

Chapter 2

Great Strikes Revisited

A strike is one thing, and we know what a strike is; but armed private mercenaries are another, and they are a thing which in this effete old country we emphatically would not tolerate. . . . Mr. Andrew Carnegie has preached to us upon “Triumphant Democracy,” he has lectured us upon the rights and duties of wealth. . . . It is indeed a wholesome piece of satire.

—*St. James Gazette*, 1892

The popular image of America’s era of titanic industrial conflicts has become all too tidy. Invocation of the labor battles of the Long Gilded Age typically triggers one of two sets of related dismissals (at least in my college classroom). The first takes comfort in historical distance. The bad old days of the Gilded Age, encompassing social Darwinism, robber barons, and a rough and sometimes tragic encounter between a new class of industrial workers and utterly rapacious business owners, ultimately gave way to a less primitive, more “modernized” set of employment relations and thus has little bearing on present-day concerns. Alternatively, the second disabling reaction derives from the all-too-close parallels between the older period’s central themes and our own. For some, especially on the political Left, the turn-of-the-century conflicts provide little more than an overt demonstration of capitalist class exploitation and determination to crush the system’s challengers that remains very much in place today. For these students, the forms and locales of exploitation may have changed, but the essential outcomes remain the same: the good guys get clobbered and our country is the worse off for it. Simply counter-posing the hard-hearted

coldness of Gilded Age villains like capitalists Henry Clay Frick and George F. Baer to the hard-working immigrant steelworkers at Homestead or idealists like railroad leader Eugene Debs, however, risks turning the era into extended melodrama in which it is easy to take sides but hard to see why the details still matter.

To avoid this conceptual pitfall, this chapter offers a renewed inquest into three major moments of Gilded Age industrial unrest: the Homestead lockout of 1892, the Pullman boycott and strike of 1894, and the anthracite strike of 1902. All three events were suffused with prime aspects of what many have considered immovable and overwhelming obstacles facing the American labor movement—determinedly anti-union employers; a polyglot, often ethnically divided workforce, and ready resort to public authority (in the form of the militia, public officials, or courts) to curtail the conflict. Yet, my rereading of this decade of confrontation suggests more open-ended possibilities in real time than is assumed in subsequent consideration of the events by historians. Moreover, it is in keeping with the suggestion of recent business and legal scholars that politics as much as “economic and technological constraints” conditioned the American variant of industrial capitalism that rose to twentieth-century dominance.¹ In particular, labor historians can learn much from a renewed emphasis on the role of elites and the ideology of anti-unionism over the course of modern American history.²

The argument here equally emphasizes the role of contingency as invoked by historian Richard White: in short, “things did not have to be this way.”³ Unexpected outcomes, to be sure, are not the same as random ones. Social actors have choices, but not free choices: they are constrained by various material (economic), political, as well as cultural limits of their surroundings. In the selective reconstruction that follows, therefore, I hope to identify both larger *patterns of development* and pivotal actors who *in the context of their times* might have moved history in a different direction.

Among the latter, consider the following facts. Andrew Carnegie lived to regret his actions in the case of the Homestead Steel strike. American Railway Union leader Eugene V. Debs knew the odds were long in the case of a nationwide boycott of Pullman sleeping cars. George Pullman himself won that battle but lost the war behind his vision of a well-ordered company town. Attorney General Richard T. Olney, who effectively hounded Debs to prison, tried later to do penance for his hard-line position. Ideologically pure railroad owner George F. Baer made a public fool of himself in

the anthracite strike of 1902, while both self-seeking union leader John Mitchell and financial plutocrat J. P. Morgan emerged from the same conflict cloaked in civic-mindedness. Turning a biblical injunction into a question, we might well ask, “How are the mighty fallen?” and equally, How do the fallen sometimes do good?⁴ The vicissitudes of triumph and tragedy are surely among the most compelling themes of historical narrative; as such it pays us to peer farther into events too long taken for granted.

One basic question, of course, is what set off these strikes? At least in a superficial way, we can quickly answer that question by pointing to a larger pattern in the proximate *cause* of American strikes. Practically every confrontation of the era has the same immediate trigger: a significant wage cut. What is more, this material sacrifice, regularly imposed in hard times, in every case is interpreted as an attack on worker rights if not more generally on human dignity and freedom. The pattern begins well before our period. The first “turnouts” among the young women textile workers at the Lowell mills in 1834 were responses to 15 percent wage cuts that had also been accompanied by *increases* in boarding-house rents. The Lynn shoeworkers’ strike, begun on Washington’s birthday in 1860 and the largest such action to that date, was initiated to restore rates that had been slashed three years before. Likewise, the tumultuous mass strikes of 1877 began when Baltimore and Ohio workers rebelled against a wage cut piled on a wage cut.⁵

Every downturn, let alone panic and depression, it seems, induced the same dynamic. At Homestead in 1892, union refusal of a reduction in tonnage rates set Andrew Carnegie on a course to lock out the company’s union men. In the same year, Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, coal miners walked out over a wage cut and increase in work hours. Famously, in the midst of depression conditions in 1894, George Pullman cut wages for the factory workers who built his sleeping cars an average of 25 percent, without any corresponding reduction in company housing rents.⁶ Distress among the anthracite miners boiled over in 1900 around the more indirect attack on workers’ income from the “infamous system of dockage.”⁷ In November 1909, some twenty thousand mostly Yiddish-speaking young women sparked an eleven-week strike over cuts in the piece-rate offered by inside contractors; the following year a walkout by a mere sixteen of their counterparts over another piece-rate cut at Chicago’s mammoth Hart, Schaffner, and Marx factory soon coalesced into a strike of 40,000 operatives.⁸ Finally, when textile workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts, learned in 1912 that

employers had responded to state shorter hours legislation (reducing hours for women and children only from 56 to 54 per week) by eliminating the extra two hours' pay, they too set off a walkout of more than 20,000 workers in what would subsequently become known as the Bread and Roses strike.⁹ Indeed, in the annals of the era, the wave of May Day, 1886, eight-hour strikes stand out as worker initiatives *not* begun in response to employer wage cuts, though there is a caveat even to this exception: just as in the subsequent Lawrence Strike, many struck employers prompted walkouts by refusing worker demands to receive the same wage (previously figured on a ten-hour schedule) for the shortened workday.

In a boom-bust economy, conflicting imperatives, it seems, set employers and workers bitterly against each other. Employers, in particular, facing declining revenues and desperately clinging to property rights arguments (explored in Chapter 1) as well as their bottom lines, long appeared clueless in adopting any policy other than wage cuts, despite their disruptive social and political after-effects.¹⁰ By the onset of the Great Depression, however, a new pattern seemed to emerge. Negative public reaction and labor upheavals as a result of wage-cutting—the old pattern we have observed from 1860 to 1912 (and which continued through the 1920/21 downturn)—appeared finally to take a behavioral toll on the nation's business leaders. While hesitating to cut wages, beleaguered depression industries instead cut work hours, and then eliminated jobs altogether.¹¹

In more recent times, other options continue to prevail over the incendiary wage cuts of the Long Gilded Age. Perhaps it was not until conservative anger at public-sector workers (highlighted by the air traffic controllers' strike in 1981) that the catchphrase “fire their asses” caught up to real-world managerial practices.¹² In any case, selective layoffs and job cuts have regularly replaced the favored Gilded Age remedy to employer economic stress. If not exactly an “out of sight, out of mind” solution, reduction of the workforce tends to render the victims comparatively invisible, even as those spared a pink slip are effectively reminded to think again before upsetting corporate decorum. Even public-sector employers, faced with few options amid the recent Great Recession, have notably tried to avoid naked wage cuts in favor of “furloughs,” or mandatory days off.

