

Little Steel's Labor War in Youngstown

Ben St. Angelo

Ohio State University

Labor and management are important cogs in the American capitalist machine. One cannot exist without the other. However, good relations between labor and management can be tenuous. When the desires of labor and management are out of balance, the relationship can deteriorate, sometimes resulting in violence. Such was the case at the steel mills of the Republic Steel Corporation in and around Youngstown, Ohio in 1937. Republic Steel was not in the top tier of steel producers in 1937. Larger companies, like United States Steel Corporation or Bethlehem Steel operated more facilities and turned larger profits than Republic Steel. Trying to keep pace with its competitors, in the early months of 1937, Republic rejected advances by labor organizers to unionize its employees. Believing unionization would have an adverse effect on its profit margin, the Youngstown mainstay's steadfast determination to remain union-less added pressure to an increasingly tense situation. Labor unrest was growing throughout the U.S. and Republic Steel experienced strikes in other cities where they also operated. On the evening of June 19, 1937, during a union demonstration at one of Republic's mills, violence struck Youngstown, Ohio. Republic employees clashed with local police, sheriff's deputies, and company security causing two deaths and scores of injuries. Republic's northeastern Ohio facilities were not the only locations of confrontation between labor and management, but the confrontation there, which left two people dead, illuminates the dangers of neglecting

harmony between labor, management, and the local community.

Since the financial success of both Republic's labor and management depended on a collegial relationship, the devolving and embittered situation in which those involved were willing to take each other's lives was extraordinary. People with, at best, a tangential interest in the outcome, like law enforcement, felt empowered to use deadly force against fellow citizens engaged in a financial dispute. Republic's leadership was not concerned with the welfare of its employees, who were beaten and shot. Rather, they were indifferent so long as a docile workforce could be maintained. Attitudes about community, economics, patriotism, and stewardship held by Republic's leader Tom M. Girdler hold the key to understanding the outbreak of violence in Youngstown, Ohio during the sweltering summer months of 1937.

Tom Girdler led the Republic Steel Corporation as either its president or board chairman from 1929–1956.¹ He was a mechanical engineer by education, but his real talent was management. His upbringing, training, and experience evolved into a philosophy called Girdlerism—a version of paternalism that rewarded loyalty and rugged individualism and abhorred communism and unions. Under Girdler's leadership, Republic Steel resisted unionization far longer than competitors in the steel industry.²

¹ Encyclopedia of Cleveland History, n.d. "Girdler, Tom Mercer," *Encyclopedia of Cleveland History*, Accessed October 1, 2017. <https://case.edu/ech/articles/g/girdler-tom-mercer/>.

² Two of the nation's largest steel companies, United States Steel and Bethlehem Steel agreed to terms with union negotiators on May 2, 1937 and March 28, 1941, respectively. Republic Steel held out until August 11, 1942 when director of industrial relations, J.A.Voss, signed a contract with the Congress of Industrial Organizations. For more information, see: Tom M. Girdler, *Boot Straps*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943), 374; Bethlehem Area Public Library, n.d. "1941 Bethlehem Steel Strike," *Bethlehem Area Public Library*, <https://www.bapl.org/local-history/local-history->

Republic Steel was a so-called “Little Steel” company—a moniker given to secondary companies that did not command the same market share as firms like the United States Steel Corporation or Bethlehem Steel.³ In the years preceding 1937, labor groups at firms of various sizes began to organize as company-sanctioned unions. Steel companies allowed their employees to organize if they did so as a company union. Company unions, outlawed today, were groups of workers that met under the supervision of their employers. Under this arrangement, workers were not actually free to voice disagreement with the company nor were they protected by a binding contract. These ‘unions’ allowed employees to feel like their concerns were being addressed while simultaneously allowing companies to exert influence and retain control over their workforce.⁴ In 1937, this balance shifted. A new, more aggressive organization, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) began to organize workers.⁵ The CIO organized outside the workplace and its membership was open to anyone who wanted to join. Steel companies hated this new model of unionization because it removed power from

[timeline/steelstrike1941/](#); Global Nonviolent Action Database, n.d. “United States steelworkers strike for a contract and union recognition, 1937,” *Global Nonviolent Action Database*, <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/united-states-steelworkers-strike-contract-and-union-recognition-1937>.

³ “Little Steel Strike of 1937,” Ohio History Connection, accessed March 9, 2017, http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/w/Little_Steel_Strike_of_1937.

⁴ United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Characteristics of Company Unions 1935: Bulletin No. 364*, Division of Industrial Relations, Florence Peterson, Chief (Washington, DC, June 1937), 199–205.

⁵ Mansel G. Blackford, *A Portrait Cast in Steel: Buckeye International and Columbus, Ohio. 1881-1980* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982), 122–125.

management and transferred it to labor. However, the writing was on the wall and in early 1937 the United States Steel Corporation acquiesced and struck an agreement with the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC), a CIO entity. SWOC bargained for U.S. Steel's employees and won the contract without a strike.⁶ U.S. Steel's history involved clashes with labor before 1937 and its leadership calculated that negotiation with labor was preferable to more bloodshed. This new arrangement was problematic for companies like Republic. It created a situation that emboldened the CIO as it began to wield power. Republic, and other companies, resisted the formation of non-company unions and this resistance led to violence.

