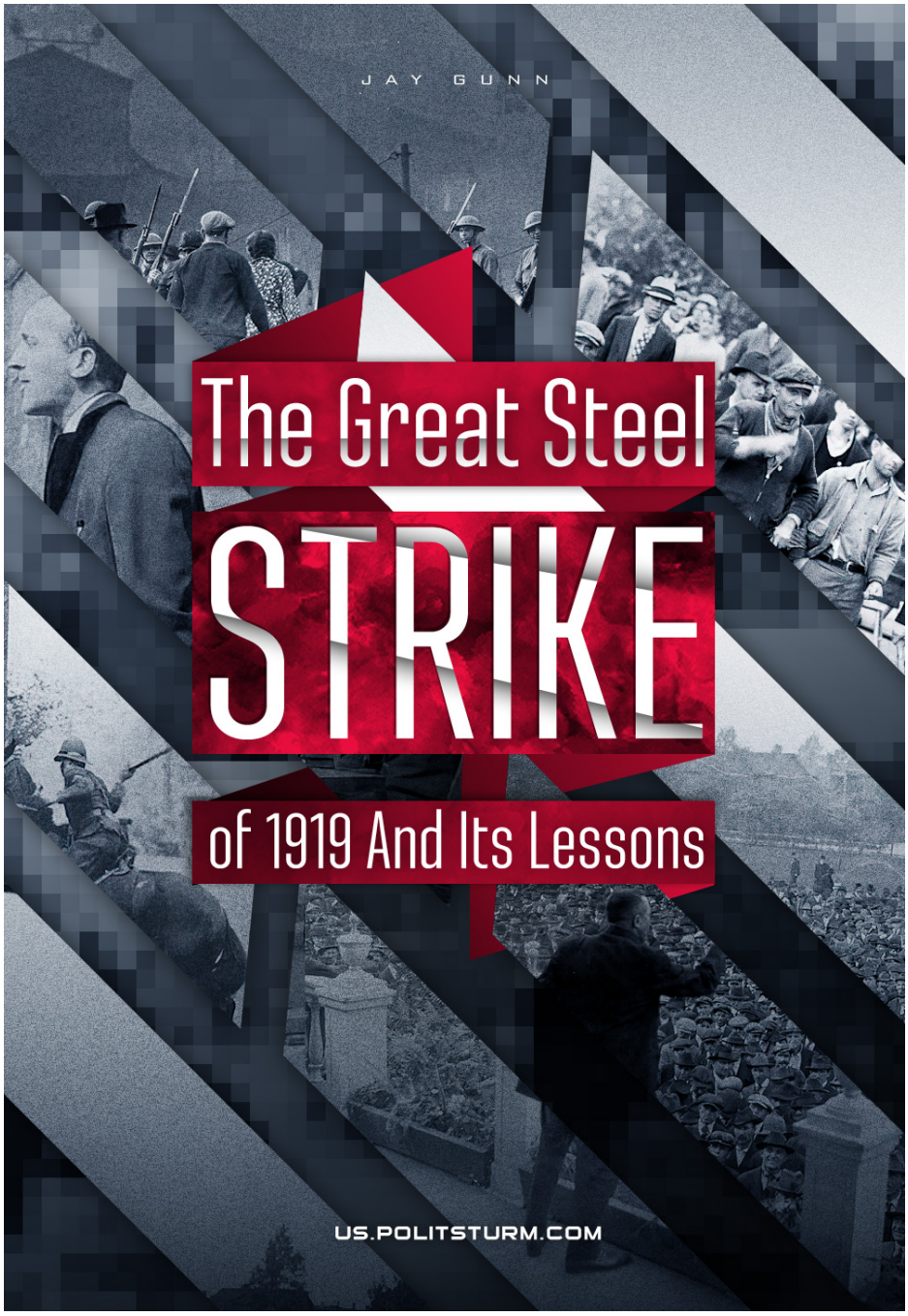
The Great Steel Strike of 1919 And Its Lessons



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From September 22, 1919, to January 8, 1920, one of the largest worker strikes in U.S. proletarian history occurred. Within that timeframe, 365,600 steelworkers, and a few workers in related and supported industries, engaged in strike actions against U.S. Steel and its subsidiary companies throughout the United States.

