie had intended to introduce new machinery even before the strike, he was only able to make the most profitable use of it after the union had been destroyed:

. . . machinery was not put in because of the strike, but determined on before . . . the moving tables came in in 1893. Before this on the 33-inch mill 14 hands were regularly employed on the rolls, now five men are employed and the output has been more than doubled.²⁷

New machinery did in some cases mean lighter work.²⁸ But such improvements in the quality of labor were accidental. Easier work, when it did happen, came as a consequence of new machinery installed for the purpose of increasing profits, not for the purpose of upgrading working conditions. Dan Kinney, once a machinist and then a roller at the Braddock Works, told of the relation between hard work and mechanical improvements:

This mill has not been changed. The roller's work is the same as it was thirty years ago. Electric tables were introduced five years ago, and the power of the engines has been increased so that an ingot can be crushed down more in a single pass than formerly. The output has greatly increased, but the work per ton has not proportionately decreased. In most departments the men are working much harder today than they were ten years ago and wages have decreased.

To Smith Johnson, a worker in the rolling mill at the Schoenberger plant until shortly after the strike, the defeat of the union meant that:

26. Fitch, p. 40.

27. "Yet the plant has so increased its capacity that all the hands have been taken care of and men have not been thrown out of work." Fitch remarked in his notes on this comment by Shea: "It is well to note in this connection, that though the men have been taken care of, they have been obliged to take poorer paying jobs, for the machinery has done away with the necessity of skilled men. Today [1908] over 60% of the employees in an up to date steel mill are common laborers and only a small percentage are highly skilled."

28. Shea also said that ". . . on the old style mill the men had spells. They didn't work more than half time and they couldn't have stood more than that on account of the heat. The work is necessarily light around the rolls . . ."

... there was no limit to a heat. In the period before the strike ... the men used to go to work at 5 AM. They would get out one heat before breakfast. Then, they would get out two heats and stop for dinner; and one heat remained to be gotten out after dinner, they would finish at about 2 PM ... a turn now takes to about 4 PM and output is three times as great.

As William Livingstone said: harder work, longer hours, less pay and no security:

New machinery is constantly displacing the men. A few years ago one could scarcely get through the tube mills on account of the men shoving trucks loaded with pipe. Now there is not a single truck, and one or two men do the work with electric cranes ... one of the mills a year or so ago employed 138 men. It now employs 38. ... Previous to 1892 this department [Open-Hearth at Homestead] was on 8 hours. The longer days came in soon after the strike. Sunday work was a later development. Under the twelve hour day men have no time to themselves. The work is hard and hot. Helpers must always watch the heat and they often had to throw in pigs weighing 50 to 100 pounds; in doing so they have to stand before the door of the furnace where heat is very intense. The heat is exhausting; it is also dangerous because a man is always wet with perspiration; his feet are always wet ... in summer after 12 hours, I am scarcely able to walk home sometimes ... after a 24-hour shift the effect is that much worse.

To the Steel Corporation, "reorganization" meant profits. To the men, "reorganization" meant the destruction of an entire way of life.²⁹

29. This two-sided meaning of "reorganization" was, of course, news to nobody who worked in the Pittsburgh District. Peter Flaherty described a similar situation at the Edgar Thomason mills in 1885: "The union went to pieces in 1885, due directly to the fear of the men that they would lose their positions owing to improvement in methods of steel making. The immediate cause of the panic was the introduction of the direct process; i. e., bringing the molten iron direct from the blast furnace to the converters, instead of running it into pigs and melting it down in the cupolas ... this improvement did away with a larger number of men ... when the union was knocked out they went to 12 hours ... the sliding scale is a farce since the company appoints men to examine books who do not understand them ... in 1892 ... the use of cranes and the automatic handling of the ingot molds came in ... the new method did away with one ladle man, six pit men, four cinder wheelers and three mold setters." Fitch was taken by the paradox of how industrial life progressed: "Latterly we have heard much of the 'merchant princes' and 'captains of industry.' Kindred to these is the term 'iron master.' It is a name to roll over one's tongue, and suggests might and

IV

Destroying the union, however, was not enough. The company sought various means by which to suppress any new attempts by the men to organize. John Martin, once a puddler boss and then a foreman on the finishing crew of the 23-inch mill at Homestead, told Fitch that while the company avoided overt coercion of the men, it did not thereby sacrifice effective control over them; for the company made it clear to the men whom it wanted to be Burgess of Homestead: "If the superintendent were not elected Burgess there would be trouble. For it would have been the mill men who defeated him." Martin continued, implying that the company would not tolerate any collective action by the men for any purpose:

Three or four years ago the carpenters in the mill got together and decided to ask for higher wages. They did not form a union, but simply set a joint request for an advance. All were discharged.