Labor Relations and Government Regulation, 1890–1937

To understand violence across the Republic Steel Corporation in 1937 it is necessary to examine U.S. labor/management relations in the preceding decades. During the late 1800s some American workers began to agitate for better pay and working conditions. Improvement for workers, however, came at a cost to employers. This expense threatened profitability and workforce control. As employees escalated demands, management turned to private security firms to quell the boldness of labor. The most famous private security organization was the Pinkerton National Detective Agency. The Pinkertons, and other groups like them, were accountable only to their customers and operated as de facto police forces. They were free to use coercion and violence to protect management's property and business interests. Workplace

⁶ Blackford, *A Portrait Cast in Steel*, 125.

laws were nearly non-existent before 1900 and companies took full advantage of notional regulation.⁷

A confrontation that exemplified companies' bravado at the time occurred at Andrew Carnegie's steel mill in Homestead, Pennsylvania. Labor, represented by the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers, disagreed with management over wages and control. Negotiation ensued, and an impasse was reached. During this impasse management took a more aggressive stance than usual. Instead of allowing work to continue, the workforce was locked out and operations ceased. With this tactic, management showed labor that it would suffer without their benevolence. Henry Clay Frick, Carnegie's business partner and supervisor of Homestead, planned to bring in non-union workers to restart operations. But the workforce did something unexpected; it seized the mill by force of arms. Frick responded by calling in the Pinkertons. The next day, July 6th, 1892, the Pinkertons fought with Homestead workers and townsfolk. The ensuing fight, in which one side used a cannon, left 10 people dead: three workers and seven Pinkertons. Six days later, the Pennsylvania state militia was summoned to restore order. For all the trouble, little changed. The confrontation resolved none of the underlying issues and tensions remained high until November when the union relented, and some workers were allowed to return. Still other laborers were blacklisted. Carnegie won—operations resumed, and the workforce learned their place.⁸

⁷ Robert Michael Smith, *From Blackjacks to Briefcases: A History of Commercialized Strikebreaking and Unionbusting in the United States* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2003), 3–4.

⁸ "Strike at Homestead Mill," American Experience, accessed March 12, 2017, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/carnegie/sfeature/mh_horror.html.

After the Homestead Strike, prevailing trends in American business continued to favor capitalists over the working class. The San Francisco streetcar strike of 1907 serves as yet another example, pitting United Railways against employees represented by the Amalgamated Association of Street and Electrical Railway Employees of America, also known as the Carmen's Union. The union decided to strike when Patrick Calhoun, United Railways' president, rejected a request to raise workers' daily wage to \$3.00. Calhoun's lawyer, James A. Farley, owned a detective agency and was a professional strike buster. Farley contracted 400 ruffians to travel from New York to San Francisco to work the jobs that strikers left. These hired hands stayed in one of the railcar storage barns, and the union knew they were there. After waiting a day, Calhoun ordered Farley's men to operate six cars in defiance of the union's strike. Like the strikers before them, they wore United Railways uniforms. Unlike the strikers, Farley's men worked armed with revolvers. Once the cars left the barn, the strikers threw rocks and bricks at the vehicles and the strikebreakers responded by firing on them. Men remaining in the barn also opened fire on the strikers. This event left 25 people mortally or seriously wounded.⁹

In both of these important antecedents, corporate leadership hired outside workers to intimidate workers with the intent of breaking strikes. The message was clear—the powerful capitalists running these companies would not tolerate having the terms of their livelihoods dictated to them. It was in management's long-term economic interest to refuse union demands. Had they not done so, they would have willingly increased the legitimacy and bargaining power of unions, threatening the order and discipline needed to maximize profits. Furthermore, the Homestead Strike involved governmental authorities in the form of the

⁹ Smith, 40, 50–52.

state militia arriving on scene. The militia were nominally neutral, but their presence further intimidated the striking steel workers, thus benefiting Carnegie's position. Government intervention in San Francisco, however, benefited the strikers. Local police were displeased that outside, private muscle came to their city agitating violence. The police warned the newcomers that, "if any strikebreakers start shooting from the cars, they will be shot in return by the police."¹⁰ Mismanagement from a lack of direction produced decidedly different outcomes as governmental leaders at each scene acted without guidance telling them which side to support. State, and for that matter national, legislatures failed to provide regulatory and legal guidance to enforcement agencies in handling violent or potentially violent labor disputes.

The early 1900s showed that the relationship between labor and management was devolving to an untenable situation. Carnegie's use of the Pinkertons and United Railways' unleashing of Farley and his men were catalysts for change. Laws that governed labor/management relations and addressed wages and working conditions were enacted because of incidents like Homestead and San Francisco.

In 1935, labor scored a legislative victory with the passage of the National Labor Relations Act, more commonly referred to as the Wagner Act for its namesake—New York Senator Robert R. Wagner. The Wagner Act guaranteed the right of labor to organize and bargain collectively, prohibited interference by management, and established an independent board to

¹⁰ Smith, 52.

administer the law.¹¹ The Wagner Act was a departure from previous judicial interpretations of the Sherman Act of 1890 which sought to ensure fair competition among businesses. The Sherman Act required prohibition of “...combinations or conspiracies in restraint of interstate or foreign commerce and provided for criminal prosecution, injunctions, and suits for triple damages for violations.”¹² Congress designed the Sherman Act to protect the American economy from monopolies by ensuring that one company or trust could not become too powerful. Corporations adapted by using the Sherman Act against labor unions. They argued that because labor unions could affect the flow of interstate commerce and its rates, they conspired against organic fundamental operations and were therefore in violation of the law. The Supreme Court upheld this interpretation in *Loewe v. Lawlor*, also referred to as the Danbury Hatters’ case.¹³ It appeared that workers’ rights were subservient to corporate profitability, at least in the eyes of Congress and the federal judiciary. These Sherman Act machinations occurred during the first decade of the twentieth century. Labor unions and progressive allies struggled for the following two decades to score a major victory in their fight for rights until the passage of the Wagner Act.

