A Window of Solidarity in Steel: McKees Rocks, 1909

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A Window of Solidarity in Steel: McKees Rocks, 1909

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Author's Introduction

In the late summer of 1909, five thousand angry men and several thousand more of their wives fought for eight weeks against the oppressive practices of the Pressed Steel Car Company, a member company of United States Steel – and, at least in some ways, won. It was a sensational strike, a bloody strike that featured firefights, gigantic mass meetings, strikebreakers working at gunpoint, and even the direct attention of Eugene V. Debs, the United States Commissioner for Labor, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The strike is significant not only for its drama, but because it fits into so many contexts of events and movements going on during the first decades of the twentieth century.

It was a strike of unskilled foreign-born workers – the “new immigrants” from Southern and Eastern Europe after 1880. Surprisingly, it was also a strike of skilled American workers who joined with the immigrants along industrial, not occupational lines – a coalition that the American Federation of Labor had been unwilling to develop. It featured the intervention of the Industrial Workers of the World, a radical labor organization that attempted to stake a claim for itself in the field left open by the AFL – industrial unionism. And it was highlighted by vigorous community support for the strike from Pittsburgh’s progressive community, who saw Pressed Steel in dire need of the reforms they desired. Not only did this community disburse monetary support to the strikers, they actively pursued their own goal of promoting a less violent, more rational system of capital/labor relations by pushing for injunctions to stop strike violence and for collective bargaining mediated by the government to end the dispute.

Where David Brody has argued that the skilled workers, the immigrants, and the mill towns were sources of stability in quelling labor unrest in “the nonunion era,” the
McKees Rocks strike is interesting because, for a brief moment, all three of those factors combined in a window of solidarity and support for labor militancy. For at least four of the eight weeks of the strike, skilled and unskilled workers fought alongside one another, determined that none should go back to work if all did not. And though the coalition would fragment in the face of the strongarm tactics employed by Pressed Steel, the fact that it could exist at all is remarkable.

In this rendering of the strike, I hope to advance several points for broadening the discussion of the subject. The first is the role of the Hungarians in the strike. The immigrant workers in the Rocks, as well as in other places, were known by the derogatory appellation “Hunky,” since many of them were Slavs and Magyars from Hungary. John Ingham, who wrote the definitive work on the McKees Rocks strike, notes that the foreign workers were uncontrollable and violence-prone, though he didn’t inquire into why this was. A reading of the history of Hungarian immigration seen through Hungarian eyes – through the work of Julianna Puskas – sheds some light on the way that the Hungarians viewed their lives as industrial workers and the fight that they undertook.

The second question I wish to address is the question of middle-class autonomy and responsiveness in the strike. As I have already mentioned, it is my view that in addition to being agents of material support for the strikers, the progressive community of Pittsburgh had its own agenda that it prosecuted vigorously. I will show that at least some contemporary commentators shared my assessment.

Third, I want to examine the role of the Industrial Workers of the World in the strike. I originally became interested in the McKees Rocks strike through study of the
IWW, and I am fascinated by its “wild card” role in this conflict. Because of the strong resonance its message of radical industrial unionism found in the immigrant strikers and because of the subordinate position the foreign-born found themselves in vis-à-vis the Americans, the involvement of the IWW helped to precipitate a crisis of patriotism in the ranks.

This crisis would push shut the already-closing window of solidarity. The strikers would gain a nominal victory, but a costly one. A wedge of “American-ness” would drive the skilled and unskilled workers apart, and the steel industry would not face industrial unionism again for several decades. But the possibilities shown by this strike are staggering, and warrant closer inspection.

One of the things I realized during the course of this project is that independent study efforts are very rarely independent, and they can involve much more than simple book study. I’d like to thank my advisor, Dr. Gary Bailey for helping me get this topic off the ground, constant encouragement, and an enjoyable car ride down to the Pennsylvania Historical Association annual meeting; Dr. Irwin Marcus, for suggesting lines of inquiry that would not have occurred to me, and which proved incredibly fruitful; James Koshan for camaraderie as a fellow McKees Rocks inquirer; Theresa McDevitt of Stapleton Library for work beyond the call of duty on the peonage investigations and “the untrammeled Mayor McNair”; and finally, Dr. Charles McCollester and the whole McKees Rocks Task Force, for rare sources and the irreplaceable opportunity to see the McKees Rocks forges, still active today.

I promise to take you all down to the Rocks for potato and sauerkraut pierogies someday soon.
Part One: Steelmasters Ascendant, Immigrant Workers at the Edge

The middle months of 1909 saw the end of an eighteen-month recession in the steel industry. For steelworkers, the Panic of 1907 had resulted in widespread layoffs and wage reductions. Now that the industry was beginning to recover, the question was whether the workers were going to share in the return of prosperity.

