

Like a Penitentiary

STEEL AND THE ORIGINS OF THE OPEN SHOP

In the course of making steel, companies like Republic also manufactured a potent system of labor repression. This is the essential metaphor in *Smoke and Steel*, Carl Sandburg's epic poem about the contradictions and tragedies of steel labor in the early twentieth century: "Steel barb-wire around the Works . . ." ¹ In the decades preceding the Little Steel Strike, this burgeoning capacity to control labor, which the steel companies embraced as a mandate of industrial production, converged with the increasing obsolescence of traditional patterns of craft unionism to almost eliminate union representation from the entire industry. The industry flaunted this condition, which it described, misleadingly, as if it really meant a benign indifference to unionism, as an "open shop" program. But the same factors that secured the open shop's reign in the first decades of the century primed a resurgence of union activism in the mid-1930s and shaped the Little Steel Strike. To understand the strike, one must therefore trace the history of the open shop, beginning with events decades earlier in Homestead, Pennsylvania.

HOMESTEAD AND THE LITTLE STEEL STRIKE

Today a monument to industrial decline, in 1892 Homestead was a bustling company town and the scene of one of the most important labor conflicts in American history. On July 6, 1892, three hundred heavily armed operatives of the Pinkerton National Detective Agency set out to prevent union workers there from cordoning a large mill owned by Carnegie Steel. Forewarned of the Pinkertons' arrival, armed unionists converged on the detectives as they attempted an early morning landing at the plant from two river barges.

The confrontation led to a gun battle that trapped the Pinkertons in the immobilized, decked-over barges. A siege ensued, which ended only when union leaders and local officials secured the detectives' surrender. An ugly scene then unfolded as the captured Pinkertons were repeatedly assaulted by incensed union people, some just apprised of the deaths of friends and loved ones in the day's fighting, before union leaders and local officials restored the peace.

Even before this clash, officials with Carnegie Steel were working hard to cast the unionists as vile, irresponsible enemies of public order and private property, and local authorities as derelict in their duty to keep the peace and protect the company's right to operate the plant without interference. When the newspapers got hold of the Pinkertons' humiliating rout, such charges flowed freely, accompanied by demands that the militia be dispatched. State authorities agreed, and on July 12 the first of some eighty-five hundred troops arrived, guns at the ready. They forced aside the picketers and allowed Carnegie Steel to fully reopen the mill with scabs. When after weeks of further conflict things finally settled down, around a dozen people had been killed, most of them unionists; and dozens of people, all unionists, had been charged with murder and treason.

The dispute at Homestead primarily involved workers aligned with the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel, and Tin Workers (AA). Although the unionists routed the Pinkertons that July day at the river, they lost their bid to defend favorable working conditions and effective union representation. In fact, the struggle at Homestead was a crucial battle in a campaign by the steel industry to establish an open shop throughout the industry. Even as the fighting raged on the banks of the Monongahela River, workers, including many far from the scene, understood that defeat at Homestead would undercut any claim that their interests could rival those of property and capital.²

At the time of the Homestead affair, unionism was relatively well established in the iron and steel industry. In 1858, following their defeat in a strike, "iron puddlers" in the Pittsburgh area founded an organization called the Sons of Vulcan. The puddlers proceeded in great secrecy, as even then unionists risked being tarred as radicals, fired, and blacklisted. Not until 1862 did the Sons of Vulcan make public its existence. Membership gains were slow but methodical. In the mid-1870s the organization entailed over eighty separate "lodges," as its locals were called, and "was regarded as one of the strongest unions in the United States."³ A craft union, the Sons of Vulcan

embodied a model of unionism—by which unions only admitted workers possessed of particular skills and organized them strictly on this basis—that would predominate into the 1930s.

In 1876 the Sons of Vulcan “amalgamated” with two other craft unions built around skills on the “finishing” side of the trade to form the AA. The birth of the AA was accompanied by the creation of other, smaller unions at locations and skill levels scattered elsewhere in the industry. In the years leading up to Homestead, these organizations were involved in numerous strikes and lockouts and managed to secure favorable agreements on wages and substantial control over working conditions.⁴ They also built impressive membership rolls. By 1892 perhaps half of the industry’s workers were organized to some extent, either by the AA or one of the independent unions. On the eve of the Homestead dispute, the AA counted nearly twenty-five thousand fully fledged members. It was among the most powerful unions in the country and its health measured that of the entire labor movement. Yet within just over ten years, the AA was in crisis and unionism in the industry had been almost completely destroyed.⁵

The most immediate reason for this dramatic shift in labor’s fortunes was the campaign that began at Homestead. The Homestead dispute was engineered by the company’s director, chairman, and part owner, Henry Clay Frick, to break the AA’s hold within the plant. Frick provoked the unionists by insisting on retrograde contractual terms he knew union workers would not accept without a struggle. Frick then locked out key contingents of workers as his deadline for agreement to the contract expired. Although insidious, this stratagem was hardly a secret, as Frick publicly announced his intention to break the AA. While the company’s founder and principle owner, Andrew Carnegie cavorted in Scotland and worried over his public image, Frick stockpiled guns and ammunition and had “Fort Frick” buttressed with barbed wire, searchlights, fencing with loopholes for riflemen, and water cannon.⁶

