

## **The Homestead Strike, 1892 (<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5349/>)**

The 1882 Homestead Strike in Pennsylvania and the ensuing bloody battle instigated by the steel plant's management have proved to be transformational events in U.S. history. The Homestead Strike was an industrial lockout and strike that began on June 30, 1892, and culminated in a battle between private security agents on July 16, 1892. In the 1880s, Carnegie Steel made major technological innovations to the company. These innovations included an open-hearth system, which enable workers to make steel suitable for structural beams and armor plates for the United States Navy, who paid higher prices for the premium product. Additionally, the plant moved towards a continuous system of production by installing hoists, overhead cranes, charging machines, and buggies. As the mills expanded, so did the labor force, especially the number of unskilled laborers. In an attempt to protect their historic position as well as secure fair wages, the skilled laborers, who were members of the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers union, responded with a strike. Unlike the Great Railroad strike of 1877, this strike was highly organized. Plant manager Henry Clay Frick attempted to defeat the strikers forcibly by hiring 300 armed agents from the Pinkerton Detective Agency. The strikers retaliated, and after casualties and deaths on both sides, the Pinkerton's were defeated. In the following newspaper article from the *Pittsburg Post*, Frick explains his opposition to dealing with the union, his belief that the Pennsylvania governor should send in troops, and his goal of reducing wages at the plant which was the central issue in the conflict.

### **Pittsburgh Post, July 8, 1892**

In an interview yesterday afternoon with Mr. George N. McCain, corespondent of the Philadelphia Press, Mr. H. C. Frick, chairman of the Carnegie Steel Company, Limited, said: "The question at issue is a very grave one. It is whether the Carnegie Company or the Amalgamated Association shall have absolute control of our plant and business at Homestead. We have decided, after numerous fruitless conferences with the Amalgamated officials in the attempt to amicably adjust the existing difficulties, to operate the plant ourselves. I can say with the greatest emphasis that under no circumstances will we have any further dealings with the Amalgamated Association as an organization. This is final. The Edgar Thomson Works and our establishment at Duquesne are both operated by workmen who are not members of the Amalgamated Association with the greatest satisfaction to ourselves and to the unquestioned advantage of our employees. At both of these plants the work in every department; goes on uninterrupted; the men are not harassed by the interference of trade union officials, and the best evidence that their wages are satisfactory is shown in the fact that we have never had a strike there since they began working under our system of management.

"What was the basis of the differences existing at present between the Carnegie company and their men, Mr. Frick?"

#### **FIRST POINT AT ISSUE.**

"There, were three points upon which we differed. The skilled workmen in the Amalgamated Association work under what is known as a sliding scale. As the price of steel advances the earnings of the men advance; as the prices fall their earnings decrease in proportion. While there is no limit to an advance of earnings on the scale, there is a limit at which the decline stops. It is known as the minimum, and the figure heretofore has been \$25 per ton for 4 by 4 Bessemer billets. We believe that if earnings based on the selling price of steel can advance without limit the workmen should be willing to follow the selling price down to a reasonable minimum, and so this figure was finally fixed by the Carnegie Company at the rate of \$23 instead of \$25. The

reason for asking this upon our part was that the Carnegie Company has spent large sums of money in the introduction of new machinery in its Homestead plant, by means of which the workmen were enabled to increase their daily output, thereby increasing the amount of their own earnings. We had originally asked a reduction to \$22, but subsequently agreed to compromise the rate at \$23. The Amalgamated Association was unwilling to consider a reduction below \$24 on steel billets, notwithstanding the fact that the improved machinery would enable their members, even at \$23, to earn more than is paid in other Amalgamated mills. This was the first point at issue.

