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## What the Homestead Steel Strike of 1892 Can Tell Us about Unionization Today

On July 1st, 1892, Henry C. Frick locked out members of the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers (AAISW) from one of the Carnegie Steel Company's Homestead Works steel mills. Frick oversaw production of the mills for his business partner, Andrew Carnegie, at Homestead, Pennsylvania. A dispute between Frick and the AAISW over the renewal of a union contract with a new pay scale led to a deadlock, with Frick declaring an ultimatum that would render the mill effectively non-union if the AAISW refused to agree to his demands. The conflict escalated as Frick employed the county sheriff and then private security from the Pinkerton Detective Agency to remove strikers who blocked entry of striker-breakers into the mill. After a pitched battle between Pinkerton detectives and Homestead strikers that left several dead on both sides, the governor sent Pennsylvania state militia into Homestead to restore order. No longer able to prevent strike-breakers from entering the mill, the strike lost steam and the remaining members eventually voted to end the strike in defeat.

The Homestead Steel Strike of 1892 is remembered as a pivotal moment in labor history, and one that dealt a serious blow to organized labor within the steel industry.<sup>1</sup> Though for all its failures, the struggle between Henry Frick and the AAISW exemplifies exactly why labor unions are necessary in protecting the interests of workers against those of employers and capital<sup>2</sup>. This paper argues that The Homestead Steel Strike of 1892 can be used as a lens to examine the inherent conflict of interests between labor and capital by laying bare the power imbalance that exists between laborers and owners of capital, highlighting the importance of labor unions and

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<sup>1</sup> Bastian, *Flowers for Homestead*, 115 ; Krause, *The Battle for Homestead*, Ch. 1

<sup>2</sup> In reference to the term 'capital,' I define it in the context of this event as those entities that both control economic resources and are oriented towards the private accumulation of wealth. These include banks, captains of industry, and other business interests that were invested in the rapid industrialization and mechanization of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

worker solidarity as a check on the demands of capital, and exposing the ways in which law enforcement is used as a tool in the service of capital's interests. In order to make these points, I explore the myriad moments in which the power differential between capital and labor is exercised by Frick and his representatives to deleterious effect upon the Homestead strikers. I will also detail the ways in which solidarity among workers was necessary in protecting their interests against the union-busting tactics of Frick and the Carnegie Steel Company. Finally, I will interrogate the use of private security, traditional law enforcement, and the military as tools of capital in the struggle against labor in Homestead.

The relationship between laborers and owners of capital is inherently unequal. In an economic system where individuals must sell their time and labor in order to obtain the means of survival, the ones in control of economic resources in a cash economy are the gatekeepers to those means. This was as true in 1892 as it is today, and the reality of this relationship was not lost on either the workers or owners of the Homestead Steel works. Carnegie himself, a self-proclaimed friend of labor, makes the admission in his autobiography that the owners of capital generally hold all of the decision-making power in a business, and therefore labor is at their mercy.<sup>3</sup> On the part of the steel workers, sociologist Linda Schneider notes that their struggle to preserve unionism as a means of economic independence from capital was in itself a recognition of the helplessness of the lone worker before capital.<sup>4</sup> This power differential was exploited by Frick, Carnegie, and their associates during and after the strike in order to further their interests in the struggle against unionism at the mill.

Carnegie Steel and its representatives exerted pressure on the union by co-opting the power of the judicial system to exhaust strikers' limited resources and bruise their collective

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<sup>3</sup> Carnegie, *Autobiography*, 341

<sup>4</sup> Schneider, *Citizen Striker*, 57

moral. After the battle between the town and the Pinkerton detectives on July 6<sup>th</sup>, Pittsburgh journalist Arthur Burgoyne, who was present in Homestead for much of the strike, recounts how Carnegie Steel secretary F.T.F. Lovejoy pressed charges against key strike leaders for the murder of the dead Pinkerton agents and declared that the company had cases against a thousand more people involved in the incident. The workers who did not flee were forced to post \$10,000 bonds and spend a night in jail.<sup>5</sup> This was a shrewd and effective method of exhausting union resources and striking fear into everyone who had taken part in the battle on July 6<sup>th</sup>. It should be noted that while the union turned around and used the same tactic against the company—charging its officials with murder by hiring security forces to come to Homestead, which resulted in the deaths of workers—the company officials were charged the same \$10,000 bonds but were spared the humiliation of a night in jail.<sup>6</sup> One might be tempted to think that the use of the judicial system in this way was equal on both sides in that the system was accessible to both parties and all charged individuals faced the same financial penalties. This position ignores the underlying power disparity between the two parties. Since the lockout on July 1<sup>st</sup>, workers were no longer receiving pay, and by extension the material security that comes with economic security that they were currently fighting to maintain. The company's resources vastly outstripped that of the workers, and so a \$10,000 penalty per person hit the strikers much harder than it did the company.