As U.S. workers in 2021-2022 continue to consolidate their workers organizations and their small but crucial gains, it is helpful to understand that throughout the history of workers struggles against their exploiters, many of the tactics of union busting used against them are those that were used effectively in the past. As the magnitude and intensity of strikes increase, so also will the reaction of corporations and companies to break up unionization. The repression of workers by U.S. Steel in 1919 was often violent and terroristic and carried out by forces of the State on behalf of capital. When capital is under threat, its brutality against workers and citizens can and will go to extremes. Additionally, a review of the great steel strike of 1919 also reveals the fundamental necessities of strong political and organizational leadership, solidarity, and unified action of workers across all sectors of labour.

Background

For the five years prior to American involvement in the war, U.S. Steel was extracting profits of approximately $105 million per year. During the war years of 1914 to 1918 those annual profits grew to approximately $240 million. When the war ended, U.S. the domestic steel industry returned to the practices of grinding as much work from labourers for the lowest cost of labour as possible. Workdays returned to twelve hours or more. The working conditions were no longer improved, and workers remained subject to harsh controls and discipline under the boot of their employers. Coupled with the retraction of wartime gains for workers, post-war inflation began to reduce the purchasing power of the wages of the workers.

Reflecting upon the years and months leading up to the strike, Robert Murray wrote:

> *“The groundwork for this conflict had been laid in August, 1918, when conference of twenty-four trade unions met in Chicago and established a National Committee for Organizing Iron and Steel Workers with Samuel Gompers as its honorary chairman, John Fitzpatrick as acting chairman, and William Z. Foster as secretary-treasurer. Throughout the ensuing months of 1918 and 1919 this committee achieved remarkable success, particularly within the ranks of the unorganized immigrant steel workers. It organized steel men in Johnstown, Youngstown, Chicago, Cleveland, Wheeling, Buffalo, and also, to some extent, in Pittsburgh, the stronghold States Steel Corporation. Naturally, the steel organizers’ activities met bitter resistance from the steel interests who retaliated against the budding unions by discharging known union men and prohibiting local union meetings.”[1]*

Most of the leaders within the various union federations were more or less conservative, cautious, and generally opposed to radicalism within labour leadership and the shop floors. A notable exception was William Z. Foster, who by this time had become a Socialist and a member of the Industrial Workers of the World. For a comprehensive recollection of the span of the great steel strike, Foster’s account “The Great Steel Strike and Its Lessons” is highly recommended reading.

While strike preparations for the strike were still nascent, the American Federation of Labor, acting in the interests of the steel workers, requested a meeting with Judge Elbert H. Gary, the chairman of the United States Steel board of directors on June 20th, 1919. This conference between the representatives of the workers and Judge Gary was to discuss conditions in the steel industry and the improvement of the workers' position. E.H. Gary was a founder of United States Steel who adjoined with himself partners such as J.P. Morgan, Andrew Carnegie, and Charles Schwab. Men whose business legacies went forward to become leaders in finance capital.

No reply from Judge Gary was forthcoming.

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It was then that the union leaders pushed the issue by circulating a strike ballot among the local steel unions with a strike date to be set by the National Committee for Organizing Iron and Steel Workers. With the rising antagonism, John Fitzpatrick and William Foster made a second request to meet with Judge Gary to arbitrate the settlement of all the differences and demands of the workers.

On the following day, Judge Gary replied, "that because of the open shop policy of United States Steel, 'The officers of the corporation respectfully decline to discuss with you, as representatives of a labour union, any matters relating to employees.' Fitzpatrick and Foster immediately asked Judge Gary to reconsider, but he again refused."[1]

Thus the interests of steel capital intensified the existing antagonisms between itself and the workers. An antagonism that the organized forces of labour would seek to exploit.

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Having gained obscene profits as a benefit of America's involvement in the imperialist war of July 1914 to November 1918, the Capitalist steel interests were unwilling in peacetime to consider any demands from workers. Apart from a disruption in steel production, the bourgeois barons of steel were confident that any action on the part of organized workers could be suppressed and defeated. Prior to the U.S, involvement in World War One, unions within the steel concerns had experienced demoralizing defeats which discouraged and dampened unionist activism and optimism. However, when the United States inserted itself into the imperialist struggle in Europe, the demands of war, such as for soldiery, munitions, and other materiel, created a shortage of workers to produce these for war. The U.S. federal government shifted its position in favour of union and labour organizing in order to maintain a cooperative balance between the steel interests and that of its labour force.

Steel companies established better working conditions only for the duration of the war. Yet as soon as an armistice was signed, these worker favorable concessions were revoked and working conditions returned to their pre-war features.

