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**Father was killed by the Pinkerton Man: How the Homestead Strike overturned both  
Labor and Capital**

By Charles Conner, HIST 430 MonWed 9:00-10:15

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Two forces that came into their own during the Gilded Age were industrial labor and capital. Both largely began as products of industrialization, big business was a market reaction as the most productive corporations rose to the top while industrial labor moved alongside that as the growth in the production sector led to a need for a larger labor force. These forces were at best suspicious and at worst adversarial to the other due to having completely divergent goals. This period featured many clashes between labor and capital but arguably the most famous saw the workers of the Homestead Steel Mill face off against agents of the Pinkerton National Detective Agency. The strike saw a massive battle of 300 Pinkertons square off against the combined strength of the striking workers and the community at large. Homestead capped off an era of labor organization and defined the labor-capital relations in the steel industry for the next four decades, but it paved the way for more labor power inspiring legislation that greatly limited the scope of paramilitary labor busting organizations like the Pinkertons.

Before examining the strike, itself it's important to discuss the origins of the combatants as to understand their motivations, these would be the Carnegie Steel Company, the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers, and the Pinkerton National Detective Agency. Beginning with Carnegie Steel Company, Homestead had been the flagship facility for the Carnegie Steel Company since its inception. Carnegie revolutionized the American steel industry by introducing the Bessemer process of steel production, this created a positive feedback loop between Carnegie and another big business: the railroads. The Railroad companies needed steel to build tracks while the steel companies needed iron to be transported to their facilities. Alongside this, steel was needed across the US as a building material and for a whole host of new commercial products. This need made the Carnegie Steel Company one of the most profitable corporations in the US and made Carnegie a Captain of Industry. Carnegie had a fairly

light touch when it came to deals with labor, he preferred a sit-down and wait strategy so that labor and capital could figure out an agreement that would get the mill working and productivity up.<sup>1</sup> In 1892 however, Henry Clay Frick had become the manager and chairman of the Carnegie Steel Company. Frick had a much more adversarial relationship with labor having garnered a reputation for hostility due to his involvement with a number of strikes in the coke-producing regions.<sup>2</sup> While the company was making 4.5 million dollars a year<sup>3</sup> before the confrontation at Homestead, many in upper management believed that the power of the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers was cutting into their profits and sought to eliminate the Union from Homestead.<sup>4</sup> While Carnegie possessed the outward face of positive relations with worker organization, he backed Frick's attempts to re-establish non-union control of the factory. The company had signed an agreement in 1889 with the AA and was set to react once the contract expired.

In 1892 the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers (AA) held control over Homestead, and they were one of if not the best organized unions in the United States. They represented the largest union of skilled iron and steelworkers in the country. In 1892 the Union had 24,000 nationwide members, it contained 750 union members at Homestead but was also supported by 3000 non-union workers who were largely southern or eastern European immigrants.<sup>5</sup> At the time of the strike, AA was made up largely of skilled workers who ran the

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<sup>1</sup> Carnegie went on record in Forum magazine saying: "Peaceful settlement of differences should be reached through arbitration. I would lay it down as a maxim that there is no excuse for a strike or a lock-out until arbitration of differences has been offered by one party and refused by the other."

<sup>2</sup> George Brinton McClellan Harvey, *Henry Clay Frick, the Man* (New Orleans, LA: Harvey Press, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> "1892 Homestead Strike: AFL-CIO," AFL (AFL-CIO), accessed November 22, 2021, <https://aflcio.org/about/history/labor-history-events/1892-homestead-strike>.

<sup>4</sup> Frick had said in conversation with Carnegie: "The mills have never been able to turn out the product that they should, owing to being held back by the Amalgamated Men."

<sup>5</sup> Paul Krause, *The Battle for Homestead: Politics, Culture, and Steel* (Pittsburgh, PA: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1992).

mill. Workers at Homestead enjoyed much higher wages than most other steelworkers in the country, even after a wage cut following an 1889 strike. The AA at Homestead had been largely successful in their labor agitation, first in 1882 they had struck when the company had tried to add a yellow-dog clause to the employment contract which essentially said that new workers were unable to join a union. The 1882 strike was successful, a repeat performance was seen in 1889 where AA struck again with the help of townspeople and local immigrant groups to get a three-year contract. In the time before Homestead, AA workers stood as an example of how labor organizations could defeat attempts by capital to reduce their wages and how labor organizations in general could be carried out successfully even against the biggest corporations in the US.

