

THE HOMESTEAD STRIKE

At the outbreak of the strike, there were two different groups of workers in Andrew Carnegie's steel mill in Homestead, Pennsylvania, in 1892.

The 800 *skilled workers* were in the minority at the mill, which employed a total of 3,800 men. They were members of a craft union, the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers, which had helped them gain wages ranging from \$35 to \$70 a week and an eight-hour day. It had also helped them gain an important role in making decisions about their working conditions. Committees of workers in each department decided who did what work and regulated many details of running the plant. Through their knowledge and organization, these committees decided everything, from what materials to use to how to get work done. Most of the skilled workers were native-born Americans whose ancestors came from countries in Northern Europe, especially Great Britain and Germany.

But the great majority of workers at Home stead were *unskilled*. They did the dirty work at the plant: lifting, shoveling, pushing. They worked a twelve-hour day with only two vacation days a year and earned under \$10 a week. The union had little interest in organizing these people. Their view was: why bother when we, the *skilled* workers, are the most important part of the process of making steel. They felt their union was powerful enough without the unskilled. Furthermore, most of the unskilled workers were recent immigrants—peasants from Eastern Europe who could barely speak English. Some of the union members realized from their experiences that all workers cooperating together could run the country's industries with out the need for bosses. They called their vision a "cooperative commonwealth." Most of the skilled workers, however, did not want to associate with the foreign newcomers.

Still, all the workers had important things in common. The accident rate in the steel mills at that time was tremendous. Deaths and injuries from explosions, burnings, asphyxiation, electric shocks, falls, crushing, and other causes were frequent. Although skilled and unskilled workers lived in different neighborhoods, their houses were often owned by the company. People who opposed management could be evicted without warning. Losing one's job automatically meant losing one's home.

The skilled workers had the union to defend them from the employer; the unskilled did not.

In 1892 the union contract was about to expire. Three years earlier, Carnegie had tried to eliminate the union and failed. To make the maximum profits, he needed to tighten control over the work process. Like other industrialists around the country, Carnegie had begun laying plans to reorganize his steel mill. Complex tasks, until then done by skilled workers, were to be broken down into single motions and divided among lower-paid, unskilled people. Machines were to be brought in. Those troublesome skilled workers would no longer be needed, the union would be eliminated, and productivity and profits would soar.

Carnegie imported a professional union-buster, Henry Clay Frick, to run the Homestead plant and gave him the following policy statement: "There has been forced upon this Firm the question whether its Works are to be run 'Union' or 'Non-Union.' As the vast majority of our employees are Non-Union, the Firm has decided that the minority must give place to the majority. These works, therefore, will be necessarily Non-Union after the expiration of the present agreement.... This action is not taken in any spirit of hostility to labor organizations, but every man will see that the Firm cannot run Union and Non-Union. It must be one or the other."

Frick built a twelve-foot-high fence, three miles long, around the entire plant, topped it with barbed wire, and bored holes for guns every twenty-five feet. Then he gave the workers an ultimatum: take a pay cut—even though business was still booming in the steel industry—or the union will be broken. Two days before the old contract was to end, he closed the mill and locked out the workers. In response, the union's advisory committee voted to strike.

The Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers called a meeting of all the workers at the plant. Their goal: to win the support of the unskilled workers for their strike. If every one would agree not to work at the mill during the strike, then Frick would have a hard time keeping it running. *But*, if the unskilled went to work as scabs, the strike would be lost.

The big question was: would the unskilled workers support the strike?

Questions

1. Why does Carnegie want to get rid of the union at Homestead?
2. What do the skilled and unskilled workers have in common?
3. What differences are there between these workers?
4. (a) What could the unskilled workers lose from supporting the strike?

(b) What could they gain?
5. How can the skilled workers get the unskilled workers to support the strike?