The company demonstrated its policy of strict, absolute control over the men's daily actions, in the manner by which the company's managers treated its employees. Thomas Williams, a heater's helper at Homestead, had once been a reporter for the *National Labor Tribune*, in addition to working in the mills since 1881:

A short time ago, I wanted to get off work before 5:30. My buddy who was there ready to take the work, was perfectly willing that the change should be made at the earlier time, but the superintendent happening by ordered me to remain until 5:30. I told him that the other men could leave the works at 5. The superintendent said that it was not at his connivance. I replied that I didn't know about that. He answered roughly that I wasn't supposed to know. I thought it was the most galling thing to have to submit to such treatment, knowing that there is no redress, that I have no right to independent action. We have only one right left and that is the right to go.

But even this right was something less than what Williams believed it to be. David James explained that changing jobs was tough going,

power. But it has a grim significance to those who know the men upon whose toil these strutting 'iron masters' have raised themselves. To them the name does not suggest heroics." Fitch, p. 234. See also, Hogg, pp. 62-63.

due to the corporation's control of the labor market throughout the Great Lakes region:

If a roller doesn't like it, he can quit his position; but he cannot work anywhere for any more than the U.S. Steel Corporation wants to give him. The courts have decided that it is illegal for a labor union to boycott. The blacklist, however, is not illegal and the company can take away a man's sole means of livelihood.

Jacob Rushe told of some men who quit the Homestead Works in 1906 to look for work in Chicago:

If a man quits a job here, he can't get one elsewhere, unless the superintendent here recommends him. The mills in Chicago were in need of men, but they sent back here and asked if there was anything against these men before they would employ them.

As Henry Smith, a veteran steelworker at Wood's mill put it:

There is a difference in the treatment of men, now that the Trust has control of the mill. If a man is fired now, he is put on the blacklist and not only cannot return to work in this mill, but will be unable to work in any corporation mill. There are men in McKeesport now that work cleaning the streets, who were formerly mill men, but have been blacklisted and cannot get a job.

The Steel Corporation silenced its workers not only by means of force and the threat of various kinds of sanctions, but also by means of a profit-sharing plan with a special kind of bonus. William Livingstone indicated that this plan required workers to conform to a propriety test as a prerequisite for receiving the bonus:

Many of the men have been fooled by this plan and believe the company has really meant to do great things for them in giving them the bonus in addition to the regular dividend. The bonus ties men down to the company; it makes the men believe their interests are identical with those of the company, and it does much to keep down labor activity or agitation of any sort, for by expressed terms of the agreement, only the employee who shows a proper respect in the affairs of the company will receive the bonus . . . But after the first stock issue there was a severe

cut in wages and this cut made up many times to the company all the bonuses that they will have to pay on the stock.³⁰

V

Steelworkers understood the minute details of repression, intensified work, and great physical danger, within their historical experience of conflict with steel companies. They did not express any coherent understanding of the impact of the immigration upon wages, labor organization, and repression. In fact, the same means workers developed to fight against employers blocked any welcome to immigrant workers. Hostility towards immigrants was embedded in a social world coherent enough to provide workers with a powerful enough means to achieve at least some of their wishes in the organization of production. The system of occupational authority, familial and ethnic job recruitment, income distribution and social prestige which enabled workers to contain and often defeat the steel and iron companies for over twenty-five years also proved hostile to massive waves of immigrant labor. The interests, customs, beliefs, language of Poles, Serbians, Croatians, Ruthenians, Hungarians, and others could no more be easily welcomed into Homestead's working class life in 1900 than could the interests, customs, beliefs of many Irish workers or semi-skilled workers or common laborers or especially black workers in 1890.

The arrival of immigrant workers thus raised a new problem: citizenship. Before 1892 nearly all the workers in Homestead lived there and many took an active part in the political life of the community. Residence in Homestead more often than not meant political involvement as well. After 1892, fewer and fewer workers desired to spend their lives in Homestead. The distinction between citizen and foreigner took on great importance. To many skilled steelworkers the destruction of *their* occupational hierarchy, their family and ethnic networks of job recruitment and advancement and their rules for determining the income and political power of workers was the same thing as the loss of their rights as citizens. Foreign workers embodied this sense of a loss of political rights. By 1908, skilled workers spoke of the "demoralization of American youth," the physical threat to the community—through saloons and riots—and of the despotic control of the labor market by a Steel Trust which ran from Chicago to Philadelphia to Birmingham.