The Pinkerton National Detective Agency, an agency known for being the mercenaries of the oligarchy was founded by an immigrant cooper in Illinois whose politics stand in stark contrast to the organization that born his name is remembered. Allan Pinkerton was originally from Scotland and was swept up in the major in the Chartist movement that argued for universal male suffrage in Great Britain. After the violent suppression of the movement, Pinkerton found himself with an arrest warrant leading to him moving to the United States with his wife. He started a barrel-making business in Illinois but slowly began working in law enforcement after he was deputized for busting a counterfeiter's camp. Eventually, he founded the Pinkerton National Detective Agency. The word national was a bold claim to make for a Chicago-based agency but it was very important for branding as it implied the agency was not restricted by state or local boundaries, something that was increasingly important in the frontiers that possessed looser law enforcement and along railroads that ran through several local, state, and territorial jurisdictions.

The Pinkertons often operated as a private paramilitary force that worked for the interest of capital, from their outset they had been used in anti-labor activity, a job Pinkerton agents often performed was “testing” workers meaning disguising themselves as workers and asking them about their affiliations then reporting them back to the bosses, this is how the Pinkerton brought down the Molly McGuires, a society of Irish American coal miners. During the Civil War, the Pinkertons gained nationwide prestige for serving as the bodyguards for President Lincoln, an old Illinois acquaintance of Allan Pinkerton, and foiling an assassination attempt of the president in Baltimore. Using these wartime associations, Pinkerton was able to massively expand his business due to his accrued prestige. Pinkerton agents gained further notoriety from defending west-bound cargo from outlaws like Jessie James and the Sundance Kid. By the time of Homestead, they were a well-established fixture in labor suppression with one of their most famous actions being their role in ending the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 and quashing the Molly McGuires. An important aspect of the Pinkerton business model was respectability, they wanted to be seen as patriots standing against foreign ideologies that had infected the American working class.

Difficulties began around the cause of every major strike of the Gilded Age: wage cuts. Due to the Union contract expiring after three years after the successful 1889 strike and a forthcoming economic depression, Henry Clay Frick moved to cut wages. This move was supported by Carnegie who at the time of the strike was vacationing in Great Britain. The previous wages were determined on a sliding scale with \$25 per ton of steel billets as the minimum, the new scale that Frick imposed set the standard wage at \$26.50 for ton but lowered

the minimum to \$22.<sup>6</sup> At the time the steel billet market was abnormally depressed, the deal if it would have been accepted would lead to a major wage cut. Frick set June 24, 1892 as the final day in which he would treat with AA as an organization, this carried the threat that the workers must get in line with this wage reduction or lose their right to a self-protecting organization, something that Andrew Carnegie himself had called sacred just a year earlier.<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that Frick issued these conditions as ultimatums rather than as negotiations, this was done as part of his wider goal of cowing the AA into stepping in line with what he wanted. Not treating with the AA as an organization and negotiated with workers on an individual basis put the advantage squarely in favor of Frick and the company. Frick in an attempt to put pressure on the workers built a board fence from the Pittsburgh, Virginia, & Charleston railroad, and the Monongahela River. Workers dubbed this new enclosure Fort Frick.

AA was not happy with this turn of events. This ultimatum combined with the enclosing the mill was seen as both an insult and an implicit threat to the worker's way of life. Several more proposals were made during the bargaining season, with a committee of men whose spokesperson William Roberts stated they would accept other changes if wages stayed at 24 per ton as the minimum.<sup>8</sup> The day after Frick's deadline of June 24th, Carnegie Steel Company Secretary F.T.F. Lovejoy stated that the firm had decided to move forward with a \$23 per ton minimum and that the rate would be enforced whether AA and the workers approved of it or not.<sup>9</sup> This led Frick to lock the workers out of Homestead and fire them all. Effigies of Frick and Mr. Potter, the General Manager of Homestead, were seen following these shows of force.