Yet, knowing what “triggered” Gilded Age unrest does little to explain how it developed or ended. For that, we must summon up some of the main characters. Given their power in the era, and the fact that in most labor-management conflicts they usually played with a winning hand, I

want to look first, in each case, at labor's opponents. Then I will circle back in selective reconsideration of the pro-labor forces of the day.

In the figures of Carnegie and Pullman, we have prime specimens of the class that has been popularly memorialized as either "Robber Barons" or "Captains of Industry," but in either case as prototypes of American anti-unionism. Yet, they were also rather complex figures. In particular, as key contributors to the distinctiveness of the American industrial order, they seem sometimes to be grappling as much with the ghosts of British or European pasts as concrete American realities.

Carnegie, of course, was the protagonist of the Homestead Strike of 1892, a fateful standoff between one of the biggest corporations and the most powerful union of the Gilded Age. When the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers (AAISW) together with an aroused local citizenry proved unable to withstand a combination of lockout, importation of Pinkertons to protect strikebreakers, and ultimate application of state militia, unionism took a toll beyond the immediate casualties of nine dead and eleven wounded. In the steel industry, declining wages and yellow-dog contracts requiring a binding non-union pledge subsequently became the norm. Overvaluing its remaining resources, the Amalgamated made a final, fateful decision to confront the newly formed U.S. Steel monolith in 1901, a decision ending in crushing defeat.¹³ Once the last steel lodge in the country dissolved in 1903, Big Steel inoculated itself from trade unionism for the next thirty-four years.¹⁴

Moreover, despite Carnegie's calculated self-removal to his Scottish castle and delegation of authority to his business lieutenant Henry Clay Frick during the Homestead events, a clear chain of authority set the fateful events in motion. Like the Boston Associates who a half century before had created the spindle city of Lowell out of Merrimack River farmland, Carnegie had within a decade turned a village of a few hundred residents into an industrial center of 8,000 people mainly occupied making steel plate (much of it for the U.S. navy) with the nation's largest rolling mill. It was Carnegie who first negotiated a "sliding scale" (geared to the market price of a key component in the manufacturing process) with the Amalgamated in 1889, then, deciding to go entirely non-union, provoked a strike by stockpiling plates, fencing in the plant, insisting on a reduction in tonnage rates, contracting with the Pinkertons to recruit a substitute labor force, then calling for military intervention and ultimately encouraging the most draconian legal penalties against the strikers.¹⁵ Indeed, John McLuckie, the twice-elected burgess

(mayor) of Homestead, fled the state rather than face charges of murder, conspiracy, and treason for opposing the Pinkertons; a once-proud skilled worker, his pro-union stand cost him his job, his home, and his marriage.¹⁶ There is thus ample evidence to finger Carnegie as the “intellectual” author of the Homestead tragedy, while leaving Frick—who would survive an assassination attempt by anarchist Alexander Berkman at the end of the strike—to serve as the fall guy.

Yet, we are also left to reconcile Carnegie’s onerous role as industrial autocrat with his philanthropical acts both before and after the strike. Of course, his philanthropy, as perhaps most famously associated with his endowment of public libraries, could be chalked up to liberal guilt or worse. From the beginning there is a touch of defensiveness in “The Gospel of Wealth” (Carnegie’s famous 1889 essay). “While the law [of competition] may be hard for the individual,” Carnegie insisted, “it is best for the race.” Yet, he allowed that the concentration of wealth in a few hands (like his own) would likely be accepted in a free society only so long as the rich treat it as a “sacred trust.”¹⁷ In addition, gift-giving could prove quite strategic: Carnegie himself was finalizing plans for the Carnegie Library of Homestead—arriving in town with “a Pullman-car-full of guests”—just two months before he locked out his employees. The Homestead historian thus does not have to reach far to contextualize such acts within the framework of behavioral “social deception” as explained by anthropologist Marcel Mauss, that “the transaction itself is based on obligation and economic self-interest” in furtherance of social hierarchy.¹⁸

Still, there were aspects of the man that seem to point to less predictable behavioral patterns. Outwardly confident and even boisterously sure of himself, Carnegie likely could not easily dissociate the grievances of Homestead workers from his own past as the son of a failed Scottish handloom weaver and grandson of a proud Chartist activist in the working-class movement for radical democratic reform that swept British industrial districts for a decade after 1838. Escape from the class system is thus a central theme behind the soaring rhetoric of his *Triumphant Democracy* (1886). Notably, it is not entrepreneurship, technology, or even hard work which, for Carnegie, account for the American Republic’s triumphal “rush” past the “old nations of the world [that] creep on at a snail’s pace.” Rather, with universal suffrage and free public education, “the people are not emasculated by being made to feel that their own country decrees their inferiority, and holds them unworthy of privileges accorded to others.” Freed from a

“social system which ranks them beneath an arrogant class of drones,” Carnegie anticipates Israel Zangwell’s melting-pot, where “children of Russian and German serfs, of Irish evicted tenants, Scottish crofters, and other victims of feudal tyranny are transmuted into republican Americans.”¹⁹ Carnegie’s career was self-consciously steeped in the ideals of both social and political independence. It is thus no accident that when, at eighteen, having just graduated from four years of service as a telegraph messenger to become private secretary to Pennsylvania Railroad owner Tom Scott, Carnegie would look around at his adopted country and exclaim (in correspondence to a British uncle), “We have the Charter.”²⁰

Even as a profit-seeking American industrialist, therefore, Carnegie was in some significant respects still tethered to the democratic concerns of the British liberal tradition. Regularly spending half of each year in the UK (historian A. S. Eisenstadt labels him the quintessential “Pan-Anglian”), Carnegie cultivated close ties with the “radical-liberal” wing of the Liberal Party, including an early friendship with writer-editor John Morley that led him into the inner circle of reform-oriented statesmen in the age of William Gladstone, Liberal leader and four-time prime minister from the late 1860s through the mid-1890s.²¹ By the mid-1880s, Carnegie was helping to finance a syndicate of Liberal newspapers: pushing vociferously for Irish Home Rule and land reform, abolition of the House of Lords, and manhood suffrage. “Carnegie’s Radicalism” (according to biographer Joseph Wall) proved a frequent source of embarrassment to party leader Gladstone, with whom he maintained a generally cordial relationship.²²

Yet, on specifically labor-related issues, Carnegie’s British commitments across the 1880s and early 1890s are unclear. Among his close associates, Morley in 1891 bitterly opposed an eight hour bill for miners, while other friends like Charles Dilke and John Burns were strong labor advocates. On the very eve of his September 1891 departure to America to deal with the expiring Homestead contract, Carnegie hedged on the question of hours legislation: internationally competitive industries like steel, he suggested, could not practically conform to restrictive regulation, yet he allowed that “we shall have more and more occasion for the State to legislate on behalf of the workers.”²³ Perhaps most surprising was Carnegie’s £100 contribution to the campaign of Scottish socialist Keir Hardie, elected the first independent Labour MP (with *de facto* Liberal support) at West Ham South in 1892: was he expressing sympathies for Hardie’s social-democratic principles or merely patronizing a fellow Scot?²⁴ Whatever the competing,

sometimes contradictory pulls on his political sympathies, Carnegie surely bore witness to the contemporary tensions between an older, individualist liberal-radicalism and a New Liberalism that tied citizenship in an industrial society to state-aided worker welfare and trade union protections.