Unfortunately, related unions did not see their critical position in war industry as leverage to gain more concessions from the steel bourgeoisie. In his account of the Great Steel Strike of 1919, William Z. Foster wrote that:

> *"The war was on; the continued operation of the steel industry was imperative; a strike was therefore out of the question; the steel manufacturers would have been compelled to yield to their workers, either directly or through the instrumentality of the Government. The trade unions would have been re-established in the steel industry, and along with them fair dealing and the beginnings of industrial democracy."[2]*

This lost opportunity was, in part, due to a lack of organization and strategic cognizance of the leadership of the constituent unions with concerns in the steel industry.

It necessarily followed that when the war concluded, the steel industry began to readjust production for domestic consumption. This led to fear among many workers of reduced hours and subsequent reductions in income. These apprehensions were exploited by steel companies and led to the firing of many workers who were suspected of union affiliations and sympathies. Any advantages that unions possessed during wartime were lost. Nevertheless, preparations for a nationwide steel strike proceeded in spite of the challenges from the steel companies, vacillating union leadership, and underfunding.

In the interest of maintaining industrial peace, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson made appeals to both sides to stay the now apparent inevitable conflict declaring that he would call an industrial conference to “discuss fundamental means of bettering the whole relationship of capital and labour” thus averting the impending struggle between the steelworkers and the Capitalist exploiters. It was a token gesture. Both the steelworkers and the Capitalist steel trust had made their positions clear and that there would be no compromise of those demands and positions.

> *Therefore, on September 10, under tremendous pressure from the local steel unions, the National Committee for Organizing Iron and Steel Workers voted for the strike to begin on September 22. Two hundred thousand copies of the strike call were immediately issued in seven different languages: “STRIKE SEPTEMBER 22, 1919. The Workers in the iron and steel mills and blast furnaces . . . are requested not to go to work on September 22, and to refuse to resume their employment until such time as the demands of the organizations have been conceded by the steel corporations.”[1]*

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Strike

Many of the steelworkers were uneducated immigrants of a dozen different nationalities who were completely at the mercy of the Steel Trust. Even so, organizers discovered that the richest, most fertile ground for agitation and support for the strike was strongest among these workers.

Living and working conditions for such workmen were often wretched, many of their homes being “mere unpainted shacks without running water or plumbing.”[3] Almost half the men worked twelve hours a day, seven days a week, while the average work week for the whole industry was slightly under sixty-nine hours. An unskilled steel labourer’s average annual income was only $1,466, while the estimated minimum subsistence level for a family of five in 1919 was at least $1,575.18.

Twelve-hour workdays in harsh and dangerous conditions were the norm.

The basic demands for which the strike was called were:

> *“The right of collective bargaining; reinstatement of all men discharged for union activities with pay for time lost; the eight-hour day; one day’s rest in seven; the abolition of the twenty-four hour shift; an American living wage; double pay for overtime; the check-off and seniority; and the abolition of company unions.”[1]*

Within days of the beginning of the strike, the Industrial Relations Department of the Interchurch World Movement convened a meeting in New York City on October 1-3 and adopted a resolution for a full investigation of the strike. Thereupon, the IRD

established an independent Commission of Inquiry staffed by prominent American church leaders to interrogate the claims of violence and repression against workers by the steel trust and the State. Though this movement was characterized as conservative, it was soon branded as an ally to the radicals and the revolutionaries by the leaders of the steel concerns and a sycophantic media that was altogether willing to defame any person or organization that dared challenge U.S. Steel. According to some media reports, this conservative protestant commission had suddenly become infiltrated by Bolsheviks and anarchists. To its credit, the Interchurch World Movement initiated legal action against media organizations that propagated this slander, and the reports were retracted.

Despite the relative social and political influence and respectability of the members of the Commission of Inquiry, U.S. Steel Chairman E. H. Gary, representing the entity of the U.S. steel interests, refused to meet with them on the basis that the commission not only represented those who had gone back to work but, more problematically, also those who were considered to be radicals and Bolsheviks. This refusal on the part of Gary was the sixth rejection of arbitration. The bourgeoisie stood fast and firm.

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On October 6, 1919, the National Industrial Conference, consisting of representatives from Capital, Labor, and the public, opened in Washington, D.C. The conference was advisory only and no proposal or resolution was binding. The strike overshadowed the conference and the antipathies between labour and Capital only heightened.