The Wagner Act was a sufficiently written law that defined conditions precisely intended “to diminish the causes of labor disputes burdening or obstructing interstate and foreign commerce, to create a National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), and for other purposes.”¹⁴ This stipulation

¹¹ Harry A. Millis and Emily Clark Brown, *From the Wagner Act to Taft-Hartley: A Study of National Labor Policy and Labor Relations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950), 28–29.

¹² Millis and Brown, 9.

¹³ *Ibid*, 8–9; O. L. Clark, Application of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act to Unions since the Apex Case, 2 Sw L.J. 94 (1948) <https://scholar.smu.edu/smulr/vol2/iss1/6>.

¹⁴ *National Labor Relations Act, U.S. Code* 29 (1935), §§ 151–169.

seemingly prioritized free-flowing commerce as the law's priority. However, the remainder of the law enumerated rights and protections for labor that represented reconciliation for decades of abuse suffered by American workers at the hands of the United States' industrial management hegemony. Despite good intentions, the Wagner Act was only partially effective at protecting workforces from unfair labor practices. Because of cultural norms, workers feared retribution by management. Local, state, and federal authorities remained impotent in their responses to labor/management disagreements even after the Wagner Act's passage. The Wagner Act was under-enforced, and management continued to wield unchecked power. Meaningful change did not occur until more blood was shed, particularly during the Republic Steel confrontation in Youngstown.

The Wagner Act specified that, "Employees shall have the right to self-organization, to form, join, or assist labor organizations, to bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing..."¹⁵ This was the most important text within the legislation as it established legal protection for laborers. Prior to the Wagner Act, employees were merely a commodity, but with its passage, their wishes had to be considered. In addition to recognizing labor as more than a tool of management, the act also prohibited practices such as interference in union activities, hiring discrimination based upon union affiliation, and retribution by management.

Management viewed the new protections granted to labor as unwelcome intrusions by the government into private enterprise. After passing through Congress with almost no opposition, President Franklin D. Roosevelt

¹⁵ *National Labor Relations Act, U.S. Code 29 (1935), §§ 151–169.*

signed the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) into law on July 5th, 1935.¹⁶ Some saw this legislation as anti-American and patriarchal, resulting in immediate legal challenges from private business. The new law established workers' rights and prohibitions of certain management practices, and also established a National Labor Relations Board to act as an enforcement body ensuring that violators were sanctioned. However, before the board was organized the American Liberty League—a conservative advocacy group whose members opposed New Deal reforms generally, and the Wagner Act specifically—questioned the Wagner Act's constitutionality in a scathing report that suggested the new law placed excessive restriction on individual rights. The Wagner Act was under attack and its survival depended on the opinion of the Supreme Court.¹⁷

On April 12th, 1937, the Supreme Court held that the Wagner Act was constitutional and provided “adequate opportunity to secure judicial protection against arbitrary action.”¹⁸ With the Supreme Court's endorsement, labor began to influence American industry. Management did not stand idly by, though, and allow their control to be usurped. A response to widespread patterns of managerial behavior that oppressed and dehumanized labor, the Wagner Act provided the legislation required to stop the brazenness with which employers treated their workers. Homestead, San Francisco, and the struggle to pass the Wagner Act served as prelude to violence in Youngstown in 1937.

Girdlerism

To understand violence throughout the Republic Steel Corporation in 1937, it is imperative to understand

¹⁶ Millis and Brown, 28.; The vote tally for the National Labor Relations Act was 132-45 in the House of Representatives. It passed the Senate without a record vote.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 36.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 40.

Tom Girdler's background. In many ways, Girdler was the embodiment of that which business and capital tried to protect. He believed in strength, patriotism, and independence. He also eschewed the union ethos which valued workers as vital and hard-to-replace partners in industry's success. Tom Girdler opposed the leadership of the CIO literally and figuratively. Literally, in that he ordered his employees to resist the formation of a union and figuratively in that he personified the practices that SWOC and the CIO tried to defeat.

Girdler gave his autobiography an ironic title: *Boot Straps*. To pull oneself up by their bootstraps implies that their road to success was within reach but required self-motivation. In Girdler's case, this could not have been further from the truth. Two circumstances, his financial well-being while attending college and his ascendancy to leadership of his father's business, illustrate that Girdler's rise to industrial rule was assured. Girdler thus represented the classic hypocritical industrialist who assumed hard work was enough without realizing his own privilege.

Tom Girdler attended Lehigh University, benefitting from the finances of his paternal aunt, Jenny. Aunt Jenny believed education to be important and promised to help Girdler attend college. His matriculation began in 1897, studying mechanical engineering. Beginning that year, Aunt Jenny saw to Girdler's monthly expenses. By the end of the first year, they agreed upon a \$50.00 monthly allowance. Girdler thrived at Lehigh. He sang in a church choir, belonged to a fraternity and forged strong friendships. One friend, Cy Roper, provided Girdler an opportunity to work in England after graduation in 1901. He worked for Roper in England for about a year, became

homesick, and returned to the U.S. by March of 1902.¹⁹ Because of his time at Lehigh and his family's benevolence, Girdler achieved academically and expanded his mind through travel. His family, via Aunt Jenny's stipend, provided him with the security that ensured an undemanding path from adolescence to adulthood. Later in life, during his time as chairman of the Republic Steel Corporation, his employees fought for this same security and Tom Girdler stood in their way.