In retrospect, one aspect of Carnegie's thought, evident in his own discourse, seems to have facilitated a confrontational stance with his American workforce. If he was a spread-eagled American patriot, Carnegie was also an Anglo American cultural chauvinist. Thus, even as he idealistically allowed for immigrants from other stock to remake themselves in the American setting, he betrayed no doubt as to which bloodline made up the "noble strain" (how odd a phrase for a radical anti-monarchist) of cultural inheritance. His sufferance of an obstreperous unionized workforce—particularly one heavy with unreconstructed ethnic outsiders—was noticeably limited. At his Edgar Thomson works in 1891, he readily assented to both Frick and Schwab's denigration of workers' recalcitrance as "nothing more than a drunken Hungarian spree" and anticipation of "another attack by the Huns tonight."²⁵ As lesser citizens, expressions from the vast ranks of unskilled, immigrant labor might be more easily dismissed. As Carnegie asserted on his way to Homestead in 1891, they "lack the necessary qualities: educational, physical, and moral. The common laborer is a common labourer because he is common."²⁶

In any event, Carnegie's reckoning with the carnage and disfavor of the Homestead event proved an uneasy one. He was pilloried on both sides of the Atlantic by erstwhile allies. His home-country *Edinburgh Dispatch* sneered that "neither our capitalists nor our labourers have any inclination to imitate the methods which prevail in the land of "Triumphant Democracy," while the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* judged that "America can well spare Mr. Carnegie. Ten thousand Carnegie Public Libraries would not compensate the country for the direct evils resulting from the Homestead lockout."²⁷ Depressed and secluded in the immediate aftermath of the violence, Carnegie returned to Homestead in January 1893, where he attempted publicly to bury the lockout and its aftermath as a kind of "horrid dream." While rhetorically still supporting Frick's moves, he loudly whispered at least a retrospective dissent from the decision to send in the strikebreakers, an event he glossed in a private message to Morley as "that Homestead Blunder."²⁸ Growing tensions dating from the strike between Frick and Carnegie would lead the former to resign his chairmanship in 1899, with Charles Schwab stepping into the breach.²⁹ Echoing Carnegie's

own post-strike whisperings, Schwab, forty years later, would similarly regret his role in the Pinkerton affair, while offering a hypothetical tactical alternative:

At Homestead, had I been running affairs, I would have called the men in and told it was impossible to meet their terms. I would have told them we would simply close down until the justice of our position had been demonstrated—even if we had to close down for ever. But I would have told them that nobody else would be given their jobs. . . . There is nothing a worker resents more than to see some man taking his job. A factory can be closed down, its chimneys smokeless, waiting for the worker to come back to his job, and all will be peaceful. But the moment workers are imported, and the striker sees his own place usurped, there is bound to be trouble.³⁰

Though there was never a direct *mea culpa* from Carnegie, we nevertheless witness some post-Homestead alterations in his thought and behavior. On the labor front, while taking advantage of lowered wage scales consequent to the decimation of the Amalgamated, he effectively cut workers' living costs, with lowered rents at company housing and new low-interest mortgage loans as well as cut rates on coal and gas supplies.³¹ In addition, Carnegie made much of what he considered a personal reconciliation with Homestead Strike martyr John McLuckie. When family friend and art historian, John C. Van Dyke, accidentally stumbled on an indigent McLuckie in Mexico's Baja California in 1900, Carnegie, acting anonymously through Van Dyke, offered whatever money he needed "to put him on his feet again." McLuckie declined the offer, insisting that he would make it on his own, and within months, Van Dyke found him again, now securely employed at the Sonora Railway and happily remarried to a Mexican woman. When Van Dyke then told McLuckie that the previous monetary offer had come from Carnegie, McLuckie reportedly replied, "Well, that was damned white of Andy, wasn't it?" The compliment so moved Carnegie that in a memoir penned in 1906, he gushed that he "knew McLuckie well as a good fellow" and that he "would rather risk that verdict of McLuckie's as a passport to Paradise than all the theological dogmas invented by man."³²

Aside from guilt offerings, however, perhaps the nearest hint of a change of heart towards trade unionism lay in Carnegie's post-millennium

connection to the AFL-friendly National Civic Federation (NCF): in 1908, Carnegie was not only its biggest financial backer but also contributed specifically to the defense of AFL president Samuel Gompers from contempt of court charges in the pivotal *Buck's Stove and Range* case.³³

Meanwhile, Carnegie increasingly turned his public advocacy to international affairs. Whereas he had happily supported a U.S. naval buildup (which also happened to rely on armored plate from his mills) and also joined the rush to “free Cuba” in 1898, Carnegie soon after refurbished his liberal, anti-imperialist principles in adamant opposition to the Philippines campaign. Opposing “distant possessions” (except where a colony could be expected to “produce Americans” as in Hawaii), Carnegie asked defiantly, “Are we to exchange Triumphant Democracy for Triumphant Despotism?”³⁴ (Secretary of State Hay countered by pointing out the contradiction of Carnegie’s anti-interventionist stance regarding Filipinos and his treatment of striking workers at Homestead.) For a time Carnegie’s anti-imperialism extended even to possible political collaboration with the Republican’s archenemy William Jennings Bryan. Though never consummated as a political alliance, Carnegie later supported Secretary of State Bryan’s earnest efforts (in the Wilson Administration) at arranging international arbitration treaties. His last commitment, what he called his greatest, was the establishment of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in 1910. As in his early simple faith in American democracy and free enterprise, Carnegie convinced himself that a series of international treaties and peace conferences were truly delivering world peace under international law by 1914. True to form, he died in 1919 still possessed of great hopes for the League of Nations.³⁵

Never a deep thinker but rather an impressive doer, Carnegie was a man caught between different worlds of time and place. Living effectively as a bi-national, he regularly projected the idealism and worldly success that he attached to his American experience back onto the forms of mid-nineteenth-century British radical democracy. For decades he could thus remain a radical-liberal in Britain while adopting conservative Republican loyalties in the United States. Yet, the times caught up with him at both ends. By the 1890s British liberals, pushed by the rise of a politicized labor movement, were coming to grips with the consequences of the manhood suffrage principle that stood at the root of Carnegie’s own Chartist-inspired political faith. For all his forward-looking projections, Carnegie himself could not quite make the move of many of his British contemporaries

towards a New Liberalism for the industrial age. Rather, with his simple faith in democracy-equals-opportunity-for-all shattered by labor conflict, he turned to the bromides of international peace and reconciliation as an alternate site of idealization. In Carnegie's case, however, the democratic ideal effectively stopped at the factory gate.

Even as many contemporaries (not to mention latter-day historians) on both sides of the Atlantic criticized and second-guessed Carnegie for his actions in 1892, there has been decidedly less second-guessing of organized labor's decision-making there—and for good reason. Basically, both contemporaries and historians see little that the AAISW and its allies could have done to avert the disaster that befell it once Carnegie and his minions determined to operate non-union. Aside from the strategic opening to a less-skilled workforce enhanced by the shift to open-hearth steelmaking, Carnegie could play two decisive political cards in the Homestead showdown. Each of them, moreover, would figure repeatedly in defining a “weak-labor” American exceptionalist path for the next forty years.

The first was the employer's ability to summon police power to put down a workers' uprising and proceed, behind the security curtain, to restart production with a non-union workforce including a corps of strike-breakers imported from outside the local community. The sway of Carnegie and Frick over Democratic governor Robert Pattison and county Republican boss Christopher Magee proved critical in the governor's decision to dispatch 8,500 National Guard troops to Homestead, thereby displacing effective control over events heretofore exercised by Burgess McLuckie and a disciplined strike Advisory Committee headed by steelworker Hugh O'Donnell. As O'Donnell immediately acknowledged following the governor's decision, “We can't fight the state of Pennsylvania, and even if we could, we cannot fight the United States government.”³⁶ Once the militia, bivouacked on company property and prepared to reopen the works at the company's bidding, intervened, the confrontation was over.