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<sup>6</sup> Arthur Gordon Burgoyne, *Homestead: A Complete History of the Struggle of July, 1892, between the Carnegie Steel Company, Limited, and the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers* (Pittsburgh, PA: Rawsthorne Engraving and Print. Co., 1893).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Locking out the AA workers provoked a massive reaction as non-union members saw the lock out of AA workers as a step to their own wages being cut. Frick's blunt methods provoked a reaction as after the final lockout on June 29<sup>th</sup>, AA announced a strike stating that the company had violated the 1889 contract. Union men supported by nonunion workers and their families surrounded the mill and set up 24 shifts. Quickly the Company had lost control of Homestead and the mill was firmly in the worker's hands.

Newspapers had anticipated a clash between the steelworkers and Carnegie since the beginning of the troubles surrounding the wage scale. Workers at Homestead were informed shortly after midnight on July 6<sup>th</sup> that two barges of 300 Pinkertons were moving up the river to kick them out of Homestead and replace them with non-union labor. Before examining the actual events of the strike it's important to look at how the Pinkertons were viewed by the strikers, this will help to understand the violence that would later ensue. Imagine being confronted with mercenaries known for destroying labor resistance that is armed with Winchester rifles, lever-action rifles that used a 9-12 round feeding system with a famously quick rate of fire. They moved in on barges pulled by a tugboat filled with arms and ammunition provided by Carnegie Steel, as a fighting force they are much more organized and disciplined than the workers at Homestead. The workers were rightly uneasy at the prospect of facing down these agents. AA and the striking workers did not possess firepower on par with the Pinkertons leading them to find anything in the town that they could throw against them. This included clubs, muzzleloading rifles, burning mine cars, on-fire oil, leftover fireworks from the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, and even two small cannons, they needed any weapon they could get if they were squaring off against the great enemy of the workingman.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

Beginning around 4 am the Pinkertons attempted to land under cover of night in order to get the element of surprise and take the factory, at this time the workers cut the barbed wire and stormed into the Homestead plant. Minor skirmishing began but no serious damage took place yet. Sources conflict on who began shooting first. John T. McNurry, a boatman on the Little Bill and someone injured by the strikers, asserted in a testimony that the workers had shot first and the Pinkertons only responded after some of their men had been wounded.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, the New York Times reported in the article "*Mob Law at Homestead*" that the Pinkertons had fired first and killed a worker named William Foy, the Times asserts that the Pinkertons quickly paid for their attack.<sup>12</sup> The Carnegie company itself would later claim that shots were first fired by the workers on the shore.<sup>13</sup> In any case, the battle was shortly joined after violence began, both sides used makeshift cover with the agents cutting holes in the side of the barges while the workers created Adhoc ramparts from steel beams and used the iron scrap yard for cover. Throughout the battle the workers were cheered on by a crowd of women shouted, "kill the Pinkertons!"

Fighting was fierce and lasted for roughly twelve hours. Despite the superior fire power of the Pinkertons, the Steelworkers fought hard using every makeshift weapon that they possessed. The Pinkertons fought as mercenaries, but the Steelworkers fought with desperation, this was their livelihood and their community at stake. The Little Steamer Bill which had bragged the barges of Pinkertons over to Homestead was forced to flee back up the river, it attempted to land again but the Steelworkers would not allow it to reach the bank forcing a second withdrawal. Pinkertons tried and failed several times to take the mill, but the Steel

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<sup>11</sup> John T. McNurry, "What a Boatman Saw: His Story of the Trip of the Steamer Little Bill," *The New York Times*, July 7, 1892.

<sup>12</sup> "Mob Law at Homestead," *The New York Times*, July 7, 1892.