During the summers of his college years, Girdler worked in the family business. His father owned a cement plant that did well, but production could be better. One summer, Girdler's father fell ill and needed to step back from running the factory. The business's treasurer, Thomas Cooper, concocted a scenario in which Girdler would take over the business. Girdler's father was dubious. The elder Girdler did not feel anyone beside him could run the factory. Alas, needing a rest, he relented, and Tom Girdler entered the world of management. Girdler described his father as enslaved to duty. Tom wasn't interested in running a cement business, but he revered his father and his way of life. Thus, duty compelled him to manage the cement plant until his father could return. Girdler worked relentlessly. During that summer, the cement plant broke production records. While other men ate lunch, he worked. When other men went home for the night, he worked.²⁰ Girdler's drive may have been due to his work ethic or it may have been due to his idolization of his father. Either way, he saw himself as driven and other men as lazy. This attitude of self-righteousness dominated Girdler's interactions with labor for his entire career.

Girdler's stance toward labor hardened when attitude turned to action. Before running Republic Steel,

¹⁹ Tom M. Girdler, *Boot Straps*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943), 65–66, 83, 9.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 73–79.

Girdler spent time at various levels of management in other companies. One of these firms was the Oliver Iron & Steel Company. Early in his career, Girdler was a foreman for Oliver. One day, one of his subordinates finished his work and tried to leave a few minutes early, which was in violation of company policy. Workers were expected to start another task if it could be completed within a few minutes after quitting time. Many workers were unhappy with this rule and one man challenged it by leaving early. Girdler ordered the man back to his post and when he did not go Girdler punched the man and a fight ensued. Girdler beat the man unconscious. After the incident, Girdler's boss was only concerned with who won the fight and fired the worker.²¹ Girdler had only graduated college a year earlier and was now a foreman, the lowest management position in a steel mill. He knew that the worker's actions were an affront to his authority. This knowledge combined with his inexperience resulted in a quicker escalation than necessary. Girdler surmised that his place in the labor/management ecosystem would be secure if he protected the interests of capital. The man's dismissal along with Girdler's continued ascension proved he was right. This lesson, combined with his belief that labor was inherently lazy, guided Girdler's business decisions and evolved into a management philosophy called Girdlerism.²² Intense control of labor through policies and practices that

²¹ Girdler, 96–97.

²² The origins of the term “Girdlerism” are unclear but it appeared in newspapers as early as 1938. Historians of the 1930s steel industry have also included their work. For more information, see Gordon Mackay, “Is Zat So!,” *Courier-Post*, August 23, 1938, 9, <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/480359653/>; Ahmed White, *The Last Great Strike: Little Steel, the CIO, and the Struggle for Labor Rights in New Deal America* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2016), 63.

define the role of the worker as inferior characterized Girdlerism. If labor did not try to re-define itself outside the bounds of this definition, there was peace. When labor upset the status quo, Girdlerism required management to preserve its paternal role.

Violence that occurred at the Youngstown mill was the result of Girdler's unrelenting desire to maintain control. When labor tried to organize, Republic only allowed company unions. When labor persisted via SWOC, Republic locked them out and slowed or stopped production at its facilities. When labor called a strike, Republic responded violently, and people were injured or killed. Republic Steel, under the leadership of Tom Girdler did not discriminate when it chose whom to apply the principles of Girdlerism. Workers, women, and non-employees were all targets on the night of June 19th, 1937. Some believe that Girdlerism was a conscious set of policy decisions, but it was not. Instead, Girdlerism was sub-conscious—a consequence of Girdler's values and beliefs that beset a company climate in his image. The managers of Republic Steel shared a belief system rooted in vehement control of labor to maintain a status-quo. Girdler attempted to justify his philosophy by shrouding it in notions of paternalism, patriotism, and capitalism.

While working for Jones and Loughlin, another steel company, in 1914, Girdler managed a steel mill: the Aliquippa Works at Woodlawn, Pennsylvania. There, he rose to the rank of Assistant General Superintendent—the highest position at Woodlawn.²³ Later that same year, he became head of Jones and Laughlin's company town that became Aliquippa, Pennsylvania. With Girdler as its leader, Aliquippa became "...a benevolent dictatorship."²⁴ He oversaw the town's private police force and installed Harry

²³ Girdler, 171–172.

²⁴ Philip L. Cook, "Tom M. Girdler and the Labor Policies of Republic Steel Corporation," *Social Science* January (1967): 25.

Mauk, a former Pennsylvania state trooper, to lead it. Girdler believed that his workers needed a paternalistic figure to guide them. Aliquippa, a town with all its homes owned by Jones and Loughlin and schools run likewise, afforded Girdler the opportunity to be that father-figure and control most areas of workers' lives.²⁵

Patriotism was another value that informed Girdler's leadership. Girdler described the United States' advantage in World War II as follows, "all the superb mechanisms which will enable them to conquer the enemies of the United States are the products of this country's great industrial corporations and could only have been created in such a short time by such organizations."²⁶ The American ideal and the determination of the United States' armed services took a backseat to industrialism for Girdler. He felt a responsibility to provide military means to defeat evil in the world. He also saw organized labor as a threat to success in this endeavor. At the time, men with communist leanings or were outright communists led the CIO.²⁷ Girdler equated the idea of workers' rights to communist sympathies. His version of patriotism would not allow communists to defile his vision of the American way. Thus, his rigid reaction to strikers in Youngstown was consistent with his belief system. *Boot Straps* was published in 1944, before both the end of the war and the onset of the Cold War. Accordingly, those events only reinforced his beliefs about communists, labor, and business. Further, as one of the U.S.'s most prominent captains of industry, Girdler was a chief architect of the

²⁵ Girdler, 73–79.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁷ Michael Dennis, *Blood on Steel: The Chicago Steelworkers and the Strike of 1937* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 17.

nation's attitude regarding communists, labor, and business.