It is worth noting that unlike many other American industrial disputes, Homestead was not a case of a fatally divided or poorly led workforce. Though hierarchies of skill, ethnicity (especially Old Immigrant versus East European), and race (African Americans in significant numbers first arrived at Homestead only in the aftermath of the 1892 strike) certainly existed within both the union and local community, a remarkable cross-ethnic (and cross-gender) solidarity had held up throughout the siege. Yet, everything changed with the arrival of the militia. Chicago's *Arbeiter-Zeitung*

compared the situation unfavorably to Bismarck's threatened use of force against the Ruhr miners. As a self-identified "Homesteader" rhetorically asked in its German-language pages, "What is the difference between the state's soldiers and the Pinkertons?"³⁷

The second (and often concurrent) resort of employers for help from the state was to the courts. In this case, Carnegie Steel's chief counsel, Philander C. Knox, who would later serve the federal government as attorney general and secretary of state, proved a zealous litigant. As historian Paul Krause summarizes, "many of the Homestead workers, unable to raise sufficient funds for bail, were incarcerated for extended periods, and a number of those who had helped lead the sympathy strike at Duquesne also received prison sentences." In a more controversial move, Knox collaborated with Chief Justice Edward Paxson of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court to charge thirty-three members of the Advisory Committee with no less than a charge of treason, based on a Civil War-era statute aimed at discouraging those who would attack the state. Though the treason indictments were ultimately withdrawn, the union's resources and a good bit of its public legitimacy had been shattered by the legal onslaught.³⁸

The degree to which the "political" landscape mattered at Homestead (and other big industrial centers) in the Long Gilded Age is perhaps best suggested by the outcomes once that landscape changed in the 1930s. The political maturation of the steel region's immigrant working-class utterly changed the odds. When the CIO Steel Workers Organizing Committee opened its campaign in July 1936, the state police escorted their chief, lieutenant governor and UMWA secretary-treasurer Thomas Kennedy, into Homestead to be the main speaker, and "filtered through the crowd as insurance against interference by company-dominated municipal police."³⁹ Before long, mighty U.S. Steel (heir to the Carnegie empire) would come to terms with the union. This was the New Deal alliance between the Democratic Party and organized labor in action.

Given what we know now about the circumstances of the 1890s, could any acts on the workers' part have turned the tide at Homestead in a more favorable direction? It is unlikely. At a funeral service for one victim of the July 6 battle with the Pinkertons, local Methodist minister J. J. McIllyar insisted that "arbitration" might have resolved the dispute, but instead violence was "brought about by one man [Frick], who is less respected by the laboring people than any other employer in the country."⁴⁰ The one pressure point that is perhaps more visible in retrospect than to contemporaries

was the ambivalence of Carnegie himself. He visibly suffered, though more in Britain than in the United States, for the loss of reputation among liberal-radical circles that had proved an important point of his political identity. Had Homestead workers (and/or other American labor leaders) at the time appealed directly to the likes of Keir Hardie or John Burns—or even William Gladstone—to intervene with their friend Carnegie, might they have bought time for a process of conciliation to which Rev. McIllyar appealed?

To posit international solidarity action on the part of a grassroots movement in the 1890s, of course, risks conviction for historical anachronism. It is true that across the industrial lands of Euro-America, one looks hard for examples that Homestead or other steelworkers could have been expected to copy with any positive effect. Decades earlier, it is true, the abolitionist movement had operated across borders in safekeeping runaway slaves, but the lesson there for the labor movement would have involved a major imaginative leap.⁴¹ If one looked beyond landed to maritime occupations, however, there was indeed a serious move afoot to harness the power of workers operating across national boundaries. Out of necessity (due to the recruitment of their workmates across national boundaries), seafarer and dockworker unions, who formed the core of the British “New Unionist” upsurge of the late 1880s and 1890s, were experimenting with transnational actions: as early as 1896 they would create a pan-European organization and by 1911 carry off a partially successful trans-Atlantic strike.⁴² Whether workers outside the incipient seafarer-dockworker alliance took notice of such pioneering attempts at labor internationalism is an un-researched question. One thing seems certain. Left to their own resources, the strikers’ fate—without an apparent way to turn “Homestead” into a national or even international issue—was sealed.

Next to Carnegie, perhaps no industrialist is more associated with the combustibility of the Gilded Age than George Pullman. Like Carnegie’s Homestead, Pullman’s giant sleeping-car factory rose from bare farmland almost overnight. From 1881 to 1884 the town of Pullman grew from a population of 4 to 8,513.⁴³ Unlike Carnegie’s steel plants and almost every other American industrial setting, however, the rise of Pullman town was also stamped with a vision of company-planned social order and harmony. Just as famously, that “paternal” vision blew up in the Pullman strike and boycott

of 1894. In a nutshell, when the company (along with the general economy) entered a profound slump in 1893 and Pullman drastically slashed wages without cutting rents of his tenants, his workers, newly organized into the fledgling American Railway Union (ARU), struck and soon secured the support of ARU president Eugene V. Debs for a nationwide boycott of trains bearing Pullman cars. When every move to uncouple sleeping cars led to the dismissal of the offending workers, the ARU called out all its members and allies on the offending railroad lines. The stage was thus set for a massive confrontation between the union and the nation's railroad owners united under the General Managers' Association. Alas for the workers, the railroads received immediate support in squashing the strike from the federal government, as directed by President Cleveland's attorney general Richard Olney, himself a longtime railway attorney and director. After securing injunctions against the strikers with a pioneering (not to mention unanticipated and legally dubious) invocation of the Sherman Antitrust Act, Olney, over the objections of both state and local officials, sent federal troops under General Nelson A. Miles to Chicago to restore order. Over July 6 and 7, U.S. deputy marshals and state militia (ordered into action in Illinois, California, Iowa, and Michigan as well) shot and killed an estimated 13 railroad "rioters" and wounded 57 others in the Chicago area alone.⁴⁴ For violating previous injunctions and additionally charged with conspiracy to subvert the U.S. government, indictments leading to arrest and ultimate conviction were issued against Debs and three other ARU leaders on July 10. With further prosecutions of hundreds of other strikers, the Pullman strike—and with it the ARU—was crushed. Following guilty verdicts for contempt of court sustained by the U.S. Supreme Court in May 1895, Debs would serve six months in the county jail in Woodstock, Illinois.⁴⁵ Not long after he emerged, Debs declared that a new struggle—this for a socialist transformation of the American state—would be needed to defend the most basic of workers' rights.⁴⁶

Classic "exceptionalist" themes echo throughout the Pullman narrative. The obdurate capitalist owner, the fiercely anti-labor federal government backed both by a pliant judiciary and armed might, and a heroic but doomed effort of organized workers to swim against the tides of constituted authority and middle-class opinion. Yet, how set and foreordained were the options and outcomes?

A brief review of key players in the Pullman events reveals some gaping holes in the picture of an a priori "American" opposition to a vibrant

workers' movement. George Pullman's company town, in its very establishment, defied any principle of "shared governance" with its workers. Yet, Pullman, however unyielding, can be seen as a Progressive reformer of a peculiar type. If no pan-Anglian like Carnegie, he too was reacting to an image of the wretchedness of urban conditions for the masses in Britain and on the Continent that could only be remedied by systematic social planning. As early as the 1870s, Pullman took an interest in the "model tenement movement," believing that clean and healthy living conditions served not only as a good in themselves but as a measurable spur to worker productivity. A contemporary French observer commented on Pullman's dedication to the "Anglo-Saxon idea, that exterior respectability aids true self-respect."⁴⁷ Perhaps the quirkiest aspect of Pullman's reformism (was this American provincialism or rather transnational over-exposure?) was his dedication to a purely *commercial*, profit-based model for all his environmental innovations. As his biographers attest, he apparently disdained the *European*-style paternalism associated with otherwise-similar company towns in Guise, France; Krupp's factory works at Essen, Germany, and Sir Titus Salt's model village of Saltaire in Yorkshire.⁴⁸ To Pullman's mind, sentimental or merely "philanthropic" gestures of social welfare were likely to prove ineffectual and short-lived; rather, he staked his claim to environmental uplift on a "hard-headed bottom-line mentality" that beautiful surroundings could pay for themselves and thus prove the urban-developmental rule rather than the exception.⁴⁹