The hemorrhage of AA members began soon after the union’s defeat at Homestead, as Carnegie Steel, which dominated the industry, systematically withdrew recognition of the union at all of its other plants. Other steel producers followed suit. Mill by mill, they renounced their union contracts or insisted upon unacceptable terms; they refused to negotiate new agreements to replace expired contracts; or they simply opened new mills on a nonunion basis. By 1894 the AA’s membership had already been reduced by more than half, to about ten thousand. And greater losses were to come.⁷

Nine years after Homestead, a merger centered on Carnegie Steel created U.S. Steel. A watershed moment in the evolution of modern capitalism, the birth of this colossal new firm held in store another blow to steel unionism, as the new corporation was founded with an explicit commitment to holding the line against any extension of union representation anywhere in its domain. Later, “the Corporation,” as it was often known, took an even more aggressive approach, reconstituting nearly all of its many subsidiaries as open shops.⁸ In fact, extending the open shop in steel was part of the reason U.S. Steel was created in the first place, for this aligned with the company’s congenital commitment, inherited from Carnegie himself, to employ rationalized management and production techniques, gigantic scale, and raw power in a relentless drive for efficiency and profits. “He always wanted to know the cost,” said one of Carnegie’s business partners. “The pressure is always on to make all the economies you can.”⁹ Achieving these economies required longer hours, faster paces of work, lower wages, and no unions.

In the first two decades of the new century, the open shop emerged as both an ideal or ideology and a concrete set of practices for ridding firms of unions and preventing their resurgence. Ideologically, the open shop appealed to fanciful notions of negotiated individual contracts and the “right to work” in defiance of union contracts and bargaining demands. Practically, it rested on coercive and sophisticated means of union repression, including blacklists; espionage; “yellow-dog” contracts, by which workers foreswore union affiliation; dependency-creating company welfare programs; intimidation and outright violence; and schemes for ensuring the companies’ domination of civil life and public authority in the communities surrounding their mills. With these measures, companies decimated union support and crushed the strikes and organizing campaigns that occurred in the early part of the 1900s.

THE ASCENDANCE OF STEEL AND THE CHANGING GROUND OF CLASS CONFLICT

The growth of the open shop was deeply rooted in the industry’s transition from iron to steel production, even though the two metals are really but different categories of alloys of the element iron.¹⁰ For more than two hundred years, ferrous metal production in America focused on making iron, in the conventional sense, in its two most commercially significant forms: wrought

iron and cast iron. For the time being, steel was both expensive to produce and needed for few applications, and so remained a specialty product. As rising industrial demand combined with improvements in production techniques to spur increases in production, the industry spread west into regions south and southeast of Lake Erie and into the upper Ohio River valley, where producers had ready access to the necessary raw materials: iron ore, coal, limestone, and water for transportation, power, and processing. Between 1830 and 1860, annual iron production in America tripled; and by 1860, the iron industry was “large and well established.”¹¹

Steel began to supplant iron in ferrous metal production in the 1860s. By the 1890s, dedicated ironworks were being replaced with steel-making operations. Among the reasons for this shift were technical innovations in the manufacturing process. The most prominent of these was the advent of a remarkably efficient method of producing steel from raw iron: the Bessemer conversion process. Bessemer converters performed the most essential function in rendering steel, which is to adjust (and mainly reduce) the carbon content of the raw, or “pig,” iron produced in blast furnaces, by driving superheated air through the still-molten iron, producing a flaming reaction that burned carbon and other impurities out of the iron. The result was great quantities of cheap steel. Along with the slower but higher-capacity and easier to control open hearth method, Bessemer conversion rapidly replaced the smaller-scale and much more skill-intensive “puddling” method of refining pig iron into more useful alloys (including steel), as well as the similarly cumbersome “blister” and “crucible” techniques for making steel.¹²

The shift from iron to steel had enormous implications for labor conditions. From the outset, modern steel-producing operations featured lower rates of unionization than ironworks. One reason for this was incumbency. The AA and other craft organizations had come to prominence when iron still predominated and had built their jurisdictions around skills unique to iron production. So rooted in iron were these unions that their members and leaders had difficulty even understanding the nature of their steel-making brothers’ work or their grievances. At the same time, the steel-producing operations that were built in the late 1800s and early 1900s arose in an increasingly open shop environment. Union men were not established in these mills and the companies successfully resisted attempts to organize them.¹³