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On the same day, Indiana National Guardsmen took over the city of Gary, Indiana, named for Elbert Gary, after police and strikebreakers clashed with striking workers. Martial law was declared. The use of State power to repress workers in the city named after the chairman of U.S. Steel was a clear signal to workers that the repressive forces of the federal government were under the effective command of those who also commanded the steel industry in the United States.

Throughout the history of The Great Steel Strike, violations and voiding of the Constitutional rights of workers abounded. Constitutional guarantees such as the freedom of assembly and freedom of speech, as well the fourth amendment prohibiting unreasonable and unlawful search and seizure by governmental authorities were effectively abrogated for the interests of the steel trust. No violators of those rights were ever prosecuted for their crimes. Documenting examples of these violations of constitutional rights, William Foster recalled:

> *“In locations in and around Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, workers were denied the right of free assembly by state and local authorities. In the town of Donora, the city council passed and ordinance forbidding public meetings without the permission of the city government. Of course, union men were never granted this permission but pressed ahead with mass gatherings anyway.” Foster continued, “The company officials left nothing undone to break up these gatherings. They held band concerts and ball games at the same hour and set dozens of their bosses and police to picket the meetings. But it was no use; the workers attended and joined the unions in droves.”[2]*

Lawful requests and petitions by representatives of the workers were almost always denied or ignored.

Quoting Foster at length once more:

> *"…the heart of the conspiracy against free speech and free assembly was in McKeesport, twenty miles from Pittsburgh. When the organizers tried to hold meetings in that city they could hire no halls without the Mayor's permission, and this the latter, George H. Lysle, stubbornly refused to give. He feared a revolution if the staid A. F. of L. unions were permitted to meet; but the Socialist party and other radical organizations went ahead with their gatherings without opposition. The truth was that he knew the unions would organize the workers if they could but get their ear, and this he determined to prevent. Nor would he shift from his autocratic position. Appeals by the organizers to the Federal government, the Governor and the local city council were alike fruitless. No meetings could be held in McKeesport. And the officials of all the steel towns along the Monongahela River, drawing inspiration from the little despot, Lysle, took the same stand. Free speech and free assembly were stifled in the whole district. The Federal authorities being so active setting the outside world aright that they could find no time or occasion to correct the most glaring abuses at home, the unions resolved to attend to the free speech and free assembly matter themselves."[2]*

Further:

> *In Duquesne, Rabbi Wise of New York was the speaker billed for the following Sunday. But the Steel Trust Mayor forbade his meeting. And when it was proposed to have Frank Morrison, with whom Crawford boasted a slight acquaintance, confer with him about the situation, he declared, "It won't do you any good. Jesus Christ himself could not speak in Duquesne for the A. F. of L!" It so happened that Rabbi Wise was unable to come to Pennsylvania for his scheduled lectures on behalf of the steel workers, and the organizers held the Duquesne meeting themselves. Crawford had his whole police force on hand and immediately arrested the speakers, Mother Jones, J. L. Beaghen and the writer. Forty-four steel workers, all the jail would hold, were arrested also, for no other reason than attending the meeting.[2]*

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The fight for free speech by the workers galvanized them. The struggle to openly exercise Constitutional rights infused confidence and enthusiasm among the workers. It most places the struggle galvanized their resolve and solidarity. Where workers proceeded with their mass gatherings, thus defeating the steel companies and their sycophant organs of state repression, the strikers became encouraged and sensed their collective empowerment and political agency.[2]

Newspaper accounts and archival documents reveal that Pennsylvania State Troopers, in hunting down strikers and strike leaders, would sometimes ride into stores and inner rooms without presenting warrants for entry. Of course, any damages and loss of property would never be covered by the State or by the steel companies nor would any police officers be held accountable for their blatant violations of the civil constitutional rights of peaceful citizens.

The harassment and violent treatment of workers and organizers by State officials acting at the behest of the Capitalist steel barons confirmed the observations of Marx, Engels, and Lenin that the State "is an organ of class rule, an organ for the oppression of one class by another" and that the creation of law and order by the bourgeois State serves to "legalize" and perpetuate that oppression of the ruling class over other social classes.

Friedrich Engels, as quoted by Lenin, noted that "In a democratic republic, 'wealth exercises its power indirectly, but all the more surely…' by means of the 'direct corruption of officials.'"[4]

During the strike, as in all conflicts between the exploiters and the exploited, the State police forces and corrupted government officials faithfully executed their duties and roles as a violent, coercive, and punitive force of repression on behalf of

wealthy steel Capitalists against peaceful workers, organizers, and innocent civilians.