Individual strikers were also targeted by the company as a means of hurting the union effort through both persuasion and retribution. The best tool of persuasion at the disposal of capital is the ability to provide the means for subsistence and even luxury to the laborer. This tool was employed against the union in the form of cushy salaries offered to highly skilled

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<sup>5</sup> Burgoyne, *Homestead*, 141-143

<sup>6</sup> Burgoyne, *Homestead*, 155-156

workers on the condition that they come back to work on an individual basis. Sociologist Steven R. Cohen argues that this tactic was expressly meant to sow division amongst the ranks of the strikers and get those with the highest value to the strike to cross the picket line.<sup>7</sup> While the carrot was used during the strike to entice workers, once the strike ended the company deployed the stick and blacklisted strike leaders from the steel industry as a form of punishment.<sup>8</sup> These workers, already reduced to poverty from the expenses of the strike, became unable to sell their skilled and specialized labor as a result of a shared covenant between owners of capital. This refusal of entry into the labor market is the best example of the way in which capital acts as a gatekeeper to the means of survival for workers. When one class holds the power to allow or deny the ability of members of another class to survive there is an undeniable power differential, the answer to which has been the organization of and collective action by labor.

If we set our focus for a moment on the strike-breakers, those workers shipped in from out of town to take the place of strikers and resume operations at the mill, we can see one more expression of power exercised by the company to the detriment of workers. The recruitment of new workers to replace striking workers is a common tactic by employers to circumvent a strike and avoid dealing with workers collectively. The company went to great lengths to get strike-breakers into the mill and retain them. Burgoyne recounts how the company provided food and beds within the walled off property for the incoming strike-breakers, and even made plans to build permanent housing within the town for them. After the strike ended, promises of permanent employment and housing that the company made to the strike-breaking workers were broken, and they were replaced by skilled workers scrambling to get their old jobs back after the collapse

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<sup>7</sup> Cohen, *Steelworkers Rethink the Homestead Strike of 1892*, 164

<sup>8</sup> Krause, *The Battle for Homestead*, Ch. 1 ; Burgoyne, *Homestead*, 296-297

of the strike.<sup>9</sup> The way that these strike-breaking workers were treated by Carnegie Steel is a prime example of capital exercising its unilateral decision-making power to further its own interests at the expense of workers, and consequently adds justification for the efforts of the strikers to preserve their union status.

The example above highlights the very reason that organized labor is necessary in holding capital accountable for its promises and to protect worker interests from the whims of employers: without the threat of collective action on the part of workers, individuals are left to fend for themselves in a conflict where they are severely disadvantaged. Historian Paul Krause describes the struggle of organized labor against capital in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as a one that strived for economic security and dignity for individuals as a right and opposed the endless accumulation of wealth by private interests.<sup>10</sup> Included in the broader discourse over who exactly controlled production was the concern over whether it was workers themselves who were in control of their livelihoods or if their continued subsistence was dependent upon their employers. The question of workers' independence from capital and the fluctuation of markets was at the core of their demand for economic security and a life of dignity. Schneider notes how unionized workers connected these values to conceptions of American citizenship and republicanism, and casted themselves in the struggle against capital as representative of American citizenry at large in opposition to a class of plutocrats.<sup>11</sup>

Indispensable to the 1892 strike were the non-union workers at other mills that acted in solidarity with the AAISW. The new pay scale proposed by Frick, which was ostensibly the focus of disagreement between the company and workers, would only have lowered the rates of

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<sup>9</sup> Burgoyne, *Homestead*, 296

