

One hundred years since the Great Steel Strike

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On September 22, 1919, a quarter of a million steelworkers laid down their tools and walked out in a strike that soon stretched from Chicago and St. Louis in the west, to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, just 100 miles from New York City, in the east. At its peak, perhaps 350,000 joined the Great Steel Strike, which brought to a halt much of what was then America's most important industry.

The workers braved vicious repression by state and local authorities. The First Amendment rights to assembly and free speech were dispensed with in some steel towns. Private guards, police, and state troopers—the “Cossacks,” the workers called them, in a reference to the Czar's gendarme—menaced and attacked picket lines. Gary, Indiana was briefly occupied by 2,000 federal troops. Company towns evicted families. Company stores cut off credit. Without income, workers suffered hunger and cold.

But the steelworkers and their families were accustomed to great hardship. Through much of the autumn and deep into the winter they held out. However, despite the great industrial power they had shown, by December the strike began to dissipate, and in early January, 1920 it was called off. The workers returned to the mills, badly beaten by US Steel, then the world's largest corporation, and the other major steel firms.

To prevent the reemergence of another similar struggle, in the aftermath of the strike US Steel implemented a far-reaching industrial espionage program. The steel trust paid a legion of post office employees, local businessmen, and “stool pigeons” to learn what workers read, what they thought, and what their organizations were. Socialist workers were a particular target, and for good reason. The influence of socialism, and the Russian Revolution, was felt everywhere in the Great Steel Strike, in spite of the strike leaders' best efforts to insist it was a mere “bread and butter” struggle.

One of the most important labor struggles in American history, the Great Steel Strike and its defeat hold crucial strategic lessons for today's workers. In particular, it demonstrates that major working class industrial struggles must be guided by a political perspective that matches the dimensions of the task at hand.

The trade unions that attempted to organize the steelworkers, under the American Federation of Labor (AFL), failed catastrophically in this regard. Their narrow organizational methods did not even approximately correspond to the nature of the steel industry. They had no perspective for overcoming the racial division the steel firms foisted upon workers. And their political subordination to the Democratic Party and Woodrow Wilson and the war aims of American imperialism during World War I handicapped the strike from the outset. In the final analysis, the character of the trade unions themselves was the most formidable barrier to organizing the steel industry.

The Steel Industry

The half-century that separated the conclusion of the Civil War and the start of World War I was a time of dramatic change. In 1865 there were no cars, telephones, airplanes, or skyscrapers; there were no electric lights, no recorded human voice, and no such thing as a motion picture. By 1914, all these wonders and more existed.

As for industry, in the age of Lincoln there were few large factories even in the North. “Manufacture” remained close to its Latin root—to do by hand. The steel industry dramatizes the point. In the 1850s, “iron master”—and Radical Republican—Thaddeus Stevens employed about 200 workers at his Cambria Iron Works near Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. When General Jubal Early's Confederate soldiers destroyed it in their invasion of June and July 1863, a single cavalry division managed the job in a day.

The steel industry of 1914 would have been unrecognizable to both Stevens and his Confederate antagonists. Now mills sprawled over many acres, their smokestacks reaching hundreds of feet into the air. They employed thousands upon thousands of workers, and a few 10,000 or more, including the Homestead Works near Pittsburgh and the massive US Steel complexes in South Chicago and Gary.

The mills defined a vast region. Huge ore freighters plied the Great Lakes from Duluth, Minnesota at the head of Lake Superior across a band of cities whose populations grew in stride with steel and other industries: Milwaukee, Chicago, Gary, Detroit, Toledo, Cleveland, Erie (Pittsburgh's lakeport), and Buffalo. The development of the Bessemer furnace and the coking process, by which bituminous coal was converted for industrial purposes, pulled into the steel industry's orbit the coalfields stretching from Appalachia to southern Illinois.