Throughout the regions where workers were engaging in the active class struggle, police forces of the various counties, towns, and municipalities were often augmented by armed small business owners, the reactionary petit bourgeoisie, to threaten, if not outwardly repress, the steelworkers. According to Foster, some reactionaries “talked loudly about the merits of a firing squad as a remedy for industrial unrest.”[2] To preserve the order and stability that Capitalism required to maintain its hegemony and dictatorship over society, thousands of untrained civilians were sworn in as special police deputies subject to immediate activation should the bourgeoisie determine that a forceful attack would be needed to crush worker rights and activities.

William Foster recalls that:

> *“To carry on the terror so well begun by the suppression of free speech and free assembly, the Steel Trust turned loose upon the devoted strikers in Western Pennsylvania the great masses of armed thugs it had been recruiting since long before the strike. These consisted of every imaginable type of armed guard, official and unofficial, except uniformed troops. There were State Constabulary, deputy sheriffs, city police, city detectives, company police, company detectives, private detectives, coal and iron police, ordinary gunmen, armed strike-breakers, vigilantes, and God knows how many others. These legions of reaction, all tarred with the same brush—a servile, mercenary allegiance to the ruthless program of the Steel Trust—vied with each other in working hardships upon the steel workers.”[2]*

Police were present in the large meetings of workers often under the guise of protecting public order and security. Speeches were monitored, notes and intelligence were gathered, and in some cases, speakers were prevented from presenting their speeches and were frequently arrested, jailed, fined, and deported from the communities of workers. Where labour meetings were granted permits to assemble, the so-called freedom of assembly was permitted on the basis of conditions and restrictions. For example, the Mayor of McKeesport, Pennsylvania granted permission to the local council of labour to hold a mass meeting on the condition that English would be the only language to be spoken by the speakers. This was an attempt to marginalize and divide the workers along ethnic and linguistic lines.

It was not exceptional for mounted police to gallop through the streets, primarily in the neighbourhoods of immigrant and foreign-born workers, to force pedestrians to seek cover in whatever doorway or structure that they were passing. On various occasions, these mounted police would ride their horses into stores and into the inner rooms of private residences for no other reason that to intimidate and terrorize innocent civilians who may or may not have been sympathetic to the cause of the steelworkers. Depositions of these acts of terror and repression are many.

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Joining forces with the repressive bourgeois State forces were hundreds of company police, privately hired, trained, and armed.

Except for a few insignificant isolated incidents of disturbance and violence, no acts of mass rioting or breaching of the peace by strikers were ever recorded. Where outbreaks of violence occurred, it was instigated by the repressive State forces of the police. Yet in many places, the strikers were the ones considered to be criminals. Public magistrates dutifully subordinated constitutionally based due process to the interests of big steel. So-called law, order, and due process were weapons in the hands of the bourgeoisie to preserve only the freedom of exploitation of workers.

It is fitting here that the memory of Mrs. Fannie Sellins be inserted. Mrs. Sellins was an indefatigable and effective organizer for the United Mine Workers of America in an anti-union district along Pennsylvania's Allegheny River. She was described as being the heart of the local labour movement. When the steel campaign began, she gave her all and was responsible for the unionization of no less than five steel mills. Her efforts were such that she became regarded as a marked organizer by the agents of worker repression.

On August 26, 1919, "she was deliberately murdered under the most brutal circumstances."[2] During a malicious and fatal attack on Mr. John Strzelicki by drunken deputy sheriffs, Mrs. Sellins first moved some children out of danger and was then shot in the back multiple times as she attempted to aid the now-deceased miner. Her body was then dragged by the heels to a truck whereby a drunken deputy smashed in her skull in the sight of bystanders, including the children that she had guided away from the violence. Though the defender of law and order who ended Mrs. Sellins' life was known and named in the papers, he was not punished for his crime.

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Indeed, no so-called keepers of the peace were prosecuted for their participation in the deaths of Mr. Strzelicki and Mrs. Sellins.

Such is the unaccountability and immunity given to the authoritarian terrorists of capitalist repression.

Will the emergent U.S. worker organizations face similar violence? That, of course, remains to be seen; however, should capital deem it necessary to crush workers movements by force, it would do so with the complicity of police forces and bourgeois media framing the violence in such a way to elicit public sympathy and support for those wronged companies.