For Pullman, labor unions represented poisoned fruit in urban working-class surroundings. Like his image of the healthy city, his dark view of the unions derived initially from Charles Reade's British novel, *Put Yourself in His Place* (1870), which, according to the testimony of Reade's daughter, Pullman "read and reread."⁵⁰ A less-gifted realist in the style of Dickens, Reade conjured up the industrial city of Hillsborough (a stand-in for Sheffield), "perhaps the most hideous town in creation. Houses seem to have battled in the air, and stuck wherever they tumbled down dead out of the melee. But, worst of all, the city is pockmarked with public-houses, and bristles with high round chimneys." (Not for nothing did Pullman ban saloons in Pullman town.) Yet, as the novel's protagonist, workman-inventor Henry Little discovers, what stands in the way of progress in Hillsborough is not just the ignorance and selfishness of industrialists but the mean-spirited corruption of trade unionists. (As his biographer discovered, for nearly a decade prior to fashioning this novel, Reade had been clipping

newspaper articles on strikes and trade unions under the heading “the dirty oligarchy.”⁵¹) Progress can prevail, the novel suggests, only so long as fair-minded employers and aspiring workers are freed from outside political entanglements. In the harsh reality of the urban jungle, Pullman apprehended, it was imperative that the well-intentioned entrepreneur stick to his guns. In uncommonly combining the role of paternalistic social planning with an undying faith in market mechanisms, Pullman thus sketched a form of “American Exceptionalism” that was also a direct response to European example.

Like Carnegie, Pullman won the round with his worker foes, but (again like Carnegie) he did not get off (to badly pun) scot-free. The crushing of the strike and imprisonment of Debs put the industrialist and key political supporters in a bad public light. The resulting strike commission authorized by a pressured President Cleveland proved caustic in its assessment of the paternalistic treatment of the workers at Pullman and effectively spanked the industry by calling for an impartial railroad commission, trade union recognition, and even compulsory arbitration in the settlement of future disputes.⁵² The boycott and strike also left the whole concept of the company town with a bad name. By 1894, the state’s supreme court stripped the Pullman Company of its ownership rights over town property, ending the vision with which it was conceived. Pullman himself died of a heart attack in 1897, never regaining his public stature, and seeking eternal shelter from potential depredations of ex-Pullman rioters in one of the most secure tombs ever constructed.⁵³

The law-and-order forces at Pullman include at least two other figures who superficially fit the mold of corporate lackeys. Both General Nelson Miles and Attorney General Olney played important coercive roles in relation to the striking workers. As western field commander of the U.S. army, Miles had helped subdue Chief Joseph and Geronimo before closing in on the Sioux and securing Sitting Bull’s arrest in 1890. By outward measure, his supervision, as major general, regular army of the federal government’s occupying forces in the Chicago region seems the perfect embodiment of what Richard Slotkin described as the transfer of the “myth of the frontier” onto the industrial landscape.⁵⁴

On more than one occasion, however, Miles’s very military professionalism also raised a cautionary flag in the use of unbridled force. Even as an Indian-fighter, he proved something of a moderate. Although he had insisted on incarceration of Sitting Bull as a symbol of pacification, Miles

was outraged by the war-lust of the cavalry's attack at Wounded Knee, which he labeled an "abominable criminal blunder and a horrible massacre of women and children." Miles was initially even more skeptical about the army's role in pacifying strikers. At the beginning of July 1894, he counseled an over-eager President Cleveland that conditions "did not yet warrant federal troops," and when overruled by Olney and pressed into action, he drew the ire of his superiors by demanding specific instructions as to if and when his men should "fire upon a riotous mass of citizenry." The wife of Secretary of State Walter Gresham noted at the time that Miles had "contempt" for George Pullman and openly sympathized "with the masses."⁵⁵ In the course of strike-related confrontations, Miles would be repeatedly criticized from on high for not sufficiently massing his troops and not responding quickly enough to taunts from surrounding crowds. In short, frontier logic did not spread automatically to urban law enforcement (or apparently even convince some of its key frontier players).

Olney more easily fits the mantle of aggressive corporate tool. He was certainly well-trained for the part. Son of a New England banker and heir to a woolen factory family legacy, he graduated from Brown University and then Harvard Law School before marrying the daughter of an ex-Supreme Court justice and becoming his associate. By 1889 Olney was serving as general counsel of the CB&Q, a western railroad (afflicted by a major strike in 1888) formed from Boston capital. Historian Richard White thus captures Olney as "intellectually . . . not subtle; he was often erratic . . . but always practical and always bold"; for good measure, adds White, he was "a tyrant" who "quite literally hated infants and small animals." Olney, by such a reading, served as an appropriate symbol of the corporation-run state, or as White again pungently summarizes: "While Debs was organizing railroad workers, and while the Populists and other antimonopolists were organizing western states, the railroads were organizing the cabinet and the federal bureaucracy."⁵⁶ Given all his associations, we might well expect Olney to share the view of other railroad executives like John W. Kendrick, general manager of the Northern Pacific, for whom the Pullman dispute ultimately tested "whether the roads shall be absolutely controlled by the labor element, or by the managers and the owners."⁵⁷ In keeping with such expectations, in the months prior to the Pullman boycott, Olney had energetically prosecuted the Commonwealers advancing on Washington to demand jobs—using the pretext of federal receivership quickly responding to appeals from federal judges to send in the army to halt trains

carrying these unemployed activists.⁵⁸ Olney, more than anyone else in government, pushed President Cleveland to take an immediate, hard line against the boycotters. “From the announcement of the boycott in late June to the collapse of the strike in mid-July,” biographer Gerald G. Eggert writes, “Olney’s primary objective was to crush the strike.”⁵⁹

Yet, even Olney felt the constraint of both politics and the law (and perhaps a deeper personal morality as well) in advancing a one-sided resolution of industrial disputes. Although he apparently felt no compunction in prosecuting those (like Debs and the Commonwealers) who would use force—i.e. intimidating strikebreakers, seizing trains, etc.—in pursuit of their cause, he otherwise balked at bald corporate power. It is thus worth noting that he had exercised forbearance in the use of federal power during Debs’s successful direction of the Great Northern strike in 1893.⁶⁰ Moreover, only two months after Debs’s July 1894 arraignment, Olney showed both cunning and restraint in intervening on the side of the Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen (a craft union that had publicly opposed the ARU’s boycott) when the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad, taking advantage of its receivership, demanded of BRT members that they resign from the union or be fired.⁶¹ The findings of the U.S. Strike Commission—which Cleveland had appointed amidst mounting outrage from labor advocates within the Democratic Party—of company manipulation in the recruitment of federal marshals struck a further nerve in the self-righteous attorney general. Soon, he joined the commissioners in condemning the extrajudicial role of the railway corporations, and he surprised many of his peers not only in reaffirming labor’s right to organize but also in supporting the commission’s call for compulsory arbitration of selected disputes. A series of ameliorative railroad labor measures (including the right to join a union and voluntary arbitration), for which Olney gave his insistent support, were ultimately secured in 1898 as the Erdman Act. A most telling comment on the shakeup of thinking in the period was that of CB&Q owner Charles Elliott Perkins: “I do not understand what has come over Olney.”⁶²

Though pilloried in much of the mainstream press at the time as a labor tyrant (“King Debs” ran the famous *Harper’s Weekly* cartoon of July 14, 1894) threatening the nation’s commerce, ARU leader Eugene V. Debs has generally been treated sympathetically by historians as a democratic leader victimized by arbitrary corporate power. Yet, given the stakes of the Pullman conflict and its outcome—particularly the end of sustained industrial

unionism on the railroads and further setback to the larger popular anti-monopoly movement—it is worth asking if Debs & Co., within the context of his core beliefs and the opportunities of the times, might have acted differently or left any significant cards unplayed. The question is raised because Debs’s public profile post-Pullman—that is, as “martyred” strike-leader-turned-valiant-but-always-losing socialist icon—diverges so dramatically from the profile pre-Pullman.