At the top levels of steel industry decision making, a debate was going on about the role of the Steel Corporation in labor reform. At one end of the spectrum of opinion was William Brown Dickson, vice president of US Steel and later vice president of Midvale Steel and Ordnance Company, who advocated shorter hours, the abolition of Sunday labor, extended employee benefits, and collective bargaining, among other things. At the other were managers like Frank N. Hoffstot of the Pressed Steel Car Company of McKees Rocks, Pennsylvania.

McKees Rocks was a fast-growing steel mill town that lay along the Ohio River six miles south and west of Pittsburgh. In 1910, it had a population of 14,702, an increase of more than 8,000 from 1900. Only 4,218 persons were native born of native-American parents; 4,388 were native born of foreign parents; and 6,068 were foreign born. Of the foreign born, 4,461 came from Austria, Hungary, and Russia; McKees Rocks was generally recognized as one of the main concentrations of Austro-Hungarians in Allegheny County. They were drawn to the Rocks by the many manufacturing jobs

available at Pressed Steel and other manufacturers in the town, who employed 11,933 people in 1907.^

Pressed Steel was an immensely successful venture, second only to the American Car and Foundry Corporation in the manufacture of passenger and freight cars for railroads. In a normal year, its turnover was over $36,000,000; during the slump years of 1908 and 1909 it still managed to sell $20,000,000 in cars. In October, at the end of the 1909 strike, the Pennsylvania Railroad would place its largest order in history with Pressed Steel.5

It had been formed in 1899 as a result of a merger between the two leading car building companies in the United States – the Fox Company, owned by the legendary “Diamond Jim” Brady, and Schoen Pressed Steel, a relative newcomer who had been able to seize a sizable share of the market. However, chronic troubles with the labor force hampered the company’s performance, and an opportunity arose for new ownership. In 1901, the shares of Charles T. Schoen were quietly bought by Frank N. Hoffstot, the forty-eight year old son of a well-to-do leather merchant, and his lifelong friend and business partner, James W. Friend, with whom he had purchased several other steel and coal concerns. The men had the financial backing of Henry Phipps of Carnegie

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3 Ibid., 354.
6 Especially in 1900, the company was racked by labor troubles. John Ingham commented on a summer riveters’ strike that was dangerous because the Knights of Labor took the opportunity to organize a lodge in the plant. The strike was broken quickly through the use of injunctions and the importation of American workers as strikebreakers. Ingham calls this “the first attempt at any organization of [Pressed Steel’s] workers” (Ingham, 357), though in the little-known newsletter of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (The Electrical Worker), it can be shown that IBEW local 51 also conducted an unsuccessful strike of crane workers in March and April of that year. It is unclear whether this is indicative of a larger union movement in steel during this period than was previously thought, or if these efforts were merely weak attempts to pick up some of the slack left by the declining Amalgamated Association.
Steel, and they soon had controlling interest in Pressed Steel and had installed Hoffstot as president.7

In order to control the labor force, Hoffstot began to institute principles of scientific management, the most important being the introduction of a moving assembly line. Progressive activist and journalist Paul U. Kellogg described the system for the Survey:

The steel comes in sheets, is cut in lengths in the shearing department; heated and pressed into shape; marked and punched in the punching department; fitted together with bolts in the construction department; and put together and riveted in the erection department. There are many minor branches of the work, where axles, trucks, upholstery, etc. are produced, but this untechnical description indicates the process of turning out the main staple—car bodies of sheet steel ...

A track runs the length of the erection aisle. The trucks are placed on the track at one end, electric cranes pick up the plates, piece by piece they are put together and riveted, and a completed car rolls off the other end of the track. There are perhaps twelve positions on the track and at each position a group of men who perform one step in the process of completing a car.8

Of the workforce, Kellogg noted, “These processes have reached a point where few skilled mechanics are demanded, compared with quick operators of heavy machines. The company claims a month’s training will turn an immigrant into a riveter”.9 This sort of work was appealing to foreign-born workers, especially the Hungarians, who were a large component of the “new immigration” of the late 19th century into Pennsylvania. They moved into jobs in coal, iron, and steel in great numbers—by 1907, 73.2 percent of workers in iron and steel were Slovaks, Magyars, Germans, and Croatians.10

7 Ingham, 355.  
8 Kellogg, 657.  
9 Ibid.  
10 Ingham, 358.
Julianna Puskás, a Hungarian historian, said of the Hungarian immigrants: “The incentive in their wanderings was to earn money in the shortest time possible by work no matter where or how hard, to get the money necessary to realize their dreams and plans so that they might then return to their families.” Many Hungarian immigrants were not planning for permanent settlement in the United States; instead, they were rural farmers who sought to escape from the poor economic conditions in Hungary to labor in the high-paying United States for a few years until they could return to their homeland and purchase a plot of land. However, their willingness to work themselves harder and longer for less wages than native-born American workers not only bred resentment with those native-born workers, but also made it very difficult for the immigrants to realize their dreams. Puskás stated that “To work at such jobs and be paid by output required above-average endurance and physical strength. Few were able to stand it, yet only those who endured it for 7 to 10 years could earn enough money to buy that 20 to 30 acres of cadastral land in Hungary”.