Girdlerism's roots are embedded in capitalist principles which prioritize profit above the well-being of workers. One of the main criticisms of capitalism is that it places excess wealth in the hands of too few people. One must be willfully self-deceptive to engineer this lack of balance into a business. Girdlerism was a tool used by those who controlled wealth to maintain a lack of balance and its inventor, Tom M. Girdler exercised it in its most perfect form.

Youngstown, Niles, and Warren: Republic Steel's Ohio Battlefields in 1937

Violence erupted in Youngstown, Ohio on the evening of June 19th, 1937 when striking union members and agents for Republic Steel fought near Republic's facilities. This encounter was brutal and deadly; two people died, and scores were badly injured. Several conditions explain why events that day became bloody. First, leadership of Republic Steel was determined not to bend to the will of the CIO, acting through its steel industry organizing arm, the Steel Workers Organizing Committee. Second, SWOC, was determined to organize workers of Republic Steel using new powers granted to it by the Wagner Act. Third, local authorities were an invested third party because events took place in their city, not only on the grounds of Republic Steel. Finally, the attitudes of those involved were rooted in their self-images as Americans. Each believed their role legitimate and essential to the functioning of the United States—all also believed their opponents were wrong, misguided, or evil.

The CIO's strike against Republic Steel began on May 26th, 1937.²⁸ Earlier that year, the organization sent a

²⁸ White, 125.

letter of demands that included a \$5.00 daily minimum wage, paid vacations, a 40-hour work week, overtime pay, health and safety standards, and a grievances settlement process.²⁹ Tom Girdler was dumbstruck by the fact that his workers wanted improvements in any of these areas but particularly in safety. “Just ordinary carelessness, such as management has engineered out of the industry, can cause horrible accidents.” Girdler also suggested that although management had virtually eliminated accidents, there were “planned mishaps” concocted to coerce CIO membership.³⁰ There was, however, enough employee unrest to enable SWOC’s organizing efforts to take hold, but Girdler refused to acknowledge their concerns. He refused the demands of the CIO letter and did so because he believed there was a faction of workers loyal to him. A large majority of Republic’s employees joined the CIO, but some did not. Girdler clung to the idea that these few were virtuous while those who joined the CIO were dishonorable. While pseudo-negotiations ensued, the group of men that Girdler preferred met with another of the company’s leaders, Charles White. Girdler claimed that, at that meeting, they stated to White, “If Girdler signs an agreement with the C.I.O., we strike!”³¹ This was music to Girdler’s ears. In his mind, it gave him a moral justification to reject SWOC’s demands.

Girdler knew a strike was inevitable, so he prepared. He anticipated violence and prior to the beginning of the strike, Girdler ordered that each Republic Steel plant be supplied with tear gas. This move showed his hand. Girdler meant to break the strikers’ will and was prepared to use force. He wrote that he instructed his staff

²⁹ White, 119.

³⁰ Girdler, 280.

³¹ *Ibid*, 228.

to avoid violence but reminded them of their obligation to protect Republic's property and defend workers who remained inside the facilities during a strike.³² Surely, he knew that if his men used tear gas, then local authorities would arrive and intervene on behalf of the city's private enterprise. In Youngstown, Niles, and Warren this was exactly what happened.

Prior to the strike, SWOC distributed handbills as workers left the plants. These papers served as recruitment tools for SWOC.³³ Newly recruited members then held organizing meetings in homes, churches, and bars.³⁴ Leaders were elected, and pickets were organized. SWOC needed to operate in accordance with the Wagner Act. So, in the months leading up to the strike, Lee Pressman, SWOC's lead legal counsel instructed membership to record all violations of their rights.³⁵

Once the strike was on, the union's tactics became a bit more questionable. SWOC and its members felt they were engaged in an ideological and material war with Republic Steel. To that end, they used whatever tactics necessary to advance their cause. According to Tom Girdler, the union needed to keep men who wanted to work out of the plants. To accomplish this, Girdler wrote of the strikers, "This was done by pickets carrying clubs, guns, razors, and other weapons. Very few of these pickets were Republic employees."³⁶ Whether Girdler's claims are accurate or not is difficult to confirm but the National Labor Relations Board found that the union barred entry of non-union workers into the plants.³⁷ For the strike to work,

³² Girdler, 238.

³³ "In the Matter of Republic Steel Corporation and Steel Workers Organizing Committee" *National Labor Relations Board*, 1938, 322.

³⁴ White, 110.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 91.

³⁶ Girdler, 229.

³⁷ "In the Matter of Republic Steel Corporation and Steel Workers Organizing Committee", 251.

SWOC needed Republic to feel economic pain. Their method was to deny plants supplies and cease production. It started to work.

As the strike began in Warren, men left at the end of their shifts intending to begin picketing while also trying to recruit others to their cause. Standing between them and potential recruits, however, were the plant superintendent and a couple hundred “loyal” workers and bosses armed with sledgehammers, pikes and other weapons. The superintendent shouted to them, “Come on you sons-of-bitches, we are waiting for you.” Another group trying to leave the Warren facility also met resistance and were told, “You have to stay here to protect your jobs... If you go home you won’t have any more jobs in this department.”³⁸ Republic Steel was clearly willing to resort to intimidation and violence to maintain the status quo, but the CIO and its members were likewise prepared to stand their ground.