The Great Steel Strike of 1919 did not enjoy popular public support. This was due in large measure to the lack of knowledge of the real concerns of the workers through the skewed narratives and suppression of the grievances, demands, and experiences of the workers by newspapers with broad and local circulation. Accurate information about the scope of the strike was omitted from public knowledge. The media deliberately reported lower numbers of strikers than were actually engaged in the struggle as well as minimizing of the effectiveness of the strike. The papers frequently acted as messengers for the steel interests exhorting workers to return to their jobs while overtly touting the merits and virtues of patriotism, law, and order.

Case Western Reserve historians note that "…newspaper coverage focused more on the radical bent of the strike's organizers than on the unwillingness of the employers to negotiate. The [Cleveland] PLAIN DEALER editorialized that "It was apparent that the leadership was in the hands of radicals and extremists."[5]

Employing the same divisive tactics as the capitalist of the U.S. steel industry, the newspapers exploited the abstract public feelings of Americanism by warning of the danger that foreign-born strikers were among the most radical and that the possibility of an uprising by these organized, radicalized, and not fully American labourers, was a real and existential threat.

Additionally, the reactionary for-profit newspapers, always keen to purvey sensationalism to increase sales, engaged in stoking the fears of the public by framing the strike as the opening tactic for an American Bolshevik revolution though a direct connection between the workers State of the U.S.S.R. and American labour organizations were never established.

It is very true that due to the success of the proletarian revolution in the U.S.S.R., guided by the leadership of Lenin, many in the working class in the U.S. and throughout the industrially developed nations expressed their support of, and solidarity with, the Soviets. And while some U.S. organizers emulated the successful revolutionary strategies of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, no direct connection or working relationship between American labour and the Bolsheviks was ever established nor were there ever enough workers with Leninist revolutionary tendencies to effect any real change. Robert K. Murray, writing in The Mississippi Valley Historical Review, said this:

> *"Amid sensational press reporting, several frenzied and frankly biased Bolshevik investigations, and much misinformation, it was inevitable that the average American should become firmly convinced that bolshevism was inimical to his security and represented the very essence of lawlessness, brutality, and crime. As a result, the Bolshevik quickly and easily replaced the Hun as the factor most responsible for many of the nation's ills. No strike, no act of violence, no deviation from the norm failed to bring charges that the probable cause was domestic Bolshevik activity. Inevitably, ever greater exaggerations were made by the press and various conservative pressure groups concerning the number of bolshevists who were active on the American scene. Although some native radicals openly espoused the Bolshevik philosophy and worked for internal revolution, the number was actually never very large (the various domestic communist factions had about 75,000 members in 1919) and there was no real reason to believe that the nation was in serious danger."[6]*

Lenin himself certainly recognized that some support and solidarity existed from the "best representatives of the American proletariat" but there was no formal connection between the revolutionaries in the U.S.S.R. and representatives or members within U.S. labour organizations.[7]

Nevertheless, the anti-worker and anti-Bolshevik propaganda was an effective tool in the hands of a sycophantic press to pry away any public support from the steelworkers.

William Z. Foster recounts the role of the newspapers as bourgeois propagandists as "Pretending to be purveyors of unbiased accounts of current happenings, [when] they are in reality merely propaganda organs, twisting, garbling and suppressing facts and information in the manner best calculated to further the interests of the employing class."[2]

The above quote can be restated to reflect the activity and role of American corporate media today. There is hardly a word in contemporary lackwit corporate media about the unionizing efforts of American workers in 2021 and 2022.

There was a hesitancy and lack of critical support from other steel-related trades that was necessary to shut down the steel industry altogether. Had, for instance, the steelworkers been supported and joined in striking by those in the coal and railroad sectors that were directly involved in supplying the factories, the entire industry would have been shut down completely by a protracted struggle and the outcome would have likely been a favourable one for the steelworkers.

Divisions among the steelworkers occurred, in part, due to the differences in their positions in the workforce vis-à-vis their job-related skills. The skilled workers and those workers whose work did not require the development of specialized skills possessed differing self-interests. The working conditions and pay of skilled workers were better than those of unskilled labour and little support was forthcoming from the skilled tradesmen. This tension was exploited by the steel trust to weaken already tenuous solidarity and hamper union organizing.