Work at the Pressed Steel Car Company and life in McKees Rocks exemplified the difficulties that immigrant workers, especially Hungarians, faced in the American industrial system. After Hoffstot had switched over to the track system of production, he found it easier in the beginning to pay unskilled foreign-born workers by straight piece rate, which increased their weekly earnings and quelled much of the labor unrest in the plant. During the 1907-1909 slump, however, Hoffstot devised a new wage scheme to complement the track system. This “pooling system” did not pay each worker by the

12 Ibid., 130-135.
13 Ingham, 356.
number of pieces he produced, but instead lumped all of the workers on a particular job into a "pool," where each man's wages were dependent on the number of completed cars that rolled off the track at the end of the day. "Each man in a pool was rated at so much an hour," reported Paul Kellogg, "This rating, the company states, was a minimum which he would get in any event if he put in full time."^14 "Full time" meant working every day of the twelve-day pay cycle. If he did, he was entitled to his share of the lump sum paid out to his pool.

While the company protested that, using hypothetical figures, an average worker would make out better under the pooling system's series of bonuses for production above quota, there were many abuses that made it terrible to work under.

In the first place, the men charge that they have no means of checking up what is coming to them. No piece rates are posted as under the old system. They don't know what the pool is going to get per piece for any of the work it does, nor the lump sum due it at the end of a fortnight. They claim the hourly rating is not a guaranteed minimum; that many of the men have received pay far under what they understood their rating to be, and that foremen and superintendents have refused to tell others what their rating was. Further, it is alleged that where a lump sum is paid for a series of operations done by different gangs in completing a car, no money is paid any of the gangs until the whole series of operations is completed. As some pools have included as many as 300 men, it is manifestly impossible for the men to keep track. Their pay envelopes show on the outside merely the check number, and the amount inside—neither the man’s rating, nor the number of hours he has worked, nor the bonus due him under the piece pool system, nor the amount arbitrarily deducted from his earnings by the company for insurance...And the company has taken the position that if they did not like what was in their pay envelopes they could quit.^15

As a corollary to the charge that wages were not allocated to one group until all of the groups had finished work on a car, it was charged that if a car was ruined by one group, or by defective materials, or production was slowed by administrative failure to

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^14 Kellogg, 659.
deal with a problem further down the track, then all of the pools along the line lost wages for it. Paychecks presented to Kellogg showed wages of $1 for three days’ work, $14.50 for ten and one-half days, and $20.30 for fourteen days, seven hours of labor. All of these low paychecks may not have been directly attributable to the pooling system – at the same time as the new system was adopted, President Hoffstot, citing uncontrollable market conditions, slashed piece rates for all positions. As well, the company’s statement that its employees were free to quit at any time was backed up in 1909 by the fact that the plant was not yet running at full capacity (due to the slump), and therefore there were some 2,000 to 3,000 additional men in the town, forming a “reserve army of labor” ready to take open jobs – or, as we shall see, to lend their support to a foreigners’ strike.

Compounding the problem of low wages for foreign-born workers was the issue of housing. Pressed Steel’s immigrant workforce was segregated in the “Bottoms” section of McKees Rocks along the Ohio River and in Presston, the company town adjoining the plant. (The native Americans lived separate from the immigrants, for whom they held little love. They lived to the south in McKees Rocks proper, or across the river in North Side Pittsburgh – both sites on higher ground.) The immigrants lived in approximately 230 company-owned houses, in what was derisively known by disdainful native-born workers as “Hunkeyville.” The rent for the homes was $12 a month, an amount that simply could not be met without taking in boarders. This was not an unfamiliar situation for the Hungarian workers; they were often in a position

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15 Ibid., 660.
16 Ibid., 661-662.
17 Ingham, 357.
18 Kellogg, 663.
where, if they wanted to send as much money back to their families as possible, they lowered their standard of living commensurately. Contemporary commentators often deplored the condition that they lived in, but to them, it was a calculated cost of their dream of land ownership in Hungary. So, they often split lodging expenses by living in a house together, what they called a burdos hazák, or boarding house. They would all share in the expenses for food and rent, and would elect a leader – the burdos gazda, usually a man with a wife – who would buy the food, pay the rent, and keep the accounts. His wife would be charged with preparing the food and keeping the house clean. Occasionally, if income allowed, they would purchase a barrel of beer, and drink it together.19