Debs, after all, had demonstrated nothing less than organizational genius in fashioning the ARU in June 1893. Across twenty years, he had worked his way up into the high counsels of the proudly conservative Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, only to witness the futility of even coordinated action among the several brotherhoods in the Burlington strike of 1888. Already by 1890, he was appealing to a larger “spirit of fraternity” that he witnessed across the land, and the ARU—open to all railway workers, regardless of craft or service (though in accord with brotherhood practice still white-only)—proved the initial vehicle of his grand vision.⁶³ Boldly, the fledgling ARU soon challenged James J. Hill’s Great Northern Railway, shutting down the road across the West while nimbly side-stepping trains with mail cars so as not to provoke governmental retaliation. When Debs (to Hill’s surprise) accepted a Minnesota state arbitration process, the ARU walked away with the recovery of their lost wages as well as a skyrocketing national membership.⁶⁴

Given the shrewdness with which he had previously conducted his union business, why did Debs risk it all on spreading strikes in the midst of mass unemployment? He had already seen the injunction used to devastating effect in the Burlington strike, and he had witnessed Attorney General Olney’s lightning legal strikes against the Commonwealers on railroads in receivership. He knew that the employers’ General Managers’ Association was itching to reverse the early momentum of the ARU. And he knew that he could not count on solidarity from the railroad brotherhoods who resented their upstart rival. Meanwhile, though growing increasingly physically desperate, the striking ARU members in Pullman town were collecting manifold political support. They not only commanded the sympathy and active support of the mayor, the governor, and major newspapers but a new cross-class coalition demanding arbitration and other Pullman Company compromises. Institutionalized in the Civic Federation of Chicago (later the National Civic Federation), this reform movement (featuring Chicago banker, world’s fair organizer, and by 1900 Secretary of the Treasury Lyman

Gage alongside settlement house leader Jane Addams) ultimately failed to dissuade George Pullman from his confrontational, and to their minds disastrous, course.⁶⁵ (Addams herself would be left to ruminate darkly on the event—condemning both sides for descending to the use of force—in a long-unpublished essay she entitled “A Modern Lear.”⁶⁶)

Soon, the conflict slipped altogether out of local hands. By most unfortunate timing, the ARU’s first annual convention convened in Chicago a month into the strike and amidst growing cries for help from Pullman residents. As historian Nick Salvatore indicates, Debs initially hesitated but then succumbed to a tide of militant resistance that he had himself helped to generate. It is true that Debs tried to reinvent his Great Northern success by promising direct action on two attempts to prod Pullman towards arbitration, but the last-minute maneuvers went nowhere. In the end, Debs’s calculus of hesitation seems to have been swamped by an instinct for justice. Contradicting his own tactical message, his convention address thus summoned the delegates to a defense of their most basic rights and self-dignity: “When men accept degrading conditions and wear collars and fetters without resistance, when a man surrenders his honest convictions, his loyalty to principle, he ceases to be a man.”⁶⁷

Such rhetoric is not the stuff of strategic half-measures. Had Debs more forthrightly stood up to the ARU delegates, might he have averted an all-out war with the nation’s railroads (and ultimately the U.S. government) by *localizing* the conflict (i.e., limiting the shutdown to Chicago), *boycotting more selectively* (e.g., no mailcars), or selecting another half-measure of solidarity like miners’ leader John Mitchell would use in 1902? If so, he might have ultimately linked a mass industrial base of organized transportation workers with that of miners, and maritime workers to form an American version of the Triple Alliance that defined British labor’s powerful public presence prior to World War I. Instead, outside the mines and big-city garment shops, American labor emerged more beaten than unbowed from what Graham Adams called the “age of industrial violence.”⁶⁸ More than Homestead, Pullman is a case where the materials and choices available might have been assembled differently to quite different effects. Moreover, if individual decisions could be so decisive, why do we (as historians) continue to rely on more secular explanations, as if the drift of history were more akin to geological shifts than the moral will of individuals?

Among the major industrial struggles of the Long Gilded Age, the anthracite strike of 1902 broke the mold in at least three critical respects. First, organized workers won a signal, if provisional, victory over one of the most powerful and anti-union employer groups in the country. Second, at a crucial moment in the confrontation, the workers *had the U.S. government decidedly on their side*. Finally, as economist and labor historian Selig Perlman noted, it was the first time in American history when a disruptive strike went on for months “without being condemned as a revolutionary menace.”⁶⁹ What were the roots of such structural and political exceptionalism? And why were the gains of 1902 so seemingly fleeting?

A thumbnail sketch of events leading to the 1902 strike quickly centers on a few key players. Textbooks regularly cite the stereotypical villain of the story, leading coal owner George F. Baer who stood adamantly against unionization in the anthracite range and uttered one of the most notorious apologias for corporate rule on record. Pressed by a religious sympathizer for the workers, Baer exploded: “The rights and interests of the laboring man will be protected and cared for—not by the labor agitators, but by the Christian men to whom God in His infinite wisdom has given the control of the property interests of the country, and upon the successful Management of which so much depends.”⁷⁰ In this conflict, however, not only would Baer not have his way, but also his viewpoint proved an embarrassment to the class with which he associated. By the turn of the century, Baer and the large railroad owners who had been used to running the geographically compact anthracite region of northeastern Pennsylvania since the collapse of contract miner organization in the mid-1870s faced an upheaval from below that they could no longer control.

Overcoming brutal repression as well as once-profound internal divisions of both skill and ethnicity, and fresh from a breakthrough agreement in multi-state bituminous fields in 1897, the United Mine Workers of America, led by John Mitchell, had remarkably called out an estimated 97 percent of the anthracite workforce on strike for recognition and a wage increase in mid-September, 1900. The owners, moreover, after refusing Mitchell’s invitation to a joint conference and/or arbitration, faced not only an assertive rank-and-file fired by the organizing talents of Mary “Mother” Jones but strong outside political pressure. With much of the heating oil on the East Coast derived from anthracite, an extended strike raised fears of widespread suffering and with it a threat to the rosy reelection call to “stand pat” and enjoy a “full dinner pail” by President McKinley and his

campaign organizer, Ohio senator Mark Hanna. Soon Hanna had reached out to J. P. Morgan, chief investor in the anthracite railroads, to broker a labor “truce,” as both owners and union leadership agreed to a 10 percent raise and no recriminations in an informal settlement that stopped short of recognition or a signed agreement.

It was precisely expiration of the 1900 truce that precipitated a new strike in May 1902. Again, Mitchell called on the intervention of Hanna, who now served as head of the industrial committee of the increasingly influential National Civic Federation. As the strike stretched on through the summer and into fall, and as Baer and the key owners dug in their heels, Hanna (again in close collaboration with Mitchell) appealed to two outside figures—President Theodore Roosevelt and J. P. Morgan (acting through his “right-hand man” George Perkins)—to break the impasse. A difficult decision faced Mitchell midway through the arduous five-month conflict. Learning of the growing desperation of their anthracite brethren, bituminous locals of the union demanded a special convention to take up a call for an industry-wide strike, albeit in violation of their own contracts. Fearing that his whole collaborative strategy was about to come undone, Mitchell upped the ante on all his partners. On the one hand, Mitchell vanquished union militants (even giving NCF agents *carte blanche* access to spread its moderate message among bituminous locals) with a full-throated convention appeal for a budgetary appropriation and strike-supporting “assessment” of members rather than a sympathy strike.⁷¹ On the other hand—fending off a proposal from Perkins and NCF chairman Ralph M. Easley—he refused to send the strikers back to work while a committee appointed by Hanna appealed to Morgan for a compromise solution.⁷²

