The Homestead Strike

The Homestead Strike One of the most difficult episodes Andrew Carnegie's life -- and one that revealed the steel magnate's conflicting beliefs regarding the rights of labor -- was the bitter conflict in 1892 at his steel plant in Homestead, Pennsylvania. Carnegie's involvement in the union-breaking action left many men dead or wounded and forever tarnished Carnegie's reputation as a benevolent employer and a champion of labor.

The conflict at Homestead arose at a time when the fast-changing American economy had stumbled and conflicts between labor and management had flared up all over the country. In 1892, labor declared a general strike in New Orleans. Coal miners struck in Tennessee, as did railroad switchmen in Buffalo, New York and copper miners in Idaho.

Carnegie's mighty steel industry was not immune to the downturn. In 1890, the price of rolled-steel products started to decline, dropping from $35 a gross ton to $22 early in 1892. In the face of depressed steel prices, Henry C. Frick, general manager of the Homestead plant that Carnegie largely owned, was determined to cut wages and break the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers, one of the strongest craft unions in the country.

Behind the scenes, Carnegie supported Frick's plans. In the spring of 1892, Carnegie had Frick produce as much armor plate as possible before the union's contract expired at the end of June. If the union failed to accept Frick's terms, Carnegie instructed him to shut down the plant and wait until the workers buckled. "We... approve of anything you do," Carnegie wrote from England in words he would later come to regret. "We are with you to the end."

With Carnegie's carte blanche support, Frick moved to slash wages. Plant workers responded by hanging Frick in effigy. At the end of June, Frick began closing down his open hearth and armor-plate mills, locking out 1,100 men. On June 25th, Frick announced he would no longer negotiate with the union; now he would only deal with workers individually. Leaders of Amalgamated were willing to concede on almost every level -- except on the dissolution of their union. Workers tried to reach the Carnegie who had strongly defended labor's right to unionize. He had departed on his annual and lengthy vacation, traveling to a remote Scottish castle on Loch Rannoch. He proved inaccessible to all -- including the press and to Homestead's workers -- except for Frick.

"This is your chance to re-organize the whole affair," Carnegie wrote his manager. "Far too many men required by Amalgamated rules." Carnegie believed workers would agree to relinquish their union to hold on to their jobs.

It was a severe miscalculation. Although only 750 of the 3,800 workers at Homestead belonged to the union, 3,000 of them met and voted overwhelmingly to strike. Frick responded by building a fence three miles long and 12 feet high around the steelworks plant, adding peepholes for rifles and topping it with barbed wire. Workers named the fence "Fort Frick."

Deputy sheriffs were sworn in to guard the property, but the workers ordered them out of town. Workers then took to guarding the plant that Frick had closed to keep them out. This action signified a very different attitude that labor and management shared toward the plant.

"Workers believed because they had worked in the mill, they had mixed their labor with the property in the mill," explains historian Paul Krause. "They believed that in some way the property had become theirs. Not that it wasn't Andrew Carnegie's, not that they were the sole proprietors of the mill, but that they had an entitlement in the mill. And I think in a fundamental way the conflict at Homestead in 1892 was about these two conflicting views of property."

Frick turned to the enforcers he had employed previously: the Pinkerton Detective Agency's private army, often used by industrialists of the era. At midnight on July 5, tugboats pulled barges carrying hundreds of Pinkerton detectives armed with Winchester rifles up the Monongahela River. But workers stationed along the river spotted the private army. A Pittsburgh journalist wrote that at about 3 A.M. a "horseman riding at breakneck speed dashed into the streets of Homestead giving the alarm as he sped along." Thousands of strikers and their sympathizers rose from their sleep and went down to the riverbank in Homestead.

When the private armies of business arrived, the crowd warned the Pinkertons not to step off the barge. But they did. No one knows which side shot first, but under a barrage of fire, the Pinkertons retreated back to their barges. For 14 hours, gunfire was exchanged. Strikers rolled a flaming freight train car at the barges. They tossed dynamite to sink the boats and pumped oil into the river and tried to set it on fire. By the time the Pinkertons surrendered in the afternoon three detectives and nine workers were dead or dying. The workers declared victory in the bloody battle, but it was a short-lived celebration.

The governor of Pennsylvania ordered state militia into Homestead. Armed with the latest in rifles and Gatling guns, they took over the plant. Strikebreakers who arrived on locked trains, often unaware of their destination or the presence of a strike, took over the steel mills. Four months after the strike was declared, the men's resources were gone and they returned to work. Authorities charged the strike leaders with murder and 160 other strikers with lesser crimes. The workers' entire Strike Committee also was arrested for treason. However, sympathetic juries would convict none of the men.

All the strikers leaders were blacklisted. The Carnegie Company successfully swept unions out of Homestead and reduced it to a negligible factor in the steel mills throughout the Pittsburgh area.

Carnegie found the upheaval and its aftermath a devastating experience. When British statesman William E. Gladstone wrote him a sympathetic note, Carnegie replied:

“This is the trial of my life (death's hand excepted). Such a foolish step -- contrary to my ideals, repugnant to every feeling of my nature. Our firm offered all it could offer, even generous terms. Our other men had gratefully accepted them. They went as far as I could have wished, but the false step was made in trying to run the Homestead Works with new men. It is a test to which workingmen should not be subjected. It is expecting too much of poor men to stand by and see their work taken by others. . . The pain I suffer increases daily. The Works are not worth one drop of human blood. I wish they had sunk.”

Carnegie would come back to Homestead six years later to dedicate a building that would house a library, a concert hall, a swimming pool, bowling alleys, and a gymnasium. However, the man who saw himself as a progressive businessman would always carry pain regarding the incident. "Nothing. . . in all my life, before or since, wounded me so deeply," he wrote in his autobiography. "No pangs remain of any wound received in my business career save that of Homestead."

"It's easy to say that Carnegie was a hypocrite," states historian Joseph Frazier Wall. "And there is an element of hypocrisy clearly in between what he said and what was done. But it's a little too easy to simply dismiss the whole incident on Carnegie's part as an act of hypocrisy. There is this curious reason as to why Carnegie felt it necessary to even enunciate the rights of labor. Frick was the norm, not Carnegie, in management's relationship with labor at that time. And, one can only answer that, once again, it's being torn between wanting to pose as a great democrat and liberal and at the same time wanting to make sure Carnegie Steel came out on top."