By 1914, the operations of the small-time iron masters such as Stevens had long been devoured by the likes of Andrew Carnegie. Steel became a highly capitalized industry that invested heavily in new technology. Criticized from the standpoint of the British steelmakers, who clung to their physical plant far longer, Carnegie responded, “It is because you keep this used-up machinery that the United States is making you a back number.”

But Carnegie's ruthless cost-cutting and relentless drive for efficiency had made the industry chaotic, placing enormous deflationary pressures to the economy throughout the late nineteenth century. Finance capital intervened. In a process that well illustrates Lenin's analysis of the rise of imperialism, in 1901 the leading banker, J.P. Morgan, bought out Carnegie as well as key rivals, creating US Steel, the world's largest corporation. It was initially capitalized at the unheard of sum of \$1.4 billion, and accounted for, by itself, something approaching one-twentieth of America's gross domestic product.

The “steel trust” monopolized industry and did away with competition in the domestic market. However, this accomplished, it could ultimately find outlet and growth only on the world market. Similar processes, as Lenin explained, were underway in the other major capitalist countries, driving the major powers toward a war of each against all.

The Steelworkers

While the capitalists and their governments divided the world and prepared for war, the same forces were, objectively speaking, drawing workers together. The American steel industry pulled to the mills workers from dozens of lands. Such was the influx that, when the Great Steel Strike came, it was derided as a struggle of “foreigners” or a “Hunky strike.” By that year, eastern and southern European immigrants and their sons likely made up well over 70 percent of the industry workforce. In the mills they joined “American” workers—who were just as often the sons of Irish, British, German, or Scandinavian immigrants.

World War I blocked the steel mills from their European supply of labor. The manpower shortage was made up, to a considerable extent, by the Great Migration of African Americans from the rural South. They poured into the mills by the thousands, taking jobs on the shop floor next to other recent arrivals from Poland, Hungary, Russia, Lithuania, Serbia, and elsewhere. The black migrants brought with them the bitter memory of the system of Jim Crow segregation, and all its violence and humiliations. But in the northern cities, they discovered that the “machine” Democratic allies of the southern Jim Crow politicians violently enforced racial segregation in the neighborhoods. These politicians, who worked hand in glove with the industrialists, helped to whip up racial animosity toward the latest arrivals, triggering the “race riots” that killed scores in East St. Louis in 1917 and Chicago in 1919—on the very eve of the Great Steel Strike.

Nonetheless, the brutal conditions in the mills represented a powerful unifying force. In steel, twelve-hour shifts were the norm, and in 1913 the average worker labored 66 hours per week. Death and injury were common. In the course of one year in a single South Chicago mill, 46 men died on the job and another 386 were “disabled permanently.” Workers typically lived in heavily polluted environments, in crowded housing, and at little better than subsistence level. They often resided within walking distance of the mills that towered imperiously above their neighborhoods, a constant reminder of the power of the steel firms over their lives.

The Unions

No “pure and simple” trade union would be equal to organizing such a polyglot workforce against such a powerful opponent as US Steel and its satellite firms. But the trade unions that existed in the steel industry under the AFL were singularly unsuited for the task.

The torrent of immigrant workers into the steel industry over the preceding quarter century was corollary to a dramatic reorganization of labor in the mills. The mechanization of production and the proliferation of time-motion studies and “scientific management” schemes sought to put, in the words of efficiency expert Frederick Winslow Taylor, “the manager’s brain under the working man’s cap.” The capitalists’ aim in steel, meatpacking, and other industries was to break the monopoly, long held by skilled workers, over the knowledge of production.

The unions in steel lagged badly behind these developments. They were craft unions, which organized workers according to skill in the plants. The steel unions clung to this outlook even as the possibility of such organization evaporated in the face of industrial and technical developments and even after they were crushed in strikes, as they had been by Carnegie in the Homestead Strike of 1892.

The AFL had long refused any effort to mobilize the unskilled workers in the steel industry. It viewed with contempt the masses of “foreign” industrial workers, and at the national level campaigned for immigration

exclusion. As for African American workers, most AFL unions barred them from membership, the United Mine Workers being the most notable exception. The steel firms were wise to this, and during the Great Steel Strike they recruited tens of thousands of African Americans as strikebreakers.