<sup>10</sup> Krause, *The Battle for Homestead*, Ch. 1

<sup>11</sup> Schneider, *Citizen Striker*, 51-52

pay for some departments within the mill and left others at their previous rate.<sup>12</sup> Frick and Carnegie framed the strike as a minority of a few hundred workers pressuring thousands of other workers into a strike they otherwise would not want to be a part of.<sup>13</sup> As Schneider notes, however, the AAISW intentionally ramped up recruitment and loosened its membership requirements to allow more unskilled workers into the union. By the time the strike was officially voted on, their union had grown from some 400 to around 3000 workers.<sup>14</sup> There is some truth to the criticism that the AAISW was too exclusive in its membership. It could also be argued that the membership drive and loosening of requirements were acts of selfish desperation on the part of a few hundred workers. The fact remains, however, that thousands of mill workers rallied behind the hundreds in support of their right to a fair wage, even when their own livelihoods were secure. One can speculate that the workers who joined the AAISW from mills unaffected by the new pay scale knew that if Carnegie Steel could do this to AAISW workers, the next year it could happen to them as well.

It is my opinion that the thousands of workers who turned out to a union meeting and voted for a strike against Carnegie Steel understood the coming struggle not to be just about the setting of a pay scale but also about the future of unionism and collective bargaining within the Homestead mills. It was just one decade earlier, in the Homestead Strike of 1882, that the company attempted to add anti-union clauses to workers' contracts in order to prevent any non-union workers from joining a union in the future.<sup>15</sup> During the 1892 negotiations and subsequent strike, Frick himself wasn't shy about his intentions and made it clear that his vision of the

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<sup>12</sup> Congress, *Investigation of the Employment of Pinkerton Detectives*, 22-23

<sup>13</sup> Carnegie, *Autobiography*, 310-311

<sup>14</sup> Schneider, *Citizen Striker*, 50

<sup>15</sup> Krause, *The Battle for Homestead*, Ch. 12

Homestead mills was for them to be entirely non-union.<sup>16</sup> Though the company ultimately succeeded in breaking the strike and Frick got the non-union mill that he wanted, It seems clear that without the solidarity of thousands of workers from mills unaffected by the new pay scale unionism at the mill would have met a swift and uneventful end. Instead, the strike garnered national attention and led to a congressional investigation. Unionism within the steel industry wouldn't recovery from the loss at Homestead for another 40 years, but it's legacy can be found in a shift of national attitudes about violence against workers at the hands of hired security and in anti-Pinkerton legislation that officially separated state authority from private security firms.<sup>17</sup>

It was, in part, the blurred distinction between private security firms like the Pinkerton Detective Agency and the authority of the state to arrest and enact legitimate violence upon the populace that allowed for owners of capital to suppress labor uprisings by force. Historian S. Paul O'Hara describes the Pinkertons as, functionally, a private army for capital, used to stifle discontent among workers and enforce order through the threat of violence.<sup>18</sup> This was certainly how they were meant to be used in Homestead. Following the lockout on July 1<sup>st</sup>, Frick began seeking assistance from the Pinkerton Detective Agency to secure the mill and allow non-union strike breakers entry in a move that he acknowledged was likely to lead to "trouble."<sup>19</sup> With virtually the entire town of Homestead turned against him and the county sheriff proving ineffectual, Frick relied on the quasi-legitimate Pinkertons to secure the mill and resume operations. This of course led to the famous battle of Homestead, where both Pinkerton detectives and Homestead citizens lost their lives. Sociologist Paul F. Lipold notes that in labor struggles, the willingness of actors to risk death and inflict death upon others is indicative of just

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<sup>16</sup> Henry Frick, *Letter to Carnegie 11 July*, 2 ; Burgoyne, *Homestead*, 21

<sup>17</sup> Krause, *The Battle for Homestead*, Ch. 1 ; O'Hara, *Inventing the Pinkertons*, 104

<sup>18</sup> O'Hara, *Inventing the Pinkertons*, 2

<sup>19</sup> Henry Frick, *Letter to Carnegie 11 July*, 1



how grave and serious they consider the conflict to be.<sup>20</sup> For Homestead strikers, the conflict at hand was about their rights as workers and as citizens to economic independence, self-determination, and dignity. That they put their lives on the line to defend the picket line speaks to the gravity of the situation they felt themselves to be in.