Steel also changed labor relations by vastly increasing the scale of plant and overall production in comparison with ironworks, which had remained

relatively small through the 1800s. Unlike the older methods of refining pig iron, which could only be performed on a small scale, Bessemer production could be steadily scaled up, generating greater efficiencies and lower marginal costs while also bidding up the capital outlay required to run a competitive operation. Open hearth furnaces, too, became progressively bigger and were operated in larger and larger arrays, or batteries. By the mid-1930s, open hearth production, which produced better steel, had largely displaced the Bessemer process, a change that further increased the capital investment required for a competitive operation.¹⁴

A comparable development characterized the most basic stage of production: the smelting of ore to produce pig iron. Fundamentally unchanged for centuries, smelting involves burning iron ore and limestone in a blast furnace. By the mid-1800s, the use of distilled mineral coal, or coke, in lieu of wood charcoal or raw coal, to fire this process was allowing companies to erect much larger furnaces, as the coke would burn properly even when stacked very high inside the furnaces. Also in the mid-1800s, producers began to power the blowers that developed the blast with steam engines, rather than traditional waterwheels. By dispensing with the need for a gradient of falling water, this machinery permitted the plants to install multiple furnaces (and other powerful machinery) nearer to each other and also permitted the works, which still required much water, to feed on lakes and slow-moving rivers. It likewise allowed for even larger furnaces. By the 1890s, gigantic coke-fired blast furnaces, often clustered together and almost always christened with feminine names, were predominant.¹⁵

The mills grew in another dimension as well. Pig iron and steel production were increasingly joined together, and joined to other processing operations, in the same vertically integrated plants. A principle reason for this is that steel, if not made entirely from scrap, has to be refined from molten pig iron. A major advantage of a vertically integrated steel mill is that it allowed the pig iron from the blast furnaces to be refined while still heated, by carrying it in rail cars and ladles over to nearby steel-making furnaces. Otherwise, the raw iron had to be cast in molds, cooled, transported, and remelted, all at great expense, before being made into steel. Integration offered other technical advantages, such as the ease of using the combustible gas generated in the blast furnaces or coke-making ovens to heat the furnaces; as well as the ease of recycling scrap metal cuttings from the “finishing” mills, where steel was further alloyed and shaped into user-ready forms. These advantages were not all-determinative and not all plants were fully integrated. However by

the 1930s, smelting and steel making were only rarely removed from finishing operations, or from each other.

More efficient methods for rolling, drawing, or otherwise rendering steel into useful shapes also proliferated with the turn to steel, as steel production entailed the development of refined alloys that were tailor-made for these milling processes. Often broadly described as either finishing or “rolling” mills, these actually involved a number of operations for shaping steel into consumer-ready stock besides rolling mills proper. Before it could be processed in these ways, the steel coming out of the furnaces and converters had to undergo a series of “semifinishing” operations in which it was formed into “billets,” “blooms,” or slabs. Though obviously distinct, for convenience of description these “primary” or “preparatory” mills were also sometimes lumped into the category of finishing mills.¹⁶ Not only did the finishing mills—to use the term in this broad way—grow in size according to their own economies of scale; but also, as the output of the steel-making furnaces and converters increased, so did the need for larger-capacity machinery at this end of the production process.¹⁷

The trend toward ever-larger steel plants completed the demise of iron production and its accompanying labor relations, as steel became much cheaper than fungible forms of iron.¹⁸ The move toward larger installations also brought with it increasingly anonymous and distant relations between workers and capitalists. Although there had always been bosses of some sort standing between workers and owners, the huge new mills further attenuated these workplace relations with multiple layers of managers and supervisors. These changes eroded traditional, craft-oriented forms of collective bargaining and union-based labor relations, which, though conflict-ridden in their own way, had put a premium on familiar and relatively informal negotiations.

The efficient production of steel mandated unprecedented controls over both machinery and workers. The resulting culture of technical rationalization subsumed larger issues of management, expressing itself in an ethos of relentless cost cutting and profit maximization, realized through advanced methods of accounting and business planning and increasingly hierarchical, top-down systems of labor control. This regime redefined ownership and management, attracting into or otherwise cultivating within those ranks an industrial aristocracy of “steel masters” who, like Carnegie and Frick, were ruthlessly calculating, unsentimental in business matters, and altogether very capable extractors of profit from earth, machines, and labor.¹⁹ In the end, steel remade men, just as men made steel.

This new business culture converged with technical changes in production to propel a very strong trend toward concentration in the industry. Already at the time of the 1892 clash at Homestead, Carnegie Steel produced half as much steel as all the mills in Great Britain.²⁰ In March 1901, Carnegie merged with seven other large companies to form U.S. Steel. The new firm was capitalized at \$1.4 billion—7 percent of the gross national product—and was by far the largest business enterprise in the world.²¹ For the first three decades of its existence, U.S. Steel was less an integrated business than a holding company comprised of dozens of smaller, autonomous subsidiaries that often continued to go by their premerger names. It was to distinguish them from these subsidiaries that companies not in the fold of U.S. Steel were referred to as “independents.”