In short, Mitchell (unlike Debs in the Pullman Strike) played both ends against the middle. Ultimately, fears of worker militancy and potential political recrimination forced President Roosevelt’s hand. The essence of an agreement, including binding arbitration by a presidential commission, was finally hammered out between Morgan and Secretary of War Elihu Root (who also happened to serve as general counsel to J. P. Morgan and Company) on board the financier’s yacht *Corsair III*. Even as the owners’ representatives argued that they could not negotiate with a “set of outlaws” who should be treated to a show of military force, Morgan himself secured their acquiescence to the arbitration agreement.⁷³

A final settlement, announced to the public in March 1903 granted working miners an additional 10 percent raise while cutting the normal

workday from ten to nine hours. Although it included no trade agreement, a board of conciliation (with elected representatives from designated mining districts) to oversee implementation of the award brought the union as close to de facto recognition in anthracite as it was to secure until World War I.⁷⁴ All in all there is good reason to credit the general public reaction of the time that the strike represented a significant union victory. In the Eastern European mining communities, the strike settlement touched off jubilant celebration. Labeling Mitchell a “second Napoleon of labor,” the editors of the area Polish, Lithuanian, Slovak, and Ukrainian newspapers jointly proclaimed that the “embodiment of everything that is pure, just, right and sublime is John Mitchell”; for decades many communities celebrated Mitchell Day.⁷⁵ Only a few years after the event, former miner and state mine inspector Andrew Roy justifiably called Mitchell’s campaign “the best managed of any strike that ever occurred in the United States.”⁷⁶

In the annals of the larger “class settlement” of the Gilded Age, the figures of both Mitchell and Hanna (and perhaps Morgan as well) likely deserve closer attention than they have received.⁷⁷ A former child laborer in the mines, Mitchell assumed his union presidency at age twenty-nine, only a year before taking on the whole anthracite industry in 1900. One writer aptly describes him as “ministerial in mien, like a parson more than a labor leader, and philosophically a moderate, two traits which endeared him to the press and to Mark Hanna.”⁷⁸ A native of Braidwood, Illinois, Mitchell’s ideological moderation was likely bred from his experience with joint labor-management cooperation in the bituminous industry. There, a state of constant overproduction and resulting wild fluctuations in price among small operators had led many operators to look to the union as a welcome enforcer of competitive standards across a diverse region. In 1897, the sweeping Joint Agreement (including the eight-hour day, dues checkoff, and differential rates depending on conditions) throughout the Central Competitive Field followed a remarkably peaceful strike that reflected not only the miners’ collective power but also the owners’ implicit recognition of the union as a necessary stabilizing agent for the industry.⁷⁹

Yet, Mitchell was forced to reckon with more adverse circumstances in the anthracite fields. Already sure of their market grip on the mines, the railroad owners wanted no meddling from the union. For that reason the owners, beginning in the 1870s imported a southern and eastern European immigrant labor surplus, while also creating a myriad of wage policies that worked against a commonality of experience among the workers.⁸⁰ Indeed,

before the uprising at the turn of the century, union organizers were openly dismissive of their chances in anthracite. A protectionist defensiveness towards the new immigrants was evident in 1889 legislation that established certification rights for miners—forcing even experienced immigrant miners to serve two years in a “helper” position in Pennsylvania collieries before accessing the industry’s higher paying “contract” positions.⁸¹ In addition a union-sponsored tax (3 cents/day) was imposed on employers of unnaturalized workers, to be deducted from the offending workers’ pay. For years, therefore, the union likely accomplished more for anthracite miners in Harrisburg than in the coal region itself. As late as 1896–97, Schuylkill district president John Fahy all but abandoned a grassroots campaign in favor of a modest legislative agenda to abolish company stores and gain semi-monthly pay.⁸²

Though Mitchell’s own instincts as union leader were hardly those of a rabble-rouser, he skillfully rode the rising militancy among the anthracite rank and file to maximum public effect. Throughout the five-month stoppage in 1902, Mitchell played a double game. While insisting to his middle-class allies like Hanna that he was trying to keep a lid on an all-out suspension of work and publicly opposing moves toward sympathetic action from the bituminous fields, Mitchell was also whipping up the energies of the workers’ fiercest partisans. He wrote Mother Jones in the early days of the strike, “I have every reason to believe that the strike will be made general and permanent. I am of the opinion that this will be the fiercest struggle in which we have yet engaged. It will be a fight to the end, and our organization will either achieve a great triumph or it will be completely annihilated.”⁸³

Yet, in addition to industrial agitation, Mitchell carried the miners’ fight to the political terrain. Undoubtedly, his most valuable political weapon lay in his relationship with Sen. Mark Hanna and, for a time, a larger business-labor bloc around the National Civic Federation. Hanna, as much as anyone the instigator of national Republican Party dominance from the election of McKinley in 1896 to Franklin Roosevelt in 1932, was eager to cultivate working-class voters and not averse to dealing with trade unions. As a Cleveland-based businessman who married into a coal and iron fortune, his own companies had regularly treated with unions when few other local producers were doing so.⁸⁴ Moreover, he regularly remembered with regret his role in summoning the militia to put down an unruly strike by Massillon miners in 1876 (in the ensuing trial the attorney who successfully defended the radical miners was young William McKinley, who would later

fashion two remarkably pro-labor terms as governor before setting out to run for president, with Hanna's help, in 1896).⁸⁵ Indeed, so cooperative had the relations of Hanna & Co.'s bituminous mines and Great Lakes shipping companies become with both Daniel Keefe's longshoremen's union and the UMWA that they played a pivotal role in Hanna's election (by the legislature) to the U.S. Senate in 1898.⁸⁶ Not surprisingly, as effective chairman of President McKinley's reelection campaign in 1900, it was Hanna who took the lead in heading off an anthracite confrontation before the election.

Only weeks after the 1900 election, Hanna made another important connection to the labor leaders—this time as head of the Industrial Department of the National Civic Federation (NCF). Growing from its Chicago roots, the NCF had “gone national” in 1900 under the direction of reform journalist Ralph Easley, as aided by a marquee list of business and labor leaders, the former encompassing Carnegie, financier August Belmont, Jr., and Morgan partner G. W. Perkins, the latter including AFL president Samuel Gompers as well as Mitchell and Keefe.⁸⁷ When President Roosevelt in 1902 finally secured the acceptance by the employers of the coal arbitration commission, he appropriately credited a political rival who was no personal friend: “Well, Uncle Mark's work has borne fruit.”⁸⁸ And, for a brief period, Hanna and the NCF did indeed seem to be contributing to a significant turn in American industrial relations: by November 1903 they had reportedly helped secure nearly one hundred trade agreements.⁸⁹ Altogether, it was an entente geared toward keeping American industry safely “corporate,” while cutting at least the strongest unions in on the deal. The deal-making, indeed, was personal as well as political: for years Perkins paid one-third of Mitchell's \$8,000 salary as a division head of the NCF.⁹⁰

Yet, Hanna's illness and death in early 1904 marked a turning point for the NCF in both momentum and direction. While the Federation's previous focus on trade agreements drifted to other subjects, the more virulently anti-union “open shop” message of the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM), led by Indianapolis industrialist David M. Parry after 1902, soon challenged the NCF's influence in key business quarters.⁹¹ It was an ironic turn, since Hanna and other Republican operatives had helped coax the NAM into being in 1895–96 largely as an adjunct to the McKinley campaign. Now the NAM—alongside other employer allies like the National Metal Trades Association, the National Founders' Association, the American Anti-Boycott Association, and the Citizens' Industrial Association of America—led the charge against any contractual conciliation with

the trade unions. Quickly, both Mitchell and Hanna were forced on the defensive by Parry's slashing attacks on the AFL as a "fountainhead . . . which breeds boycotters, picketers and Socialists."⁹² Mitchell himself, facing illness and declining membership rolls, was pushed out of his UMW presidency in 1908; though he subsequently took an administrative position in the NCF, he never again wielded the influence he had as a union leader.⁹³

