A five-month strike, one of the bitterest industrial disputes in US labour history, which seriously weakened organized labour in the steel industry at the Carnegie Steel Company, near Pittsburgh, USA. When the union would not agree to a wage cut, the manager, Henry Frick, refused to negotiate except with individual employees. He then recruited strike-breakers and hired 300 Pinkerton detectives to protect them. The union seized the works, and an armed battle broke out when the Pinkertons attempted to break in, in which several men were killed or injured. Control of the factory was regained only when the National Guard was sent in at Frick's request by the Governor of Pennsylvania.

The Homestead Riot, also known as the Homestead Strike, was a gunfight between union members and private security guards that occurred on July 6, 1892, in Homestead, Pennsylvania. In the 1880s and 1890s, Andrew Carnegie had built the Carnegie Steel Company into one of the largest and most profitable steel companies in the United States. The Homestead steel mill, located a few miles upstream on the Monongahela River from Pittsburgh, was one of the largest of Andrew Carnegie's mills. Over the course of the previous decade, Carnegie had broken unions at most of his other mills, but in 1892, the workers of the Homestead mill were still represented by the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel, and Tin Workers. These workers were overwhelmingly eastern and southern European immigrants and their sons, and had formed a tightly knit community surrounding the mill.

In June of 1892, the contract between the union and Carnegie Steel expired, and Andrew Carnegie, who was in Scotland at the time, gave his operations manager, Henry Clay Frick, carte blanche to break the union. Frick opened his campaign by cutting the workers' wages. The Union, understandably, rejected the wage cut. On June 28, Frick responded by locking the workers out and building a massive, barbed wire topped fence around the plant. On July 2, Frick fired all 3,800 of the workers, and on July 6 sent a force of 300 Pinkerton Agents—private security guards, up the river in two covered barges to occupy the plant.

The workers understood this was the prelude to replacing them with nonunion labor, known to the workers as "scabs." Virtually the entire town stormed the plant and rushed the pier where the guards were trying to dock. Inevitably, shots were fired, and for the next 12 hours, the Pinkertons and the workers exchanged intense fire. Eventually, the workers accepted the surrender of the guards, who were led off the boat and to the local jail for protection. However, they were savagely beaten by the crowd along the way. Seven Pinkertons and at least nine workers were killed, and at least half of the guards were injured.

Frick asked the Pennsylvania governor for help; he responded by sending in 8,500 soldiers of the state National Guard, who occupied the plant. By July 15, the plant was again operational, using replacement workers.
Public support for the strikers, undermined by the brutal treatment of the surrendered Pinkertons, suffered more damage with an assassination attempt on Frick by an anarchist on July 23. In the meantime, waves of criminal charges were lodged against scores of union leaders and workers. While almost all were eventually acquitted, the charges meant the union leaders languished in jail, out of touch with the members, as the strikebreaking proceeded.

The conflict between the union workers and the strikebreakers, meanwhile, took on racial overtones. The union prohibited blacks; many of the strikebreakers, therefore, were blacks brought in from the South. Given the alternatives they faced in the rural South, the steelworker jobs even at the lower wages, provided them with a better life. Incidents of fire bombings and other violence culminated in another riot in November of 1892, this time directed primarily at the black strikebreakers in town.

The union had been broken, however. By October of 1892, the last of the National Guard troops were withdrawn, and by mid-November, some of the workers began reapplying for jobs at the mill.

See also
Union Movements

Further Readings

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