These independents, including the firms that would constitute Little Steel, also moved toward concentration. First incorporated in 1860, Bethlehem *Iron* Company was reorganized as Bethlehem *Steel* Company in 1899, and reorganized again in late 1904. The firm grew considerably in the first decade of the twentieth century, such that total annual revenues increased from around \$15 million in 1905 to nearly \$150 million in 1915. For the company's president, Charles Schwab, the logic of expansion was clear: to realize the “undoubted advantage” of large plants over smaller ones, to reduce marginal expenses to an absolute minimum, and to leave “nothing . . . to chance.”²² Republic, referred to as the “rolling mill trust” when organized in 1899 (as Republic *Iron* & Steel Company), represented an initial consolidation of some thirty-four separate steel and mining companies. Over the next decade and a half, the company more than doubled its production capacity. Youngstown Sheet & Tube (née Youngstown *Iron* Sheet & Tube), founded in 1900, and Inland, which began production in 1894, followed a similar course. Along with the two other Little Steel companies that would not directly figure in the strike, National Steel and American Rolling Mill Company (ARMCO), these companies emerged as major producers with fully integrated operations. Though never so large as U.S. Steel, they accumulated extensive “captive” mining, rail, and maritime shipping assets. Already in 1900, for example, Republic owned ten ore mines, four coal mines, three stone quarries, and two railroads, with interest in another.²³

The reasons behind this trend toward both integration and concentration were not only technical; there was also something captured in Charles Schwab's quip about leaving “nothing . . . to chance.” Owners and managers embraced vertical integration in part because it promised greater control

over the circumstances under which they produced and sold their products. The same quest drove the consolidation of disparate firms into larger companies in the first place.²⁴ Underpinning concentration, especially, was also the question of capitalization. The rapid move toward more capital-intensive operations generated efficiencies that favored still greater capitalization and were difficult to realize without ready access to cash and credit. By 1936 the investment required for the efficient operation of a plant with a blast furnace was around \$100 million (about \$1.5 *billion* in today's dollars, by conventional indexing); the initial cost of a new blast furnace was \$3.5 million; and a new, continuous rolling mill cost about \$15 million.²⁵

These changes in the nature of steel production unfolded in concert with a remarkable expansion in the overall size of the steel industry. U.S. Steel and the companies that became Little Steel were dominant players in an enormously powerful industry. The total value of basic steel products increased from \$200 million just after the Civil War, to \$800 million in 1899, to \$3.4 *billion* (in 1929 dollars—about 3.4 percent of gross domestic product) at the dawn of the Great Depression. Over the same period, employment in the industry increased by equal measure, from about 78,000 wage earners in 1869, to 280,000 in 1909, to over 400,000 in 1929.²⁶ By the time of the Little Steel Strike, American companies ruled the industry internationally, accounting for nearly half of world steel production.²⁷ In 1937, U.S. Steel produced nearly as much steel as the Soviet Union, the world's second-largest producer. And Republic could boast that its production exceeded that of Belgium and Japan combined, and that its Corrigan-McKinney plant in Cleveland made more steel than all of Sweden.²⁸

THE LOGIC OF CONTROL, THE DEGRADATION OF LABOR, AND THE OBSOLESCENCE OF CRAFT UNIONISM

The methods of production that prevailed when iron reigned supreme could only be performed by a workforce populated with many experienced and highly skilled workers. Their essential role in producing the metal allowed these workers great control over the production process and over their own conditions of employment. This control formed the foundation of craft unionism, which organized and safeguarded workers' sovereignty. Steel, though, had much less need for these craftsmen. Many of the processes used in making it could be performed by largely untrained operators applying

methods devised from afar by university-educated chemists and metallurgists.²⁹ With steel, too, shop-floor authority could be devolved from craftsmen to foremen, the latter chosen more for their ability to drive other men and faithfully execute orders from on high than for any particular expertise in making the product. At higher levels of management, formal education increasingly certified men as trustworthy representatives of ownership interests while also investing them with the necessary knowledge to comprehend the new processes of making steel.³⁰ While Carnegie never attended college and Frick left after a year, in the mid-1930s both Republic's president, Tom Girdler, and Bethlehem's president, Eugene Grace, were college-trained engineers.

Actually, the move to steel production was as much the product of a conscious effort to bring ferrous metal production, including its labor relations, in line with the emerging ethos of efficiency and rational management as it was a determinant of that reorganization. The truth of this point is evident in the history of Carnegie Steel, whose owners envisaged Bessemer converters, open hearth furnaces, and newer finishing mills not simply as wonderfully productive technologies but as effective means of displacing older, worker-controlled methods.³¹ Steel was more than a name for various alloys of iron. It was a device for liberating production from the control of workers.