#### **OTHER STUMBLING BLOCKS.**

Under the present Amalgamated system the date of the expiration of the sliding scale is June 30, annually. We asked that this date be changed to December 31 (same as at Edgar Thomson), for the reason that the change would permit us to take our estimate upon the wages that we must pay during the year, beginning on January 1, so that we would be enabled to make contracts for the year accordingly. This point the Amalgamated Association refused to accede, and demanded the old date. The third proposition was the reduction in tonnage rates in those departments in the mills where the improvements I have spoken of have been made and which enable the workingmen to increase the output and consequently their earnings. Where no such improvements had been made there was no request on our part for a reduction in tonnage rate. In other words, we asked no reduction in any department of which the output had not been greatly increased by reason of our expensive improvements since the scale of 1889 went into effect. As a rule, the men who were making the largest wages in the mill were the ones who most bitterly denounced the proposed revision of the scale, for out of the 3,800 men employed in every department only 325 were directly affected by this reduction.

#### **WORKMEN HELD SWAY.**

"Finding that it was impossible to arrive at any agreement with the Amalgamated Association we decided to close our works at Homestead. Immediately the town was taken possession of by the workmen. An advisory committee of 50 took upon itself the direction of the affairs of the place; the streets were patrolled by men appointed by this committee, and every stranger entering the town became an object of surveillance, was closely questioned, and if there was the slightest reason to suspect him he was ordered to leave the place instantly under the threat of bodily harm. Guards were stationed at every approach to Homestead by the self-organized local government. Our employees were prohibited from going to the mills, and we, as the owners of the property, were compelled to stand by powerless to conduct the affairs of our business or direct its management. This condition of affairs lasted until Tuesday, when I appealed to the sheriff of Allegheny County, stating the facts as I have outlined them. The sheriff visited Homestead and talked with the advisory committee. Its members asked that they be permitted to appoint men from their own number to act as deputy sheriffs; in other words, the men who were interfering with the exercise of our corporate rights, preventing us from conducting our business affairs, requested that they be clothed with the authority of deputy sheriffs to take charge of our plant. The sheriff declined their proposition, and the advisory committee disbanded. The rest of the story is a familiar one; the handful of deputies sent up by the Sheriff McCleary were surrounded by the mob and forced to leave the town, and then the watchmen were sent up to be landed on our own property for the protection of our plant.

"Why did the Carnegie Company call upon the Pinkertons for watchmen to protect their property?"

"We did not see how else we would have protection. We only wanted them for watchmen to protect our property and see that workmen we would take to Homestead—and we have had applications from many men to go there to—were not interfered with.

**DOUBTED THE SHERIFF'S POWER.**

"Did you doubt the ability of the sheriff to enforce order at Homestead and protect your property?"

"Yes sir; with local deputies."

"Why?"

"For the reason that three years ago our concern had an experience similar to this. We felt the necessity of a change at the works; that a scale should be adopted based on the sliding price of billets, and we asked the county authorities for protection. The workmen began tactics similar to those employed in the present troubles. The sheriff assured the members of the firm that there would be no difficulty, that he would give them ample protection and see that men who were willing to work were not interfered with. What was the result? The posse taken up by the sheriff—something over 100 men—were not permitted to land on our property; were driven off with threats of bodily harm, and it looked as if there was going to be great destruction of life and property. That frightened our people. Mr. Abbott was then in charge of the Carnegie, Phipps & Co. business, and was asked by the Amalgamated officials for a conference, which he agreed to, fearful if he did not do so there might be loss of life and destruction of property. Under that stress, in fear of the Amalgamated Association, an agreement was made and work was resumed. We did not propose this time to be placed in that position.

"The Pinkerton men, as generally understood, had been summoned and all arrangements made with them to be on hand in case of failure by the sheriff to afford protection. Is that a fact or not?"

"The facts concerning the engagement of the Pinkerton men are these: From past experience, not only with the present sheriff but with all others, we have found that he has been unable to furnish us with a sufficient number of deputies to guard our property and protect the men who were anxious to work on our terms. As the Amalgamated men from the 1st of July had surrounded our works placed guards at all the entrances, and at all avenues or roads leading to our establishment and for miles distant therefrom, we felt that for the safety of our property, and in order to protect our workmen, it was necessary for us to secure our own watchmen to assist the sheriff, and we knew of no other source from which to obtain them than from Pinkerton agencies, and to them we applied.