For example, in early November 1919, under contractual and circumstantial duress, The Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel, and Tin Workers directed its members back to work in what was the first significant retreat of labour in this struggle. The amalgamation was primarily composed of more skilled workers who struck in sympathy with the other unions but ceded to the threats by the steel trust to terminate the contractual relationship with the union entirely. The strike by the amalgamation violated existing contracts at union mills and it was determined by Amalgamated president Michael Tighe that it was in the best interest of the union to return to work.

This does not mean that solidarity among the striking workers was non-existent. On the contrary, rallies and mutual material support among strikers were significant examples of worker solidarity throughout all ethnicities and demographics. Unions and various locals established commissaries and meal distribution centres for workers and their families. Despite a perpetual lack of funding, the distribution of food and various other necessities provided a means of survival and solidarity among the strikers as well as keeping up their morale and endurance during the struggle.

Should certain elements of the American workforce continue to organize and exert greater pressure on the interests of the ruling class, union solidarity and mutual support will become more necessary for success.

Along with divisions caused by intraclass self-interests, a more nefarious cause of working-class division was ever more effective.

Nativism, racism, and xenophobia are always powerful cards for the bourgeoisie to play in weakening labour activism and class struggles. They are a weapon in the hands of all Capitalist interests to divide labour and to maintain the status quo of their ownership and control of the means of production.

During the great steel strike of 1919, the steel trust recruited and transported between 30,000 to 40,000 unskilled black workers to take up the work of those who were out on strike. As much as it was a tactic to keep the steel plants running, the tactic was also cynically employed by the steel companies as a means of furthering divisive racial tensions within the American working class. Such a tactic also serves to transform common labour struggles into racial struggles. In fairness to these imported workers, their strike breaking was regarded by many in their ranks as a means to improve their own material conditions, if only temporarily. An opportunity that was exploited and encouraged by the steel trust for their benefit. However, advantages enjoyed by one group of workers should not be sufficient cause to undermine the necessary solidarity required to seize gains for all workers. Racial divisions then, as now, are in direct contradiction with the fundamental requirements of solidarity that all workers be organized and mobilized without regard to race, creed, sex, or nationality.

The newspapers in and around the Pittsburgh area were accomplices in stoking racial tensions by communicating, in so many ways, that real Americans needed to stand together in support of the steel companies’ efforts to ward off an invasion by foreign workers who were prone to radicalism and posed a threat to the stability of American society. The naked implication, of course, was that to be a supporter of United States Steel Corporation was to be a devoted patriot of the United States itself. Strikers, particularly those of foreign extraction, were baselessly considered domestic enemies and a threat to the Capitalist order.

What became evident during the strike was that these immigrant workers were sincere, honest, and earnest-minded people who seemed naturally disposed to a cooperative effort in workers struggles and demonstrating good citizenship for the benefit of their communities. All of these characteristics were, of course, obscured

by the prevailing propaganda of the day.

Then as now, one of the effective tactics used by capitalists to discipline labour and break up efforts of unionizing is that of discharging workers for engaging in organizing activities.

Foster reported that the officials working on behalf of the steel interests:

> *...contented themselves by stationing numbers of bosses and company detectives in front of the office and meeting halls to jot down the names of the men attending. But when this availed nothing, they took the next step by calling the live union spirits to the office and threatening them with dismissal. This likewise failed to stem the tide of unionism, and then the company officials applied their most dreaded weapon, the power of discharge. This was a dangerous course; the reason they did not adopt it before was for fear of its producing exactly the revolt they were aiming to prevent. But, all else unavailing, they went to this extreme.*

> *Never was a policy of industrial frightfulness more diabolically conceived or more rigorously executed than that of the Cambria Steel Company. The men sacrificed were the Company's oldest and best employees. Men who had worked faithfully for ten, twenty or thirty years were discharged at a moment's notice. The plan was to pick out the men economically most helpless; men who were old and crippled, or who had large families dependent upon them, or homes half paid for, and make examples of them to frighten the rest.[2]*

The threat of discharge remains a weapon in the hands of the Capitalist ruling class. It is particularly effective in times of economic stress when the labor pool of workers is high, and most are merely surviving week to week.

The interests of U.S. Steel precluded any expression of humane treatment of its aggrieved workers. Those interests, like all interests of Capital, are maintained through acts of violent repression, reprisals, and coercion.

Conclusion

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Even though this strike significantly decreased, and in some places halted, post-World War One U.S. steel production, it ended in a little over ninety days with none of the demands put forward by those labour organizations affiliated with the National Committee for Organizing Iron and Steel Workers fulfilled.