Capital also employs the legitimate authority of the state in struggles with labor, and law enforcement is a particularly popular tool with which it exerts pressure on workers. In the case of Homestead in 1892, law enforcement took the form of Allegheny County Sheriff William H. McCleary. At the start of strike, when workers began to guard the entrance to the mill in an effort to prevent strike-breakers from entering, Frick requested that McCleary remove them. McCleary found, however, that the overwhelming support of the strike in Homestead made it impossible for him to do so. Krause argues that Frick anticipated this result, and that he requested the Sheriff's help only as a pretext for hiring Pinkertons when the Sheriff inevitably failed to remove the striking workers from the mill. He goes even further in arguing that even the hiring of Pinkertons was a tactic to sow enough chaos within Homestead that the governor would bring in the state militia and restore the mill to company control, a sentiment that Frick seems to admit to in his private letters.<sup>21</sup> This gradual escalation shows a methodical premeditation on the part of Frick to utilize the authority and physical might of the state in the struggle against the AAISW. From the strikers' perspective, however, they felt that they were on the side of the law. After all, the local authority in Homestead was vested in burgess John McLuckie, a striker himself. Additionally, as the trading of murder charges between the company and strikers showed, strikers considered their actions during the July 6<sup>th</sup> battle to be a justified response to Pinkerton

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<sup>20</sup> Lipold, *Striking Deaths*, 568

<sup>21</sup> Krause, *The Battle for Homestead*, Ch. 2 ; Henry Frick, *Letter to Carnegie 11 July, 2*

aggression. So when the state militia finally arrived, strikers likely believed it would be to their benefit.

To the strikers' dismay, the arrival of the Pennsylvania state militia did not mean a vindication of their struggle against Pinkerton invasion and an intransigent employer, but instead the enforcement of capital's will and the beginning of the strike's collapse. General George R. Snowden, commander of the Pennsylvania National Guard, made the declaration when he arrived in Homestead that his forces would be staying until either the strikers or the company conceded. This seemingly neutral position was contrasted with the fact that his forces escorted strike breakers into the mill and guarded it against strikers, disallowing any contact between the two groups.<sup>22</sup> However sincere General Snowden may have been, his actions effectively removed the strikers' leverage. If the company was allowed to replace strikers with workers who were willing to cross the picket line, the mill could resume operations without need for the workers who were attempting to force concessions with their collective voice. It's worth noting that up until that point striking workers likely considered it their legal right to block off the mill from strike-breakers and withhold their labor without fear of replacement. A mere 3 years prior, during the Homestead Strike of 1889, the union won considerable concessions from the company that allowed for worker input in deciding wages, working hours, and rules and policies within the workplace.<sup>23</sup> The workers considered production within the mill to be under their control, and thus if they decided to stop production it was their right to do so. The retaking of the mill and the admittance of strike-breakers was a harsh wake-up call, and a sign that the strike was doomed for failure. When the strike ended, the absence of collective bargaining for workers meant that all of the negotiated aspects of work that had once been agreed upon by the AAISW and Carnegie

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<sup>22</sup> Burgoyne, *Homestead*, 144 ; O'Hara, *Inventing the Pinkertons*, 94-95

<sup>23</sup> Krause, *The Battle for Homestead*, Ch. 17

Steel became the sole purview of the company and its managers.<sup>24</sup> Workers simply had to either agree to the conditions set by the company, try to find employment elsewhere, or be resigned to poverty and starvation. In this case, it was the forceful use of state power that ended unionism within the Homestead mill.

The lessons of Homestead are relevant even after a hundred years of labor history. Capital still employs any methods at its disposal to further its interests at the expense labor. Organized labor and worker solidarity is still crucial for giving voice to workers' interests. The rise of the gig economy, with its characteristic classification of workers as independent contractors who are not entitled to employment benefits, shows the extent to which owners of capital will go to maximize profits by exploiting workers and skirting laws meant to ensure fair labor practices. As income inequality continues to grow, we are beginning to see signs that workers employed by some of the largest companies in America want more for their work than their employers are willing to give them. Recent Unionization efforts by employees of Amazon, Starbucks, Chipotle, and Trader Joe's show a discontent with what employees are able to get from their employers by selling their labor as individuals. While the success of some individual stores to unionize gives hope that support for organized labor is growing among American workers, there is reason to worry when established and storied unions like United Mine Workers of America are ordered by the National Labor Relations Board to pay damages to Warrior Met Coal Mining, against whom the union has been striking since April of 2021. As we head towards a possible economic recession and the end of a labor market characterized by increased bargaining power for the individual worker, it is all the more important that the fight for collective workers' rights is maintained.

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<sup>24</sup> Cohen, *Steelworkers Rethink the Homestead Strike of 1892*, 168

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