**TRIED TO AVOID TROUBLE.**

"We brought the watchmen here as quietly as possible; had them taken to Homestead at an hour of the night when we hoped to have them enter our works without any interference whatever and without meeting anybody. We proposed to land them on our own property, and all our efforts were to prevent the possibilities of a collision between our former workmen and our watchmen. We are to-day barred out of our property at Homestead, and have been since the 1st of July. There is nobody in the mills up there now; they are standing a silent mass of machinery with nobody to look after them. They are in the hands of our former workmen.

"Have the men made overtures for a settlement of the difficulties since this trouble commenced?"

"Yes, sir. A leading ex-official in the Amalgamated Association yesterday, when this rioting was going on, called on the sheriff and I am informed asked him to come down to see me, stating that if he could get a promise that we would confer with the representatives of the Amalgamated

Association looking toward an adjustment of this trouble, that he would go to Homestead and try to stop the rioting.”

“Did you consider his proposal?”

"No, sir. I told the gentleman who called that we could not confer with Amalgamated Association officials. That it was their followers who were rioting and destroying our property, and we would not accept his proposition. At the same time this representative of our former workmen said that they were willing to accept the terms offered, and concede everything we asked except the date of the scale, which they insisted should be June 30 in place of December 31.

#### **FUTURE OF IT ALL.**

“What of the future of this difficulty?”

"It is in the hands of the authorities of Allegheny County. If they are unable to cope with it, it is certainly the duty of the governor of the State to see that we are permitted to operate our establishment unmolested. The men engaged by us through the Pinkerton agencies were sent up to Homestead with the full knowledge sheriff and by him placed in charge of his chief deputy, Col. Gray, and, as we know, with instructions to deputize them in case it became necessary. We have made an impartial investigation and are satisfied beyond doubt that the watchmen employed by us were fired upon by our former workmen and their friends for twenty-five minutes before they reached our property, and were fired upon after they had reached our property. That they did not return the fire until after the boats had touched the shore, and after three of the watchmen had been wounded, one fatally. After a number of the watchmen were wounded, and Capt. Rodgers, in charge of the tow-boat, at their request, had taken the injured away, leaving the barges at our works unprotected, our former workmen refused to allow Capt. Rodgers to return to the barges that he might remove them from our property, but fired at him and fatally wounded one of the crew.

“You doubtless are aware, Mr. Frick, that the troubles at the Homestead mill invited widespread attention, and as a result Congress proposes to investigate the trouble, as well as the employment of Pinkerton detectives?”

“I am aware of the fact, sir. While nobody could regret the occurrences of the last few days more than myself, yet it is my duty, as the executive head of the Carnegie Company, to protect the interests of the association. We desire to, and will protect our property at all hazards. So far as Congressional investigation is concerned, I can say with the utmost candor that we welcome the investigation proposed. We are prepared to submit facts and figures which will convince unprejudiced men of the equity of our position. More than this, I believe that when all of the facts are known revelations will be made which will emphasize the justice of all our claims.”

#### **AS TO POLITICS.**

“How do you regard the present troubles at Homestead from a political standpoint. What effect will it have as a tariff issue in the political campaign of the coming fall?”

"We have never given a thought as to what effect our affairs might have on either of the political parties. We can not afford to run our business and run politics at the same time. It would prove very unprofitable if we were to trim our sails to meet political issues. At the same time I may say that it is not a matter in which the protective tariff is involved, and every intelligent man, whether he be a manufacturer or employee, is aware of the fact. It is, however, a question as to whether or not the proprietors or its workmen will manage the works.

We did not propose to reduce the earnings of our employes below those of Amalgamated men in other mills. As I have said, we have put in improved machinery which other mills do not possess;

increased our output and increased the earnings of our men. We asked that a reduction be made in these departments so that the earnings of our employe's would be on a par with other workmen in other Amalgamated mills. It is not a question of starvation wages, for you will please bear in mind the fact that the proposed equalization of earnings affects only about 325 men out of 3,800, and they are the ones who earn the most money in our establishment. It has no effect upon the wages of more than 15,000 other employees engaged in our establishment. It has no effect upon the wages of more the 15,000 other employees engaged in our establishment at Duquesne, Braddock, Pittsburg, Beaver Falls, and in the coke region."