30. Fitch, pp. 187-88, 208.

Finally, skilled steelworkers were confronted with a new way of thinking about the conflict between labor and capital. Before 1892, such conflict was seen as one in which the legitimate rights of both workers and employers were constantly redefined within a community setting. By 1908 these same conflicts were being defined by some foreign workers as a struggle between socialism and capitalism. Skilled steelworkers, whether they were inclined to or not, now had to take stands on two new issues: did the working class in Homestead include foreign workers, common laborers and semi-skilled men and, was the conflict between labor and capital over the existence of private property or over the establishment of fair standards of pay, safety and working hours within capitalist enterprise?

The point of departure for many of the skilled men was bitterness and hostility. Dennis Reilly,³¹ who as a worker at Braddock recognized the dilemma of skilled workers at that plant, failed to appreciate the dilemma of immigrant workers:

A great evil is the foreign element. They keep down wages and are very irresponsible; many of the accidents which take place in the mills are directly due to the ignorance or contrariness of the foreigner. They cannot be relied upon and are good workmen only when the boss is watching. They are desirous to get money and not to improve the country. The presence of the Slavic people is demoralizing to the American youth.

Reilly was correct, of course, in noticing that immigrant labor did have the effect of keeping labor cheap. But while he implied that immigrants were at fault for this condition, another worker, David James, directed attention not only to the effects of great numbers of immigrant workers but also to the more general connection between new laborers and the control exercised by the corporation over the labor market:

It might seem at first thought that the rollers would not be affected by the foreign immigration, since the foreigner is not a competitor for a roller's job. But the situation is altered by the fact that there is a monopoly in the steel industry and consequently no competition, while for the secondary positions there is unlimited competition. Hence all the wages come down, for the roller cannot go anywhere else . . . Homestead is crowded

31. Reilly's parents were Irish immigrant farmers in Illinois.

with saloons and the Second Ward is full of foreigners. It requires a double police force to preserve order. There is practically a riot every day. If it were not for the saloon the foreigner might have some inclination and opportunity to develop himself. The second generation of foreigners who have attended the schools is very much superior to their parents . . . there is a native ability among the foreigners, but evidently they have been so crushed and worked so hard in the old country that there is no development.

The same condition which gave rise to the intense hatred and fear of immigrants—the loss of at least partial collective control of work and community—also forced the men to begin thinking about labor as something more than grades of skill and power and social prominence which marked the expectations and behavior of steel and iron-workers. Some workers began to see connections between capitalism as a system of production, work accidents, social classes, and a commitment to socialism. To Andrew Senn, an Irish welder in the Nubia mills, problems of skilled and unskilled, native and foreign workers all were linked within a single system of constraints:

A while ago a foreman's wife died and the superintendent started a paper among the men to raise money to buy flowers. About the same time a Hunkie was killed in the mill, horribly mangled. At my suggestion, the man to whom the superintendent gave the paper asked the superintendent why they couldn't start a paper for the Hunkie, too. The superintendent declared that to be impossible. This Hunkie was killed by getting caught in the machinery. The foreman and the boss crowded about hurriedly and ordered the men to hurry with their work in getting him out of the machinery. Their object was not one of humanity, but they could not afford to let the mill stand idle. It would be just the same if a superintendent were caught in the machinery and they had to stop and get him out. It is the result of the 'system' . . . The working man is given enough to buy food and clothes for himself and no more. He works 12 hours a day, whereas one hour or one hour and a half of labor performed by everyone each day would be sufficient to support the population of the country . . . all the excess 10½ hours a day goes to the employer and many people are living in idleness because workingmen work their time for them . . . Half of the Hungarians and Slavs in the mills are now socialists.

Steelworkers remembered Homestead in 1892 as a community in which social prestige, honor, income distribution, religious and ethnic loyalties and jealousies, job recruitment networks, labor exploitation by fellow workers, job training and advancement in work crews existed side by side with the ever present danger of conflict with the employer. The strike ended this world of work, society and culture and brought to Homestead thousands of immigrant workers who neither understood nor much cared for the older way of living.³² Skilled workers, as well as immigrant workers, lived under the constant pressure of diminishing wages, repression, the twelve hour day and work accidents.³³ Old issues of community, labor organization and conflict between labor and capital were framed in this new context. In 1908 skilled steelworkers, immigrant workers and many others groped for some common ground.

32. See John W. Bennett, "Iron Workers in Woods Run and Johnstown: The Union Era, 1865-1895," (unpublished Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Pittsburgh, 1977).

33. Fitch. pp. 200-01.