The resulting conflict between craft unionism and the new management approach defined the industry's labor relations from the late nineteenth century right through the Great Depression. Researcher John Andrews Fitch, author of a classic study of the social conditions of steel production in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, in the early 1900s, recounted that a "prominent official" with Carnegie Steel told him after Homestead how that dispute grew out of the fact that "the union was firmly entrenched" at the mill; "the men ran the mill and the foreman had little authority. There were numerous vexations." The official claimed that this situation made it difficult to get rid of "incompetent men" and frustrated the company's quest for control over the production process.³² William Jones, who ran Carnegie's Edgar Thomson Works in the 1870s, said that he felt as though he were entering a "penitentiary" when he ventured into some parts of the plant, so palpable was the conflict between workers and managers.³³

Of course, industrial capitalism is as much an ideology as it is a collection of workers and machines, or a set of business practices and production techniques. In steel, the effort to wrest control of the production process from workers and replace their autonomous authority with rules and procedures

authored and enforced by industrialists and their managers became a goal unto itself. Grounded intellectually in a fetishization of the norms of efficiency, control, and deskilling, this program aimed to reduce labor to a factor of production that would surrender to the same quantifiable economics as had coal and ore. In this respect, it was entwined with the larger ideology of scientific management, a set of innovations associated with (though by no means exclusively developed by) Frederick Winslow Taylor. It is no coincidence that Taylor, who abhorred unions, formulated his system while working as a foreman, manager, and technical innovator in the steel and metal-working industries.³⁴

Scientific management intellectualized the effort to reorganize work. In steel, it was realized by a shift in production techniques aimed at diminishing human interface with the means and processes of production, including both mechanization and machine-age forms of automation. The collateral effects of mechanization and automation on labor relations were, in turn, important but notably uneven. Their tendency to eliminate skilled labor was counterbalanced somewhat by increased employment in newer, more capable finishing mills, whose complicated mechanisms required the attendance of workers possessed of an array of new skills. At the “hot end” of the plants—the coke works and the iron- and steel-making furnaces—the tendency was more toward replacing workers with machines or reducing them to attendants of those machines. And this was the net effect of mechanization and automation. Through the late 1800s and early 1900s, the ratio of skilled to unskilled workers in the steel industry decreased dramatically even as the total number of workers increased.³⁵ By the early decades of the twentieth century, no more than one-third of employees in the big plants were skilled workers, with the remainder equally divided between unskilled and semiskilled jobs.³⁶

The disparate effect of these processes at the hot end of the plants versus the “cold end” had another important consequence. Mechanization and automation gradually established the finishing mills as home to the largest contingents of workers in the industry. Moreover, the concentration of skilled workers in the finishing mills heightened their influence and status relative to other workers in the industry. The men who operated these mills were usually paid more than workers elsewhere in the plants.³⁷ In general the finishing mills became in the early twentieth-century redoubts of relative status and privilege. And yet, the same factors that favored these workers identified them as the ripest targets for the continued extension of the

mandates of scientific management. The workers were often aware of this and proved keen to defend their interests, which would make the finishing mills and other specialty operations important battlegrounds in the 1930s.

Rationalization also undermined the stable and relatively intimate social groupings—and the accompanying norms—around which iron making had been organized. With their skills less integral, workers found that their identities were being reshaped around an ability to sell their capacity to be ordered around in often crude and highly alienating ways. Nowhere was this degradation more salient than in the identification of workers by accounting numbers and in the requirement that every worker, regardless of skill, be identified by “check number” badges bearing these numbers. A participant in the Little Steel Strike recalled how the numbers affirmed the reduction of the workers to objects of authoritarian control. “We were nothing but a number,” he said. “We weren’t even addressed by our full name or our first name; we were called either ‘You dago’ or ‘You Hunkie’ or ‘You black so and so.’ My check number was 11940 and they used to refer to me, ‘Check Number 11940’ or ‘You Italian so and so we want this done or that done.’”³⁸

The reshaping of the workplace was part of a larger contest encompassing disputes over pay and working hours, as well as politics and ideology. In this struggle the steel companies would prevail, although never quite completely. The Taylorist goal of preempting workers’ autonomy and individuality was impossible to fully realize in steel, as even the most advanced machine-age devices depended on significant levels of human control, which the workers sought to retain. One means of resistance was the conscious effort by workers to monopolize critical knowledge about and influence over the intricacies of the production process, including inevitable idiosyncrasies in the operation of the machinery. Other means of resistance to the new management regime were more intimate and direct: innumerable acts of disobedience, soldiering, minor sabotage, and theft of company property and time. Although lacking much organizational structure, these tactics nonetheless were often ritualized, symbolic, and consciously retaliatory.

Throughout the rise of steel, unions represented the most direct challenge to employers’ push to install autocratic and alienating management practices. For steel capitalists, unions not only threatened higher costs and inefficiencies; they also impeded the effort to assert managerial control over the production process, which the capitalists viewed as a prerogative of ownership. This attitude was evident to John Andrews Fitch, who summed up the companies’ labor policy as “a determination to control, in pursuance of

which object the employers inflexibly exclude the men from any voice in the conditions of employment.”³⁹ As historian David Brody puts it, as early as Homestead, the steel companies had resolved that maximum efficiency required “complete freedom from union interference.”⁴⁰ Here can also be found the immediate impetus of a number of bitter strikes. Already by 1885, a conflict involving work assignments caused a major strike in the Wheeling, West Virginia, area.⁴¹ The Homestead affair was also a contest over control—it was explicitly conceived by Frick and Carnegie as a bid to break the AA in order to make way for a reorganization of production. Indeed, conflicts over control would at least partially define every major strike up to and including the Little Steel Strike, constituting the overriding rationale of a struggle that otherwise could seem irrational.