On the surface, most plainly, it would appear that the Great Steel Strike of 1919 was a complete failure for steel workers in the United States at that time; however, when examined more critically, the dynamic struggle between organized workers and Capitalisms most powerful individuals and entities, provides valuable and applicable lessons and strategic considerations for the necessary and inevitable re-emergence of worker union organization and efficacious strike activities in the present antagonistic conditions between workers and exploiters in the U.S.

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By the time that the Great Steel Strike of 1919 was called, much of the fundamental preparatory groundwork had been laid by organizers. Nevertheless, the strike was hamstrung by various obstacles, setbacks, defeats, and mistakes of the organized working class. Given the relative positions of labour and steel Capitalists, the workers demonstrated courage under very difficult conditions. While such obstacles, setbacks, mistakes, and defeats inevitably occur in class struggle, they always provide opportunities to learn, adjust, adapt, or correct strategies and tactics under

the guidance of ideologically mature and disciplined workers through the successful application of the historically validated principles of Marxism-Leninism. V.I. Lenin wrote:

> *Every mistake committed in the course of such work, in the course of this most conscientious and earnest work of tens of millions of simple workers and peasants in reorganising their whole life, every such mistake is worth thousands and millions of "lawless" successes achieved by the exploiting minority—successes in swindling and duping the working people.For only through such mistakes will the workers and peasants learn to build the new life, learn to do without capitalists; only in this way will they hack a path for themselves—through thousands of obstacles—to victorious socialism.[7]*

Offering his critique and personal assessment of the failures of the steel strike, William Z. Foster stated that "Labor can learn and progress only through a frank acknowledgement and discussion of its weaknesses, mistakes and failures."[2]

Defeats of the working class on the battlefields of class struggle may be regarded as temporary and as opportunities to reassess the effectiveness of certain tactics and to make the necessary corrections in praxis. No particular conflict between workers and exploiters is the same and it is a mistake to copy and apply the tactics of the Great Steel Strike to subsequent contemporary struggles. But, the class-based critique of the strike of 1919 serves as a valuable exercise that yields some relevant and useful lessons and strategies for the organizing and collective actions of U.S. labour movements today.

The third decade of the twenty-first century will be remembered as a time of the resurgence worker organization in the United States. Workers in many service-based companies, such as Amazon and Starbucks, along with their comrades at Kellogg's and John Deere, have become conscious of their class position and of its antagonistic relationship with capitalist ownership of the means of production and are organizing for their own interests.

Will the emergent U.S. worker organizations face similar violent repression as that of 1919? That, of course, remains to be seen; however, should capital deem it necessary to crush workers movements by force, it would do so with the complicity of police forces and bourgeois media framing the violence in such a way to elicit public sympathy and support for those wronged companies.

The history of the Great Steel Strike of 1919 presents workers with one of the most dynamic examples of the antagonistic conflict between workers and the interests of industrial Capital. The account further provides the proletariat with a gauge of the intensity of class struggle that is inevitable under Capitalism. While the specific historical and economic conditions between 1919 and 2022 have changed considerably, the struggle for worker emancipation from the exploitation of the Capitalist ruling class remains.

Present social and political indications point to an intensification of this struggle in the United States. The account of the Great Steel Strike of 1919 cannot serve as a template for present worker organizing and activism in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, but it does provide the U.S. working class with some fundamental lessons about the nature of class struggle, the necessity of long-range strategic planning and ideological and political clarity and discipline under the guidance and the proven effectiveness of the theory and principles of Marxism-Leninism. The American proletariat must consider why Marxism-Leninism was, and is, considered such an existential threat to the social position of the bourgeois Capitalist ruling class. If the development and successful application of the theories of worker revolution under Marx, Engels, and Lenin lacked efficacy and historical precedent, the reactionary ruling class, and its various repressive organs

and uncritical ideological stenographers in media, would not be so committed to obstruct, diffuse, downplay, and extinguish the emergent organizing efforts, activism, and emancipation of the U.S. working class.

[1] Murray, “Communism and the Great Steel Strike.”

[2] Foster, “The Great Steel Strike and Its Lessons.”

[3] Soule, “Prosperity Decade from War to Depression 1917-1929

[4] Lenin, “The State and Revolution”

[5] Case Western Reserve University, “1919 Steel Strike”

[6] Murray, “Communism and the Great Steel Strike of 1919”

[7] Lenin, “Letter to American Workers”

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