<sup>13</sup> Henry C Frick, "The Carnegie Defense," *The New York Times*, July 7, 1892.

workers were too well fortified. Newer agents slowly gave up hope and took cover in the barge furthest away from the fighting. Throughout the battle, a number of jerry-rigged attack strategies were used by the workers including sending barrels of burning oil down the river in order to catch the barges on fire and firing leftover 4<sup>th</sup> of July fireworks at the barges. After much fighting the Pinkertons now viewed the situation as hopeless, Homestead had become a rock that had broken their teeth. The first attempt at surrender was turned down as the white handkerchief was shot through, only on a repeat attempt did the workers consent to a parlay. The Pinkertons offered surrender in return for a guarantee of safety, this guarantee was quickly overturned as the remaining agents were forced to march through a gauntlet to reach safe shelter at a nearby opera house which acted as a makeshift prison. While walking through the gauntlet the agents were beaten with fists, blunt weapons, and any other material that the workers had on hand, the beating was comprehensive as every Pinkerton agent that survived the battle came out with a major injury.<sup>14</sup>

The first phase of the strike had been an abject failure for Frick and the Carnegie Steel Company, their Pinkertons agents had been solidly defeated and sent packing under the escort of a sheriff. AA's victory had drawn more local Steelworkers to Homestead where they pledged to stand in solidarity and the national AA was probing the situation seeking to know what external support the Homestead workers needed. Ex-President of the AA William Weihe, who had been attempting to prevent more bloodshed throughout the whole battle, again attempted to contact Frick. The Chairman refused stating that it was representatives of the AA that were destroying their property and the Carnegie Steel Company would refuse to negotiate with them. At this point Frick sought another means of quelling the strike, much like many of the great strikes of

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<sup>14</sup> "Mob Law at Homestead," *The New York Times*, July 7, 1892.

the age Homestead ended with the intervention of government troops. Frick was not a neophyte to destroying labor unrest, he knew that if the situation went too far out of control than the Governor of Pennsylvania would be forced to send in the state militia to quell the disorder. 8,500 Pennsylvania National Guard troops were ordered by Governor Robert E. Pattinson to end the violence at Homestead and re-establish order. General Snowden of the Pennsylvania militia marched to Homestead where the workers, not without discontent, submitted to his authority. In the parlay that followed, one of the workers' leaders Hugh O'Donnell stated that the workers would willing submit to the lawful authority of the state militia but not the unlawful authority of Frick's brigade of Pinkertons.

On November 20<sup>th</sup>, 1892, the workers of AA voted 101-91 to resume work, the strike had lasted 142 days. AA had fought and lost at Homestead, the strikers and members of AA would never again enter Homestead. Before the strike the AA at Homestead had been one of the most prominent and successful unions in the country, their defeat, and the conduct of their actions during Homestead signaled an overall retreat for unionization in the steel industry that would remain until after the First World War. After enjoying massive public support at the beginning of the strike, the AA saw a major decline in membership following the battle in large part due to their treatment of the Pinkerton agents during the gauntlet and the later assassination attempt on Frick by a New York anarchist named Alexander Berkman. What had been a vital and expansive union sank into a thorough decline, membership sagged from 24,000 in 1892 to 8,000 in 1894. Further loses followed and by 1907 the Union only possessed 6,300 members.<sup>15</sup> Many AA lodges were disbanded and Carnegie slowly threw out AA at the rest of their mills throughout the 1890s. The effect of Homestead on workers in the steel sector was easily felt, between 1892 and

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<sup>15</sup> "1892 Homestead Strike: AFL-CIO," AFL (AFL-CIO), accessed November 22, 2021, <https://aflcio.org/about/history/labor-history-events/1892-homestead-strike>.

1907 the wages of steelworkers were cut by 1/5 and the average working day went from 8 hours to 12.<sup>16</sup> By 1900 no steel mill in Pennsylvania had any union presence to speak of. Further labor agitation in the steel industry was largely unsuccessful, a 1903 strike against the successor company to Carnegie Steel Company US Steel was defeated and a nationwide steel strike in 1919 was also a failure.