The eighteen or so craft unions in the industry lingered on after Homestead and a subsequent corporate offensive after the formation of US Steel. Doing little or no bargaining, by the time of the Great Steel Strike most were not much more than fraternal social clubs for the better-off workers and the union officials. Thus, the organization that was finally commissioned by AFL head Samuel Gompers to lead the organizational drive in steel, the National Committee for Organizing the Iron and Steel Workers, was bound to respect the jurisdictional turf of all the craft unions. Leading the National Committee was William Z. Foster, the future leader of the Stalinist American Communist Party.

The political conceptions of Gompers, the AFL, and the National Committee proved bankrupt. Few AFL bureaucrats could ever have been accused of radical thinking. Yet in its formative years in the 1880s, the “House of Labor” had accepted, as a matter of course, that there existed a fundamental conflict between owners and workers. This outlook ended once and for all in World War I, when the AFL embraced corporatism—the belief that the victory of American imperialism (“the war effort”) and the subsequent spoils accruing to US big business would be shared by the workers.

Offered a semi-official status by the Wilson administration, Gompers and the rest of the AFL worked mightily to keep workers from striking during the course of US involvement in WWI. Nonetheless, in each year, 1917 and 1918, over 1 million workers walked off the job in a strike wave spurred by rampant inflation and a growing politicization among workers. Yet even after the war, and as the corporations sharpened their knives for a counteroffensive, Gompers sought to keep the faith with Wilson. As steelworkers “stampeded” into the National Committee over the summer of 1919, Gompers repeatedly appealed to Foster to delay a strike so that a deal might be concluded. But US Steel had no intention of recognizing the union.

The delay proved deadly. The productive capacity of the steel industry, built up during the war, was being scaled back. The severe recession of 1920 was approaching. US Steel and the other producers could wait out a strike. Worse, the steel strike faltered and collapsed even as a powerful strike of coal miners—also numbering 350,000—began under the United Mine Workers. Rank-and-file coal miners that year were demanding the nationalization of the coal industry, which was linked closely to the steel industry. But there is nothing to suggest that the UMW, the National Committee, or the AFL leadership ever considered joint industrial action.

Socialism

Historians, beginning in the 1950s, have tended to view the Red Scare of the early 1920s as a paranoid overreaction. However, a closer reading of the period shows that the growing strike wave—which counted some 4.5 million workers in 1919 alone—was indeed intersecting with various forms of working-class radicalism under the impact of the Russian Revolution.

The AFL finally agreed to allow the steel organizing drive only after it became apparent that to do otherwise would risk a far more radical outcome. The National Committee pleaded with the steel bosses, in the words of one of its organizers, that the industry’s “only safety lay in letting the men be organized into a conservative trade union affiliated with the A.F.L.”

The revolutionary syndicalist I.W.W. (the Industrial Workers of the World, also known as “the Wobblies”) had spearheaded major strikes of steelworkers and iron miners in Pennsylvania and Minnesota, respectively, in the years before the war. In 1917, spontaneous strikes hit mill after mill. These were blamed on the Wobblies in spite of the fact that the entire I.W.W. leadership had been arrested by the Wilson administration, including William “Big Bill” Haywood. The late David Montgomery estimated that one-sixth of all strikes in 1917 were headed up by the I.W.W., and many of the rest “breathed the spirit of One Big Union.”

Meanwhile, the Socialist Party (SP) grew rapidly in 1917 and into 1918, when its leader, Eugene Debs was also arrested by Wilson for opposing the war. The SP growth was concentrated among industrial workers and especially the eastern and southern European “Foreign Language Federations,” that were rooted in the great steel centers.

Beginning in 1918, walkouts in the steel industry were attacked as “Bolshevik” strikes. Hostility to the workers’ revolution in Russia fused, in the media propaganda, with the strike wave of “foreigners,” many of whom were drawn from lands in Europe gripped by revolution. Predictably, when the Great Steel Strike came in 1919, the media claimed that Bolsheviks were behind it as well. In fact many of the workers were indeed inspired by the October Revolution.