Besides completely eliminating some jobs, the turn to steel reduced many jobs to rote functions. Of course this rendered workers in these positions increasingly vulnerable to replacement if not by machines then by other workers, which further discouraged attempts to organize and bargain effectively.⁴² Steel also fragmented the workplace via a proliferation of separate departments within the plants. Indeed, the big mills were incredibly elaborate institutions, composed of scores of departments and dozens of structures and buildings. An integrated mill combined the furnaces necessary for the production of iron and steel with blooming, casting, and rolling mills, as well as a vast array of other operations: batteries of coke ovens; by-products reclamation installations; electrical and steam power plants; masonry, blacksmith, and metal working departments; dock and rail facilities; motor pools; metallurgical laboratories; fire, police, and medical services (even hospitals); and so forth. These many ancillary operations also created toeholds in the mills for about twenty other craft unions besides the AA, including organizations of bricklayers, electricians, plumbers, and so on.⁴³ Even the more prominent of these, for instance, the International Association of Machinists, claimed jurisdictions nowhere near as extensive as the AA’s. But their existence further complicated labor relations in the mills.

The byzantine organization of the plants supported the notion, so central to craft unionism, that there existed a functional hierarchy of jobs that both labor and management were bound to respect. However, this structure did nothing to prevent the overall degradation of skills in the plants and consequent erosion of unionism. Deskilling reduced the relevance of the AA and other craft unions, along with the autonomy, relative numbers, and overall importance of the craftsmen themselves. Increasingly, even when a significant

number of skilled workers with crucial skills withheld their labor, they could be outlasted by companies armed with huge reserves of capacity spread among redundant plants and increasingly potent means of labor repression.⁴⁴

The size of the new mills alone altered labor relations in still other ways. Already in the 1910s, steel plants were among the country's largest factories, with the bigger integrated mills employing over ten thousand people working around the clock in either two or three shifts, or "turns."⁴⁵ Such concentrations of workers presented unionists with real challenges. One obvious difficulty was the scale of organizing and the complicated logistics required to successfully organize such large factories, particularly if the aim was to build an industrial union that encompassed the plants' many departments. Another difficulty flowed out of the power that the huge factories projected over the workers. Typically well-fenced, with their gates guarded by armed company police, the largest mills stretched for miles along rivers and lake-fronts. Merely to enter these enormous complexes, on which one was so dependent, could be a daily exercise in supplication.

THE POLITICAL AND CULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF LABOR CONTROL

The large steel companies often wielded extraordinary influence at local and state levels. Some plants loomed over company towns, some of which were constructed by the companies from the ground up; others were located in sprawling urban areas, amid fairly diversified economies. But everywhere steel was produced, several factors worked to align companies' interests with those of public authorities and civic groups, including political campaign contributions, tax payments, direct purchases of land and services, and the employment of middle-class professionals and managers into relatively high-paying and secure jobs. And of course there were the payrolls. In 1936, the industry claimed a nationwide monthly payroll of \$45 million.⁴⁶ Often, this made for a lot of money in relatively small places. By the time of the Little Steel Strike, Bethlehem's Cambria Works in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, disbursed a weekly payroll of \$500,000 spread among about 13,000 workers, in a city of only around 70,000 people.⁴⁷ Even whole regions could be dominated in this way. In 1937, Republic Steel was the largest industrial firm in Ohio and the dominant employer in northeast Ohio, with over 30,000 production workers in Cuyahoga, Mahoning, Stark, and Trumbull Counties.⁴⁸

Occasionally, the steel companies' power amounted to nearly totalitarian control. The communities in Hancock County that eventually became Weirton, West Virginia, were ruled by Weirton Steel, which controlled the police department, the administration of municipal services, the banks, and the *Weirton Daily Times*.⁴⁹

From such a position, the companies could threaten communities of workers and civic officials alike with the prospect of relocating or downsizing operations if faced with labor conflict. The same store of political and economic power gave the companies inordinate influence over elected officials as well as police and the courts. Even voting rights were manipulated. Well into 1930s, the companies not only encouraged workers to vote a certain way; they operated political machines, ordering workers to vote for particular candidates (usually Republicans) under the threat of firings or collective loss of work.⁵⁰

Although there were conflicts, the companies were generally successful in cultivating controlling, often paternalistic relations with local business groups and commercial associations. This was aided by large donations. From the beginning of 1933 through the end of 1937, Youngstown Sheet & Tube—"Sheet & Tube," as it was generally known—donated over \$85,000 to local business associations and chambers of commerce.⁵¹ In 1937, payments from Republic Steel accounted for around 10 percent of the budget of the Warren (Ohio) Chamber of Commerce. Republic paid that organization five times as much in dues as the next nearest firm and occupied a perennial position on its board; and it was the lead sponsor of the Trumbull County Manufacturers' Association.⁵²

