

Labor Strikes and Riots in Pittsburgh
Concerted Activity vs. Private Control
By Charles McCollester, Ph.D.

American Association of University Women, Sept. 14, 2023

INTRO:

- Mark Rylance and STEEL – Possible US Steel Buyout
 - Thomas Bell Marker - 1300 Braddock Ave. – Oct 28 11:00 am
 - Charlie’s Monday Markers <battleofhomestead.org/media>
-

A strike is the collective withholding by workers of their labor with the goal to regulate by agreement or contract the terms and conditions of their employment. When conditions became intolerable on sailing ships, sailors struck the sails, thus the ship lost its ability to move as the captain or owners desired.

Workers’ Collective Action challenges Owner Property Rights.

Pittsburgh has long been a center of the American labor movement. There is a rich history of workers’ struggle to limit hours, earn a fair wage, secure safe working conditions, eliminate child labor, as well as gain a voice and respect on the job. Many strikes and picket lines combined with political activity brought society social security, workers compensation, health care, vacations etc.

While Pittsburgh industries – coal, steel, rail, oil, glass, aluminum, electricity – changed the world, Pittsburgh workers and their unions set a standard of working-class prosperity through struggle.

When asked to speak on labor strikes and riots, the realization came that there was really one true labor riot, the “Great Upheaval,” the 1877 Railroad Strike. The 1892 Battle of Homestead was an organized conflict with violence on both sides.

The vast majority of the tens of thousands of work stoppages in Southwestern Pennsylvania have been non-violent.

We will touch briefly on some major ones:

1814 Cordwainers Strike and Conspiracy Trial

- No violence. Concerted activity. *Conspirato*. To breathe together, to talk, to act together.
- Free speech and collective action. American revolutionary tradition vs. British Common Law
- Conspiracy in Restraint of Trade – illegal. Not a slave, a Worker can quit employment singly - but not together.
Labor organization defined as a conspiracy.
- Private Property prevails

1845 and 1848 Cotton Mill Strikes

(called riots – physical confrontations and property damage.)

First major factory strikes in Pittsburgh. Female leadership. Male support. Ten vs. 12-hour days (Six day weeks), Child Labor and family obligations.

- Forcible ejection of scabs, replacements.
- Ethnic division introduced. Irish and Know-Nothings
- “Proper” role of women vs. Protection of children and family.
- Legislative protections with loopholes.

1860: Concerted activity – Citizens of Pittsburgh block movement of cannon to the South. First action of the North in the Civil War.

1877 Railroad Strike/Riot

Riot – a spontaneous, decentralized uprising caused by mass suffering or outrage.

(Black Lives Matter riots vs. Jan. 6 – an organized insurrection with centralized leadership).

- Severe economic depression. Widespread unemployment.
- Technological advance: Westinghouse Airbrake leads to longer, faster, trains with smaller crew. Safety advance with employment loss.
- Series of wage cuts but Investors receive dividends.
- Refusal to meet with Trainmen’s Union elected committee and negotiate.
- Major strike spreads along the rails (Martinsburg, Baltimore, Pittsburgh – nationally to Texas and California. Pittsburgh workers stop all freight. Allow passenger and mail traffic.
- Philadelphia militia attempts to impose order.
- Burning of the yards & gun battle.
- *First “Red Scare”* (Spectre of 1871 – Paris Commune).
- Pittsburgh destruction vs. Allegheny City political and union leadership alliance.

1892 Battle of Homestead (Strike-Lockout)

Workers’ Republic. Union contract (1889-1892) in most advanced mill. Shopfloor presence and community political control.

- “Sliding Scale” – Productivity or Price.
- Shop floor union voice, Hours 50-60 a week by job. Sundays off.
- Historic linkage to production maintained for skilled crafts.
- Ethnic Unity. Slavs and Irish.
- Corporate Control. Ten-hour gun battle. Pinkerton surrender. Frick assassination attempt. Reorganized State Guard occupies town.
- Strike broken, Blacklist.
- Twelve-hour, seven-day work, Swing shift. Much lower wages for greatly increased hours.
- Total employment at Will. Corporate dictatorship.