On Saturday May 30th, 1937, SWOC leadership in Ohio met with representatives for the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers. Steel mills connect to railroad lines that deliver steel making materials and distribute the finished product. Republic wanted to use their lines to deliver food and other supplies to workers who remained inside defying SWOC’s wishes. SWOC appealed to their fraternal brothers in the Engineers union to convince them not to make deliveries.³⁹ Their efforts were somewhat successful. In describing an exchange with the railroads, Girdler wrote of the engineers’ commitments, “...we’ll haul coal, iron ore, or finished steel as usual. But we won’t haul munitions.” Those ‘munitions’ included food and

³⁸ “In the Matter of Republic Steel Corporation and Steel Workers Organizing Committee”, 356.

³⁹ “South Chicago Clash Marks Strike,” *Plain Dealer*, May 29, 1937, 1, 5.

clothing.⁴⁰ The union needed the engineers' help because they could not hope to stop a locomotive physically. Mail trucks, on the other hand, could not get through the human picket lines around Ohio's Republic facilities. Republic authorities attempted to mail food into the plants from Cleveland, but the union suspected the tactic and stopped deliveries.⁴¹ With the situation becoming desperate, Republic devised an ingenious solution to defeat the SWOC siege.

Tom Girdler was an engineer by training, and he attacked the siege problem like one. Girdler examined Republic's resources, assessed tactical success probabilities, determined material cost and the cost to Republic's reputation, and decided on a course of action. The Niles plant was in dire straits. Girdler's leadership team considered driving food near the plant, but they abandoned that idea because strikers controlled all roads around the facility. They considered using trains and mail, but those methods had already been thwarted. Another thought was to use a tank to deliver food, which Republic had because they were contracted to provide armor and needed to test steel on a working model. This was also rejected because the Republic men decided it would lead to bloodshed. Finally, they decided to try aerial resupply.⁴²

Several Republic employees who owned airplanes as well as private contractors were mobilized to drop food into the plants. The Niles plant was the site of the first attempt. It was off target and the strikers ended up with supplies intended for workers in the plant. Subsequent drops were successful, and the workers got food and domestic supplies. Within a few days, workers inside the Niles plant were able to fashion a makeshift runway that Republic used to fly men and supplies in and out. The

⁴⁰ Girdler, 283.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 331–332.

⁴² *Ibid*, 299–305.

union also used planes to perform reconnaissance. The CIO needed to know what work was ongoing and they used planes to circle the plants and collect information.⁴³ The airplane strategy worked but it was not a long-term solution. Steel making supplies could not get into the plants and product could not get out. With both sides dug-in, something had to give.

The strike languished for several more weeks into the beginning of June 1937. Meanwhile, Republic tried to gather support from law enforcement in cities where work had stopped. On June 15th, Girdler distributed a statement to employees that, in part, read, “Employees kept from their jobs by mobs of armed pickets many of whom have never worked for Republic and citizens outraged by this defiance of law and decency by the C.I.O. are joining together to insist that law enforcement agencies compel the union to cease unlawful picketing.”⁴⁴ While Girdler’s statement reassured uninvolved employees, it also called for them to pressure local authorities. Girdler tried to start a grassroots campaign to benefit one of America’s most prosperous companies. He wanted those on the sidelines to agitate for local police and sheriff’s departments to enter the fray. When fighting erupted in Youngstown the police and sheriff’s deputies that were involved protected Republic’s interests—not the workers.

There were only a few points of entry at Republic’s Youngstown mill. This made it easy for strikers to control the flow of people in and out of the mill. One of these points was “Stop 5.” On the evening of Saturday, June 19th, 1937—three weeks into the strike—gunfire erupted, and John Bogovich and James Eperjesi were killed outside

⁴³ Girdler, 299–305; White, 125.

⁴⁴ “In the Matter of Republic Steel Corporation and Steel Workers Organizing Committee”, 255.

the Republic plant in Youngstown.⁴⁵ Accounts of the fight report that at least 26 people were wounded, however the actual number may have been upwards of 60. Dozens more suffered the effects of tear gas.⁴⁶ The community was changed by this incident and divisions between labor and management deepened. Both factions and bystanders saw parts of their city damaged by disagreements between labor and management. The costs of these confrontations were materially high but the cost in human life and peace of mind were even higher. The lives of those involved and their loved ones changed forever.

Accounts of the events vary, and the genesis of fighting is unclear. One account, purportedly from an eyewitness, suggested that Youngstown police provoked the incident. The eyewitness described a scene in which women picketers arranged themselves for a photograph. One had a camera and while others sat on folding chairs, a Youngstown police officer snatched the camera from the would-be photographer's hands. Upon seeing this, the photographer's husband, who was nearby, tried to wrestle the camera away from the police officer. Things escalated quickly; the police lost control of themselves and the situation. In contrast to others, this account stated that the police opened fire with bullets as well as tear gas.⁴⁷ This account blamed the beginning of the battle on the police and described them as a group of people itching for confrontation. The account was sympathetic to SWOC and saw its tactics as just. Others saw the beginning of the encounter at Stop 5 differently.

⁴⁵ "Fight Rages at Republic Mill Gates," *Plain Dealer*, June 20, 1937, 1,13; White, 158–160.

⁴⁶ White, 157-159; Girdler, 354.

⁴⁷ *Republic Steel Company Stop 5 Riot Eyewitness Narrative*, June 19, 1937, Manuscript. From the Youngstown Historical Center of Industry and Labor, Carl "Jerry" Beck Papers, <http://www.ohiomemory.org/cdm/ref/collection/p267401coll36/id/18634> (accessed March 24, 2017).