How much should be made of the Mitchell-Hanna entente in American business and political life? Was the government-labor-management collaboration it witnessed merely a momentary opportunistic conjuncture of interests or did it presage a larger possibility of tripartite social peace? One contemporary who thought the latter was influential Progressive reformer Herbert Croly. Better known as author of *The Promise of American Life* (1909) and co-founder of *The New Republic* with Walter Lippmann and Walter Weyl (1914), Croly accepted a contract from Hanna's son in 1911 to write the biography, *Marcus Alonzo Hanna: His Life and Work* (1912). Croly's sympathetic account of a subject he knew was commonly denounced as the "living embodiment of a greedy, brutalized and remorseless plutocracy," perhaps not surprisingly, did not go over well at the time.⁹⁴ Notwithstanding its possible taint from the pecuniary considerations of the author, the work repays attention for the very way that Croly adapts Hanna to serve the needs of a high-Progressive moment.⁹⁵

Having only recently sketched his own call for a pragmatic, experimental state that would smooth class tensions by way of government regulation, Croly treated Hanna as a representative of "pioneer politics" and "pioneer economics"—a system that admittedly did not in itself make for "social fair play"—whose common sense and decent instincts nevertheless carried him towards genuine reform impulses.⁹⁶ Among those impulses, none was more important than Hanna's grudging sympathy for worker dignity in the form of trade unionism and the need for peaceful settlement of industrial disputes (objectives that Croly had also accented in his *Promise of American Life*).⁹⁷ As Croly quotes Hanna in a 1902 Chatauqua speech, "The natural tendency in this country, ay, and in the world over, has been the selfish appropriation of the larger share by capital. . . . If labor had some grievance and each laborer in his individual capacity went to his employer and asked for consideration, how much would be shown to him? Not much. Therefore, when they banded together in an organization for their own benefit which would give them the power, if necessary, to demand a remedy, I say organized labor was justified." To the end of his life, Croly argues, Hanna

beseached the employer class to (in Croly's words) "establish a foundation for joint action and mutual good-will by conferring with unionized laborers and their representatives and entering into agreements with them."⁹⁸

It is only implicit in the Hanna biography, but Croly likely also bore in mind the special influence Hanna had been able to exercise on the single most powerful American business figure at the turn of the century, J. P. Morgan. In three critical moments of labor-management conflict—the anthracite strike of 1900, the strike against U.S. Steel in 1901, and the anthracite strike of 1902—Hanna had prevailed on the financial titan with a logic (however self-interested) of at least moderate accommodation to the forces of organized labor. In the middle case (which we have not examined here), Morgan himself tried to call off a system-wide war by extending collective bargaining contracts at already unionized mills, still a significant proportion of the industry. Multiple commentaries point to an utterly bungled response by the AAISW leadership to the Hanna-NCF intervention that for a time had the support of both Morgan and AFL leader Samuel Gompers. A botched strike erased the union from existence, completing the demolition process begun at Homestead. Yet, as in the Pullman boycott, not just raw power but timing and tactics mattered.⁹⁹

Might Morgan himself have served any further moderating role in American industrial relations? Between 1902 and his death in 1913, he seems to have retired from that particular limelight. His daughter Anne Morgan, however, famously intervened (along with Alva Belmont) as part of a Women's Trade Union League delegation in support of New York City's women shirt-waist strikers in 1910. At the time, an intimate friend of the family told a reporter, "Mr. Morgan naturally has very different views from Anne, but he is a broad-minded man and respects his daughter for thinking and acting for herself. . . . The story that he had angrily sworn to disinherit her for her avowed sympathy for the strikers is absolutely false."¹⁰⁰

By the time he was eulogizing Hanna, Croly and his left-progressive friends had already given up on the NCF and purely voluntary good-will gestures between labor and management. As he recognized, class conflict ("ill-feeling and mutual suspicion") had only "increased during the past ten years." Near the end of his 500-page biography, Croly thus laid the template for a different set of measures: "The results which Mr. Hanna hoped to accomplish informally by the agency of a private organization backed by public opinion evidently demand a more powerful and authoritative engine of the social will—one which he himself might have been loath

to call into action.”¹⁰¹ In short, in the progressive view, the voluntaristic era of Hanna, Gompers, and the NCF was over; it was time for decisive governmental action to restore fairness and equality at the workplace.

Is there a unifying thread to our analysis of the Gilded Age-Progressive Era series of great industrial conflicts? In the introduction to *American Labor Struggles*, a valuable treatment of ten great strikes (including Homestead, Pullman, and Anthracite 1902) published in 1936, Samuel Yellen summarizes: “Certain conditions . . . become unbearable to the workers in an industry; they organize, they strike, often they strike a second time to defend their organization. Certain forces are brought to bear upon them by employers, by the government, by social agencies, even by other labor organizations. They resist these forces successfully and win, or they succumb to them and lose. The story is simple enough.” Perhaps not so simple, however, is an assessment of those “forces” that helped to make or break the workers’ struggles. Repeatedly, in these contests, we see not only raw tests of workplace-centered power but also complicated agendas of morality, authority and legitimacy. Carnegie and Frick could prevail—there was never much doubt—at Homestead, but would the terms of such victory be acceptable to the voting, investing, and consuming public? Pullman, likewise, could beat back a national ARU mobilization, but only by sacrificing his own treasured version of serene, paternal governance. An unlikely alliance of John Mitchell and Mark Hanna, on the other hand, proved that restrictions could indeed be placed on one-sided corporate control of a basic industry. The facts on the ground suggest that as of 1902 no one rule of thumb, and no clear model of industrial relations, had yet fastened itself on the American workplace.

The impact of contingencies examined here is further highlighted in comparative perspective. Not only were the new unions (i.e., organizations of semiskilled and unskilled industrial workers) crucial to the takeoff of labor parties in Britain and Australia, but their counterparts in the United States (particularly the ARU and UMWA) also showed considerable aptitude for independent political action. Indeed, as historian Robin Archer suggests, a movement towards a labor party (evidenced in Gompers’s defeat by UMWA president John McBride in 1894 and formation of a labor-populist party in Illinois that same year) might well have won official AFL backing (in line with Australian developments) had not the ARU been so thoroughly crushed by the end of the Pullman strike.¹⁰²

Yet, even if we rule out as too far-fetched the emergence of a U.S. labor party in these years, other historical contingencies surely still beckoned. By way of prime example, the role of collective bargaining, and thus a real workers' stake in the corporate liberal order, was still up for grabs even after the eclipse of producerist-republican movements. Just what a more robust, longer-lived Mitchell-Hanna axis might have accomplished is hard to say. Yet, had the agreements reached by 1904 in the printing industry, building trades, machine tool industry, bituminous mining, and some railroads been supplemented by additional sectors in coal, steel, and rail, might not pre-World War I progressivism have taken on a decidedly more social-democratic hue? At the very least, the NCF turn away from collective bargaining toward top-down corporate welfarism (so definitive of American industrial relations by the 1920s) might have been averted. The signs, in short, point to an unrecognized fork in the road *within* the formation historian James Weinstein in 1968 summarily dismissed as "corporate liberalism."¹⁰³

Given the circumstances, therefore, historians should pause before declaring with confidence why and when organized labor ended up as a peculiarly weak force in the American polity. Only on further consideration of the conflicts during the decades of the 1890s and 1900s are we likely to appreciate a potentially pivotal turn in American history. Employers, after all, looked back at the Gilded Age strikes and learned something from them about how to treat workers in the midst of economic depression. Reformers, like Croly, equally tried to assemble the elements of an American version of social democracy from the elements at hand in a conflicted culture. By the 1930s, the labor movement as well applied the lessons of prior setbacks—organizing with the same energy at the ballot-box as at the workplace. If we probe the past for its (sometimes buried) openings, might we not find a window still of use for our own day?