The companies secured their dominance of the mills and mill towns by employing networks of informants whose ranks included professional labor spies, attentive foremen and managers, and everyday workers. Besides sniffing out union organizing efforts, these agents cultivated a climate of fear and intimidation, built on the pervasive suspicion that the companies were privy to everything, including casual talk about unions or politics. John Andrews Fitch saw this in the steel towns of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, in 1907, where men went to great lengths to avoid speaking with him at all, for fear that he was a company agent or would make imprudent use of their words. He found the workers equally reticent to speak with each other about unions or politics, for the same reasons. Fitch knew there to be many Socialists in these towns, and yet he could find no party establishments. He knew there to be unionists, but they too were elusive. The wisdom behind

the workers' cautious attitude was not lost on Fitch, who observed numerous instances where the steel companies managed to identify those who had attended union meetings and then fired and blacklisted them.⁵³

These suspicions played out on an intricate social landscape. By the early twentieth century, the workforce in steel consisted not only of native-born white "Americans" of mostly northern European origin and African Americans, often newly arrived from the South, but also Hispanics, both native and immigrants; Italians, Greeks, and Hungarians; various Slavic peoples from southern and eastern Europe; as well as people from the Baltics. Indeed, in the early twentieth century, American steel workers hailed from almost every place on earth. In the first decade of the twentieth century, over half were foreign-born; the remainder were native-born, although often to foreign-born parents.⁵⁴ In Chicago in 1920, only 15.6 percent of white steel workers (and whites were then 95 percent of that population of workers) were born to native parents.⁵⁵ Although the number of immigrants later fell dramatically, first because of the Great War and later because of Congress's enactment of stringent quotas, even by the 1930 U.S. Census, about one-third of steel workers were foreign-born whites. Another 10 percent were black, 2 percent were Mexican, and the remainder were native-born whites.⁵⁶

These many races and ethnicities often formed communities with distinct spatial, ethnic, and class boundaries. Long celebrated for defying the homogenizing influences of industrial capitalism and the emergence of a common American identity, and by definition exclusionary, the prominence of such "enclaves" in the lives of the workers raises crucial questions about how ethnicity and place affected labor relations. The enclaves isolated workers in their domestic and civic lives from the diversity that prevailed around them, reinforced differences among workers, and likely diminished the social resonance of class. Language barriers aside, racial and ethnic identities were accompanied by considerable chauvinism in a society in which social privileges and opportunities were very much defined by race and ethnicity. The period between Homestead and the Little Steel Strike was, after all, the era of Jim Crow, race riots, and lynching and the height of anti-immigrant reaction. For their part, the steel companies were quite adept at cultivating chauvinism among their workers in order to frustrate organizing efforts or otherwise undermine solidarity.⁵⁷ To this end, as much as for the stated reasons that workers preferred it that way, the companies imposed racial and ethnic segregation in company-controlled neighborhoods in towns like Aliquippa, Pennsylvania; Gary, Indiana; and Youngstown, Ohio.⁵⁸ In

essence, the companies created the enclaves right along with the plants they bordered. Whatever their origins, these neighborhoods bred bigotry, mistrust, and regular outbursts of ethnic and racial violence, not least among gangs of young males on the verge of beginning work in the mills.⁵⁹

Within the mills themselves, workers were often segregated by a process that preemptively identified skill levels with ethnicity and race. American-born workers of northern European ancestry dominated the more lucrative, higher-skilled positions, such as operating cranes and rolling mill machinery; an array of eastern and southern European ethnicities populated jobs of intermediate quality, including many positions around the furnaces; and Hispanics, blacks, and very low-status Europeans generally held the worst jobs, like common labor or service in the coke works.⁶⁰ In part because many racial and ethnic groups embraced such practices to benefit their own members, and in part because the organization of work along such lines was convenient to the companies, these patterns were commonplace.⁶¹

To some degree, this situation also frustrated the development of solidarity and heightened suspicions and resentments among groups of workers.⁶² Such was evident to a Communist labor organizer at a small steel plant in 1933 who discovered that all he could sign up were “Italian workers, [and] a couple of South Slavs.” Most workers “will speak to people of their own nationality. They won’t approach anyone else. And for this reason it is very hard to get contacts.”⁶³ The system afforded employers yet another advantage. When skill mapped along ethnic or racial lines, a protest by skilled workers could be presented to other workers as the machinations of a greedy and privileged aristocracy against the interests of less privileged groups.