The Pinkertons began to decay following Homestead, once at the forefront of the anti-labor paramilitary industry the Pinkertons saw declining fortunes after 1892. Much of the credibility of the organization rested on respectable detectives defeating the machinations of disreputable workers influenced by foreign ideology, this is a sentiment seen in Allan Pinkerton's famous anti-strike novels *Strikers, Communists, Tramps, and Detectives*.<sup>17</sup> The strikers at Homestead were different, nationally recognized workers who embodied a common man's republican philosophy, Pinkertons being used to quell them signaled to the country that there was no moral standing to their arguments. State governments began passing legislation that prohibited agents like the Pinkertons from being deputized and Congress passed the Anti-Pinkerton act which limited the federal government's ability to hire mercenaries or members of agencies similar to the Pinkertons.<sup>18</sup> The legislation specifically barred the use of Pinkerton agents by the federal government and by extension the District of Columbia. The legacy of this act is unclear due to a 1977 court case that ruled that the act was specific to Pinkerton's actions at the time, namely the use of quasi-military force to crush labor agitation, but in its own time, the act marked a victory for labor as the federal government could no longer rely on private eye

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> In this novel, Allan Pinkerton asserts that the American working class goes about protecting their interest in the wrong way. He asserts that they are influenced by foreign political ideologies like socialism and anarchism. This is a strange claim for Pinkerton to make as he was most likely influenced by similar ideologies during his time as a chartist in Great Britain.

<sup>18</sup> Anti-Pinkerton Act

agencies like the Pinkertons. The organization grew weaker as the country progressed into the 20th century due to police modernization and the creation of the Federal Bureau of Investigations. At the same time public opinion regarding the Pinkertons deteriorated, leading to the agency moving out of strike breaking and towards corporate security. While the Pinkertons and similar detective agencies would remain a fixture of anti-labor activity during the early 20th century, something that can be attested by the involvement of the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency in the Battle of Blair Mountain during the 1920s, they never had the power and prestige they enjoyed before Homestead. Their inability to partner with the federal government, the thing that had brought them to prominence in the first place, the power of the organization began to atrophy until it was bought out by a Swiss security agency in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The Carnegie Steel Company came out as the overall victors and were able to reopen Homestead using non-union labor, the company or Carnegie himself did not come out of the strike without injury, however. 700 non-union workers were brought in and by the 27<sup>th</sup> of July the works had begun to operate again under the guard of the military, it would not be till September when all of the 7000 troops aside from one regiment had been withdrawn. During the immediate days of after the intervention of the militia, Homestead saw difficulty reaching pre-strike productivity as many of the new workers were unskilled and were woefully unprepared for the task at hand. Frick testified that the strike had cost workers in wages a million dollars in total, he refused to comment on the company cost which must have been heavy. 163 indictments for the strikers followed the battle, with charges ranging from aggravated riot to treason.<sup>19</sup> None of these indictments were followed by convictions, countercharges filed by the workers against

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<sup>19</sup> The Workers charged with treason were due to the intervention of the state militia, this was seen in the cases as levying war against the state and thus a treasonous offense. None of the workers charged with treason were convicted.

Carnegie and Pinkerton officials were never even prosecuted.<sup>20</sup> While Frick had always been seen as the iron hand that broke the back of labor, Andrew Carnegie himself had always professed a belief in the rights of his workers to organize. His support of Frick's measures to quash labor organization, Carnegie's image as the respectable captain of industry faded. But the injuries the company suffered were relatively inconsequential, the profits of the company rose to 106 million dollars nine years after Homestead and the future merger into J.P. Morgan's US Steel would make Carnegie one of the richest men to ever live.

The legacy of Homestead was a large-scale slate wiping and back to start for both capital and labor. AAISW was destroyed and with-it unionization in the steel industry was crushed for four decades, this left a major hole an industry that would be incredibly important heading into the First World War. Steel would not see a major union presence that could shake capital until the FDR administration. On the other hand, the great paramilitary organization of the day was crippled by laws that made its interaction with the federal government impossible. Without this official sanctioning of labor suppression new similar organizations would move into the void left by the Pinkertons, the Anti-Pinkerton act helped begin a foundation that would lead to the labor victories of the Progressive Era. Carnegie Steel, which would soon become US Steel, came out stronger but not unmarred. Homestead was an event that set the new status quo for American labor relations, a state of affairs that lasted until the New Deal. For better and for worse, Homestead redefined American labor and brought the previous era of labor-capital relations to a close.

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<sup>20</sup> Paul Krause, "Legacies of Homestead," in *The Battle for Homestead: Politics, Culture, and Steel* (Pittsburgh, PA: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1992), pp. 348-349.

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