1909 McKees Rocks Strike

- Immigrant labor uprising. “The Slaughterhouse,” The Last Chance. American skilled workers vs. immigrants.
- Preston housing – sexual predation. Pay system opaque.
- July to September. Evictions from housing. Introduction of scabs by rail and boat, peonage. Sixteen languages – meetings at Indian Mound.
- “Bloody Sunday.” Eugene Debs. IWW. Strike fails – improvements made.

1910 Westmoreland Coal Strike

- 17,000 miners involved. Brutal repression. Tent colonies. Phil Murray.
- Demands: 8-hour day (not 10), checkweighman, compensation for dead work. Many bitter and violent strikes in coalfields. (Blair Mountain and Windber etc.)
- Terrible mine explosions: Mammoth mine, Jacobs Creek, Monongah, Darr. Over 1,000 Pennsylvania miners killed per year in 17 years between 1890 and 1920.

1914 & 1916 Westinghouse Strikes

- 1914 led by 1,000 women strikers as 8,000 go on strike. ACIU (Allegheny Congenial Industrial Union). Non-violent and creative but defeated by state trooper intervention. Switch workers join the Electric strikers. Festive March through Braddock. Bridget Kenny “Joan of Arc of the strikers.” “Troops Enter East Pittsburgh.”
- 1916 Non-Violence rejected. War orders and worker leverage – wildcat strikes, worker options. Mayday March on Braddock Mill – shuts it down. May 2 shoot out at mill. 3 dead, 30 wounded. National Guard – 30 arrested.

1919, 1937, 1946, 1959, 1986 Steel Strikes

1919 “Hunky Strike” vs. 84 hour week and brutal working conditions.

- Cynical use of Black strikebreaker/refugees from boll weevil South.
- 25,000 armed men.
- Nowhere to meet except St. Michael’s Braddock (Fr. Kacinski). Slovaks.
- Thomas Bell *Out of This Furnace*. Murder of Fannie Sellins.
- *Second Red Scare* – Russian Revolution

1937 – J&L Decision – US Supreme Court.

- Worker organization, collective bargaining, and concerted activity protected.
- Aliquippa and “Little Steel Strike.” Democratic landslide in 1936.
- US Steel capitulates. Union power at height.

1946 strikes in Steel, Auto, Electrical raise living standards and ease transition to “peacetime” economy.

1959 – Three-month strike over union shop floor input.

- Beginning of foreign steel imports. American steel industry dominant, lazy and stupid.
- War against workers leads to sclerosis.
- Khrushchev visit.

1986 – Six Months stoppage (ULP strike) wins continuous caster for ET in Braddock.

1981-2 Westinghouse Airbrake, Union Switch & Signal - UE 610

- Following PATCO strike. Reagan – hard money, deindustrialization, imperialism, and anti-unionism.
- Militant union demonstrates labor resistance.
- Engenders a long death march for company and union workers. Impact – NYC Subway system.
- Loss of capital worker knowledge. Supply chains stretch. Trade imbalance and national debt.

1986 – March of 45,000 Building Trades unionists

- Concerted activity. Demonstrates great power and loyalty of skilled craft organizations strengthening not undermining union contractors.

2022-3 Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

- Divided union strikes an inept management in an industry in crisis.
- Starbucks – decentralized. Amazon – intense monitoring. Turnover, Covid impact. Essential Workers.
- Grad students, faculty, museums and libraries.

Intelligent management *with* a well-run democratic union is the most efficient type of business organization. As demonstrated in Sweden, Germany, Japan etc. Works Councils plus unions. Importance of feedback loops in organizations. Worker input, rather than domination and fear. Organization protects ability to participate.

Strikes are serious matters. I was on strike for seven months as a machinist at Union Switch & Signal 1981-2 with wife and four children. I like to say that the only good strike is short and successful. But sometimes strikes are necessary. Even when labor is defeated in an especially bitter struggle, the working-class as a whole sometimes benefits from their tenacity and example. However, some strikes end with real and lasting loss on all sides. Negotiation is preferable. But *not easy*, Neg Otium.