

# HOMESTEAD STRIKE

## The Outcome

At the mass meeting on June 30, 1892, more than 3,000 of the plant's workers jammed into the Homestead Opera House. After discussion, they overwhelmingly voted to support each other and to strike.

A woman who interviewed some of the participants wrote: "The strike began June 30. The Association, which had been so recently indifferent to the conditions of the day men [un skilled workers], now realized, since many of the latter could be put into the skilled positions, that the strike could not be won without their assistance. A call was thereupon issued for them to strike, and the day men, with every thing to lose and almost nothing to gain, went out too, and remained faithful supporters to the end."<sup>1</sup>

Frick hired a private army of hundreds of armed mercenaries to force the strikers back to work. Local sheriffs' deputies had been unwilling to oppose the strikers. When that army was beaten by the workers, with people killed on both sides, the governor of Pennsylvania sent in the state militia. Upon seeing that the troops were friendly to the workers, the general in charge forbade them to talk with strikers or even to walk in the town unless supervised by an officer. The general wrote, "[The workers] believe the works are theirs quite as much as Carnegie's."

Strikebreakers were brought in from different parts of the country, and gradually production resumed. Often they weren't told of their destination until they arrived; many times they were brought in sealed railroad cars after having signed up to go to other Carnegie plants. A number of these men escaped along the way. Afraid for their own safety or unwilling to take other workers' jobs, forced to live inside the plant and work in poor conditions, some man aged to get away after arriving.

Still, the workers stayed out on strike. Legal charges were brought against almost two hundred of them for crimes that included treason against the state of Pennsylvania. Found innocent by juries on one set of charges, they were immediately rearrested and tried for other supposed crimes. Ultimately, no striker was ever found guilty of any charge, but the constant prosecutions took the money they had saved for the strike, demoralized them, and kept their leadership locked up during crucial times.

Carnegie owned other mills and was able to continue to produce and sell steel while the strike went on. Workers in other mills also struck, briefly, in solidarity with the Homestead workers. Nevertheless, after four and a half months the strike was lost. With winter approaching, the strikers were forced to return to work on Frick's terms.

Having beaten the union, it was relatively easy for Carnegie and the rest of the steel corporations to introduce changes in work practices and to bring in new machinery. At Home stead, wages were cut, hours were increased, and the number of workers employed was drastically reduced.

Carnegie and Frick decided to change more than work relations at Homestead. They thought that if they could influence the private lives of the workers in their mills, they would have a more obedient workforce. They did this by encouraging the workers to marry and take on family responsibilities.

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Byington, *Homestead: The Household of a Mill Town* (New York, 1909-1914), p. 9.

Instead of renting houses and thus controlling workers through the threat of eviction, they now would *sell* the houses. Owning a home, workers would be tied to their jobs and would have to keep up house payments.

This was a time when a few corporations came to own many of the steel mills. There were attempts in other mills to strike; however, the union still excluded the unskilled, so the workers seldom agreed to follow the leadership of the skilled. Even when there was solidarity between skilled and unskilled workers in one mill, the corporations were able to shift production to other mills and wait out a strike. Within ten years, Carnegie Steel merged with other corporations to become United States Steel, a company that controlled 60 percent of the entire industry.

## Questions

1. Based on the outcome of your role play, does the actual decision of the unskilled workers at Homestead to support the strike surprise you? Why or why not?
2. What are the reasons the strike was not successful? Think of the actions taken by both Frick and the government.
3. (a) As a result of their victory, what changes were Carnegie and Frick able to introduce in the workplace (feel free to use what you know from earlier lessons) and in the community?  
  
(b) Why did they want these changes?