Newspaper reports of the event varied. The *Cleveland Plain Dealer* was the largest daily publisher in the immediate vicinity of Youngstown. Its reporting on the opening salvos of the battle indicated that the women failed to follow police instruction to move further from Republic property. The *Plain Dealer* also identified them as the CIO Women's League. Because of their refusal to leave, the police used three shells of tear gas. The crowd then dispersed, reorganized and marched on police. The *Plain Dealer* implied the melee began because the Women's League failed to comply.⁴⁸ The language used in the *Plain Dealer* article portrayed the strikers as wild and uncontrollable. It mentioned no gunfire on the part of the police and was specific about the number of tear gas shells fired. The tone of the article painted authorities as 'good-guys' and the union as 'bad-guys'. Likewise, when the *Chicago Daily Tribune* summed up the evening's events seven days later its reporting cast the strikers in an unfavorable light. The *Tribune* called the strikers "a wild throng of enraged pickets." The article did not indicate strikers' motivations, but it did, tellingly, call the CIO an "all-powerful labor dictatorship."⁴⁹ This language reinforced communist accusations leveled at the CIO. Rather than reporting on the Youngstown strike, the *Tribune* used their platform to advocate for Republic Steel, authority, and the economic status-quo.

The chairman of Republic Steel was the most extreme in blaming the CIO and SWOC for the violence. In his autobiography, *Boot Straps*, Tom Girdler recounted the events that started the strike. "As for the women, they were anything but peaceful. They were, in fact, the same

⁴⁸ "Fight Rages at Republic Mill Gates," *Plain Dealer*.

⁴⁹ "Thousands Quit Lewis Radicals for Steel Jobs," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 26, 1937, 1-2.

truculent, foul-mouthed type that Communist strategists have used repeatedly to provoke a riot brawl with policemen. And this riot was provoked. It had been planned.”⁵⁰ Girdler, although not present for the encounter, described it in exhaustive detail. He claimed that the women would not follow police instruction, spat at them, and even cursed them—sometimes in a foreign language. He also emphasized that the women sat on folding chairs and boxes, which supposedly incited the police. In addition to besmirching the character of the women, Girdler’s account suggested that union agents waited just beyond the vicinity of the female picketers so they could pounce if there was trouble with the police. Girdler described the Stop 5 incident as a coordinated tactical ploy designed by SWOC, the CIO, and communists. In his mind, they used underhanded tricks such as gender baiting and provocation to pull the police into a confrontation they hoped to avoid. A successful strike threatened to undermine Girdler’s managerial ability and the union was beginning to outflank him. Production slowed and local support, which he needed to pressure workers into returning, was neutral. A union instigated confrontation only benefited public opinion of Girdler and Republic Steel.

Donald Sofchalk presented another depiction of the Stop 5 incident in his 1961 dissertation examining the Little Steel Strike. Sofchalk began his discussion of the Stop 5 incident by giving a detailed description of the terrain involved. He also described Stop 5 as a bottleneck or choke point into and out of the mill. Either side of the road at Stop 5 was bounded by a river or a railroad embankment. This created an area controllable by anyone on the embankment’s high ground—a veritable killing field. To enter the facility, a person or vehicle had to go through an underpass in the embankment. According to Sofchalk, members of the Women’s League organized themselves on

⁵⁰ Girdler, 342.

the sidewalks and the driveway near the underpass. One issue with the protests on June 19th was that the women sat in chairs and were not walking. This amounted to provocation in the eyes of the police. An officer informed the women they were obstructing traffic, the picket line must be moving, and they could not sit. He gave them five minutes to correct themselves and when they did not, he discharged two or three tear gas grenades near the picketing. After this, confusion reigned, and a full-blown riot began.⁵¹ Sofchalk's dissertation offered the most sober assessment of the Youngstown riot. The events that ignited violence that evening remain in dispute but what followed later that night is certain—the lives of two people ended on June 19th, 1937.

John Bogovich and James Eperjesi were shot to death during the June 19th riot. The two victims that eventful night, Bogovich and Eperjesi, were steelworkers, European immigrants, and strikers. They worked together at Youngstown Sheet and Tube—another steel company involved in the Little Steel strike.⁵² The fact that they were not Republic Steel employees but were present at the incident is evidence that SWOC's organization and fraternal ties among workers were assets to the union's cause in Youngstown. Both Republic Steel and local law enforcement opposed that cause. It is undetermined which side fired the shots that killed Bogovich and Eperjesi. Like the Stop 5 events that led to riot, competing versions of the truth obscured the identities of Bogovich's and Eperjesi's killers.

After the initial events at Stop 5, all sides agreed that things escalated quickly but that is the limit to their

⁵¹ Donald Sofchalk, "The Little Steel Strike of 1937" (PhD diss., The Ohio State University, 1961).

⁵² White, 158.

agreement. Eyewitness testimony that appears favorable to the union claims that machine gun fire erupted from the “overhead cranes in the old tube mill.”⁵³ This version leaves no doubt that someone inside the mill fired on the crowd. Girdler’s version contradicts this claim. He wrote, “I am satisfied that no shots were fired by any of the more than 800 men in our plant. They were mad that night. They wanted to go out and go after the rioters. But all such talk was discouraged and kept under control.”⁵⁴ Not only did Girdler justify the behavior of his company by absolving it of any wrongdoing, he did so in a way that made him appear to be in total control. When he said that he was “satisfied,” Girdler’s words indicated that he was the ultimate authority that arbitrated right and wrong at Republic Steel. Furthermore, Girdler’s words betrayed his attitude toward his employees. He portrayed them as people of lesser emotional control who needed to be restrained. If this is what he thought of employees loyal to Republic during the strike, he must have believed worse about the strikers.