These difficulties were exacerbated by the AA’s long-standing hostility to blacks and low-status ethnic groups. Well into the New Deal period, many AA lodges either refused to admit these workers or blatantly discriminated against them regarding job assignments and grievances. Such practices combined with company-sponsored discrimination to prevent most blacks and many immigrants from ever obtaining the skilled positions that were the mainstay of the AA and other craft organizations. The result was a vicious cycle, as systematic exclusion primed many in these groups to serve as strike-breakers. This led to the charge that immigrants and especially blacks were inveterate scabs, which in turn was used to justify the discrimination inflicted on them by the AA and other craft unions. Eventually many blacks and low-status ethnics embraced the open shop as a prerequisite to their own collective uplift.⁶⁴

At the same time, native-born, “American” workers of European ancestry (who also dominated the ranks of owners, managers, and foremen) were often deeply invested in such employment patterns. For these workers—and often for the AA and other craft unions that represented them—“whiteness” and American-ness were both currency and markers of class standing, social privilege, and relative economic security. For “Americans,” the mere presence in the mills of racially or ethnically downcast workers threatened these interests, especially if accompanied by any suggestion that these people intended to test the existing alignments of race and ethnicity with workplace status.

Even for workers of modest standing, it often made sense to defer to these hierarchies because doing so affirmed the possibility, at least, of future upward mobility. This was surely true for many European immigrants on their way to achieving the status of generic whiteness. But for many more workers in this situation, deference to the status quo was informed by the fear of losing ground. Only the especially enlightened and courageous would unhesitatingly challenge company-sponsored segregation—or the open shop—when doing so could easily result in alienation from one’s ethnic peers and consignment to a worse position, if not discharge.⁶⁵

Clearly, the geographic and demographic realities of steel labor impeded the organization of effective unions. Nevertheless, as a number of scholars have recently highlighted, ethnic and racial identities and the chauvinism that accompanied them were neither all-determinative nor inevitably antithetical to class consciousness.⁶⁶ Besides demonstrating the remarkable degree to which class identity successfully competed with identities of ethnicity and place, this work shows how class was often entwined with, and sometimes supported by, these other identities. In the mill towns, loyalty to ethnicity, race, and place could become a mandate for class solidarity, just as class solidarity could reinforce these other identities. The strength of this logic manifests in the answer an Italian American worker from Youngstown gave his wife when she asked him why he joined the Little Steel Strike. Everyone else from the village back in Italy struck, he said, so “we had to strike.”⁶⁷

As much as racial and ethnic hierarchies might have safeguarded existing privileges and promised future ascendance, they also generated anxieties and resentments. Workers could well perceive the ways they were being manipulated and turned one against the other to the benefit of people whose own social and economic standing was at no risk whatsoever. Although this

could be evident to anyone, the less white a worker was, the less privileged he was, the more acutely he perceived these pains of discrimination and manipulation. Notwithstanding their position on unionism, ethnically or racially downcast workers were often more likely than “Americans” to harbor resentments of the companies and their managers. As the new century unfolded, these workers proved increasingly receptive of the idea that employment practices in the mills needed to be radically restructured.

Moreover, although many workers did indeed inhabit insular enclaves, there were integrated worker neighborhoods. And the enclaves were not all-encompassing. Rather, they were porous, penetrated by political parties and other social groups and by individuals who preached the gospels of universal rights, common grievances, and collective values. Moreover, many steel workers simultaneously inhabited larger communities that were very cosmopolitan, bringing together a far greater variety of peoples, cultures, and political ideas than the mill owners and managers experienced in their own lives.⁶⁸

There was also the considerable mixing of races and ethnicities within the mills, notwithstanding company stratagems. An unusual witness to this was a man named Charles Rumford Walker. The son of a New Hampshire physician, a graduate of Phillips Exeter and a “Bonesman” at Yale, Walker signed on to Jones & Laughlin’s Aliquippa Works in 1919 after a serving in France as an officer in the Allied Expeditionary Force. But Walker was no “lost generation” dilettante. His purpose at Jones & Laughlin was to learn how steel was made, a base of knowledge on which he later built successful careers as a journalist and expert on industrial relations. While working at “J&L,” Walker was eventually able to see far enough past his own rather bigoted views to appreciate the humanity of the men he labored alongside. Walker’s accounts of the men’s lives highlight a level of camaraderie and sense of common struggle that transcended the workers’ many different cultures and backgrounds.⁶⁹ Decades later, many of the men who participated in the Little Steel Strike recalled how conflict and mistrust across racial and ethnic lines coexisted with a growing sense of common interests and identity.⁷⁰

In a world defined by shared hardships, workers’ identities were eroded and reshaped around universal values as much as they were preserved and contained within more narrow cultural frameworks. Ironically, this was an important part of what it meant to be Americanized. And if the mills and mill towns could remake immigrants into Americans, they also made them into industrial workers with a common perspective defined around a shared

identity, which would eventually comprise a foundation of the CIO's challenge to the companies' hegemony. In the tense arena of social conflict formed around the mills and mill towns, workers and capitalists would find themselves struggling, not only to contend with the realities of race and ethnicity, but also to contest and reshape their meaning and bearing on the class struggles that increasingly enveloped all.