The Ukrainian Socialist Federation in the United States, after announcing its support for the Russian Revolution, saw its membership triple. One Finnish informant warned a conservative socialist speaker to “inject considerable bolshevism into your talk and necessity for Industrial democracy the world over” if he wanted to contain the anger of an audience of Finnish workers drawn from the Superior, Wisconsin ore docks. A strike of 13,000 Toledo workers in the summer of 1919 formed an organization called “The Workers, Soldiers, and Sailors Council.” An investigator for the Wilson administration warned that steelworkers in Hammond, Indiana could not be contained much longer, and that they were operating under the “doctrines [of] Bolshevism and socialism.” An informant in Pittsburgh explained that steelworkers “beg for literature and devour any labor or radical literature they can put their hands on.” In Gary, on May 4, a crowd estimated at between 4,000 and 10,000 was broken up by the authorities. Investigators discovered that the demonstration’s slogans were the following:

“We demand the liberation of political prisoners; We demand recognition of the Soviet Government; We demand the immediate release of our Eugene Debs and Wm. Haywood; We demand immediate withdrawal of American troops from Russia.”

As David Sapos, a contemporary labor commentator concluded,

“The upshot of the matter is this: the methods of the organization used in the steel strike were old fashioned and became ostentatiously so as the organizers recognized the radical possibilities...The cry of Bolshevism was... a dangerous thing because it advertised to the mass of immigrant steel workers, who went down to defeat under old flags and old slogans, an idea and untried methods under which they might be tempted to make another battle.”

Lessons

The experience of the defeat of the Great Steel Strike holds key lessons for workers today.

On the most immediate level, old, outmoded forms of union organization that do not correspond to existing conditions cannot simply be reformed or revived. That was Foster’s great misconception in 1919. The organizers of the National Committee attempted to impose 18 craft

unions on a single, unskilled workforce in a massive industry. Those unions were in fact hostile to the workers they were meant to organize, and became ever more so as the workers demonstrated their industrial strength and gravitated toward socialism, as Sapos observed. As the US autoworkers demonstrated in the struggle to unionize their industry in the 1930s, the old unions had to be literally driven out of the plants.

Today, 100 years later, autoworkers the world over are watching as nearly 50,000 of their brothers and sisters face off against General Motors. The workers’ union, the United Auto Workers, is far more corrupt than anything that could have been imagined a century ago. As the widening corruption scandal makes clear its entire leadership is on the payroll of the auto firms. Like all the nationally-based unions, the UAW opposes to the bitter end any organization with workers in Mexico, Canada, Europe, Asia, and Latin America. Yet the auto industry is a global industry. No progressive solution is possible that is not based on the recognition of this objective reality.

A century ago the AFL unions maintained racial exclusions that barred black workers from membership, accepting a division of the workforce that benefitted the steel bosses and helped create a vast pool of strikebreakers. Today the practitioners of identity politics—many posing as “progressives” and even socialists—insist that the essential social problem is “white privilege.” The names and the finger pointing have changed, but the same political party is stoking racial politics then as now: The Democratic Party. Workers must learn the lesson of 1919. Terrible consequences arise from the promotion of racial and national divisions.

A century ago workers involved in the Great Steel strike and other struggles of the period exhibited an immense attraction to socialism. The American ruling class responded with the Red Scare and immigration exclusion. Ever since, anti-communist and anti-immigrant politics has formed the bedrock of its capitalist ideology. Workers must recognize anti-communism for what it is: an alien class politics at odds with their most basic interests.

With the re-emergence of the class struggle on a global scale, workers must arm themselves with the most advanced ideology, corresponding to the immensity of the tasks that they face. The International Committee of the Fourth International and the *World Socialist Web Site* are providing the socialist and internationalist leadership and perspective that are needed for this fight.

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