John Bogovich was not initially involved with the strike on June 19th. After hearing about what was unfolding at the mill, Bogovich, like many other union members, rushed to the scene. It is undetermined who fired the bullet that killed Bogovich, but the anti-union forces seemed to be using tactical methods. According to an interview of striker Fred A. Fortunado, shooters inside the Republic mill opened fire when flares were sent into the air. The flares illuminated the scene and allowed gunmen to fire more accurately.⁵⁵ It was during one of these illuminated moments that Bogovich was shot. Whether the fatal shot came from the police, a Republic agent, or a union

⁵³ *Republic Steel Company Stop 5 Riot Eyewitness Narrative*, Carl “Jerry” Beck Papers.

⁵⁴ Girdler, 354.

⁵⁵ Fred A. Fortunado, interviewed by Philip Bracy, *Youngstown State University: Oral History Program*, January 6, 1983.

member, Bogovich was shot from distance. In contrast, a point-blank shotgun blast killed James Eperjesi. Like Bogovich, Eperjesi's killer is unknown. Physical evidence suggests that the fatal shot came from the direction of the plant or the railroad embankment. Anti-union forces occupied both locations. One witness claimed that sheriff's deputies shot Eperjesi from the back of a nearby truck and that he was killed while he ran for cover.⁵⁶

Most accounts of the deaths of John Bogovich and James Eperjesi ran counter to Girdler's claim that his men fired no shots. His abdication of any Republic responsibility was an exercise intended to salvage both the reputations of himself and his company. The union, on the other hand, tried to use the deaths as a source of inspiration. At Bogovich's funeral, a SWOC organizer named John Stephens said, "Tom Girdler and Frank Purnell are responsible for the death of this man, but his life has not been taken in vain. The cornerstone of the union has been cemented in his death."⁵⁷ The deaths of Bogovich and Eperjesi on July 19th did little to change the attitudes of SWOC, the CIO, and Republic Steel toward one other. It took another four years and a War Labor Board order until Republic Steel finally signed an agreement with the CIO.⁵⁸

Conclusion

Two federal bodies, the National Labor Relations Board and the Supreme Court of the United States both released decisions that condemned the labor practices of

⁵⁶ *Republic Steel Company Stop 5 Riot Eyewitness Narrative*, Carl "Jerry" Beck Papers.

⁵⁷ Patricia Ann Terpack, "Youngstown and "The Little Steel Strike of 1937:" A Study of Community Reaction to a Labor Dispute" (Master's thesis, The Ohio State University, 1971).

⁵⁸ Girdler, 374.

Republic Steel during the 1930's. First, in 1937, the Supreme Court found the Wagner Act to be constitutional. The CIO and SWOC based most of their organizing strategy on the rights afforded to them by the Wagner Act.⁵⁹ This decision granted legitimacy to labor unions across the country and served as a threat to companies like Republic Steel. Then, in 1939 the NLRB found that Republic Steel operated in a manner that violated the Wagner Act by using intimidation tactics and dismissing employees who tried to organize. Under the power granted to it by the NLRA, the National Labor Relations Board ordered Republic Steel to compensate employees whom they harmed financially or physically during the Little Steel strike. The NLRB also reaffirmed the freedom to unionize without molestation and required that workers fired for union affiliation be re-hired. Furthermore, Republic Steel had to report to the NLRB the steps it took to implement their orders.⁶⁰ Against the backdrop of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, federal entities began to make policy and decisions that took power from corporations and placed some in the hands of the working class. Labor organizations took full advantage of the changing climate. Some corporations resisted the winds of change. Where resistance was strong, labor and management clashed, and sometimes violence ensued. Republic Steel, led by one of the most ardent opponents of labor rights, Tom Girdler, resorted to violent means when no other option seemed plausible.

Police justification for lethal violence is tenuous at best, judging from available evidence. Accounts vary as to the levels of danger law enforcement officers were in. Judging the behavior of the female strikers and their motivations is also difficult because of the difference in

⁵⁹ White, 3.

⁶⁰ "In the Matter of Republic Steel Corporation and Steel Workers Organizing Committee", 400-404.

descriptions of that fateful evening. Nevertheless, for laborers nationwide, a new era was emerging that promised greater bottom-up influence in decision making to bring better conditions, higher pay, and shorter hours. For management, however, this upcoming labor-centric period foretold an end to outright dominance over workers' rights and lives. When management's fears of the future clashed with labor's hope, confrontation was inevitable. The degree to which that confrontation escalated was dependent upon the commitment that both sides gave to their ideals. In Youngstown, on June 19th, 1937 those commitments ran deep.

Historians have written very little about the conflict at Republic Steel's Youngstown operations, yet this event nevertheless remains an important episode within the broad arc of worker struggles in America. Republic Steel, albeit less productive than "Big Steel" firms like U.S. Steel and Bethlehem, was nonetheless an important component of the latent American industrial power that played such a critical role in the country's ascendancy to world economic leadership. The strike, and subsequent *status quo ante bellum* at the plant, likewise presaged an era of continued antagonism between labor and capital that continues to this day. Regardless, the Republic workers' strike and the violent aftermath in Youngstown, Ohio demonstrated an important juncture in the long history of capitalist exploitation of workers in the United States.