The Pressed Steel housing system was as rife with abuses as the assembly line was. The quality of housing was, of course, poor, with no indoor plumbing. An observer characterized it thus: “Children and parents live in dingy two-story frame houses which, jammed close together in the long rows which line the yellow clay of the street, cause one to think of abandoned pest houses in a region which has been swept away by disease. The houses have four stalls, described by the company officials as rooms.”20 In order to keep their “stalls,” as well as their jobs, the men were expected to pay graft to foremen and housing agents in the forms of bribes of food and alcohol as well as exorbitantly inflated fees for marriage licenses and the like.21 Also, the company strongly suggested

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19 Puskás, 141-143.
20 Pittsburg Leader, 15 July 1909.
21 Pittsburg Leader, 20 July 1909; Kellogg, 663.
that its workers buy goods at a general store that it owned through a third party—a way to get around the Pennsylvania prohibition of company stores.\textsuperscript{22}

Finally, a word must be said about working conditions. The pooling system encouraged not only worker self-regulation of the pool, but also a continual speed-up, since the wages of the whole depended on the pace of the slowest worker. This fast pace, combined with the use of dangerous machinery and the uncaring attitude of the management toward its workforce led to accidents. Many terrible accidents. One of the Pressed Steel plants was known nationwide as “The Slaughter House” because so many people were killed there, and another as “The Last Chance” because it was said that “if a man ever worked in this mill he has no chance on earth outside.”\textsuperscript{23} A reporter was probably exaggerating in the details, but captured the spirit of work at Pressed Steel when he wrote:

These simple people are slaughtered every day, not simply killed, but slaughtered. Their very deaths are unknown to all save the workers who see their bodies hacked and butchered by the relentless machinery and death traps that fill the big works. Their families, of course, know that the bread stops coming. But the public, the coroner, everybody else is ignorant of the hundreds of deaths by slaughter which form the unwritten record of the Pressed Steel Car plant...

When some poor “Hunky,” as they even familiarly call themselves now, is maimed and mangled at his work, some foreman, or other petty “boss” pushes the bleeding body aside with his foot to make room for another living man... The new man often works for some minutes over the dead body until a labor gang takes it away.”\textsuperscript{24}

In such an appalling system, in the midst of improving economic conditions across the industry, the situation in McKees Rocks was bound to come to a head. The confrontation would begin on a Tuesday morning in July.


\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
Part Two: Gaining Middle Class Support for a Foreigners' Strike

The morning of Tuesday, July 13 marked a sudden turn in the situation at Pressed Steel. The previous Saturday had been a payday, and the workers along the lines were once again bewildered by the pooling system that left them only pennies for two weeks of work. They also suspected the plant’s time clock of irregularities that stole several hours a week from them.25

On the evening of Monday the 12th, a group of the workers had held a meeting at Turner Hall to plan a course of action. Afterward, they visited the house of Edward Pollitt, a former Pressed Steel machinist and respected real estate salesman whom they had consulted before “for advice following outrages perpetrated by the company.”26 The men asked Pollitt to draw up a set of resolutions to present to the company. He authored the following statement:

We, the employees of the Pressed Steel Car company, believe that we have not been treated fairly by the company, and we ask the business men and citizens of McKees Rocks to take this matter up before the board of commerce of McKees Rocks that we may live and let live.27

The following morning, the discontented workers sent representatives to the company offices to discuss the wage rates; they were rebuffed by officials who would not see them. Thus, 600 men of the riveting department put down their tools and left the shops. The walkout spread quickly through the plant. By 9:30, only about 500 of the

24 Pittsburg Leader, 15 July 1909.
26 Pittsburg Leader, 18 July 1909.
27 Pittsburg Leader, 18 July 1909.
men still labored in the mills (mainly skilled Americans in the wooden car works), and approximately 4,000 had left. The strike was on.

Stowe Township police chief T.A. Farrell hurried to the scene in order to arrest an exiting striker, probably to scare the rest into returning to the plant. The plan backfired, and fifty outraged workers set upon him, beating him severely and forcing him to retreat via a passing wagon (Leader, July 14, 1909). By 10:30, the workers’ wives had discovered what had happened, and they went to the plant, several hundred strong, to heckle and threaten the skilled workers who remained inside.

From the beginning, the strike at McKees Rocks was characterized by a high level of participation by the women of Schoenville and Presston. Julianna Puskas hypothesized that Hungarians involved in labor disputes in the United States did not have a conception of their fight as one of organized labor versus management, but as a peasant revolt. Viewed through this lens, the rioting of the first few days (and later in August, when American leadership seemed to be breaking down) seems not so much mindless raging, but as the application of Hungarian methods of resistance to an American dispute.

Later that evening, the strikers held a meeting at Turner Hall to which Mr. Pollitt was invited as a speaker. On his way to the hall with a group of the men, he was intercepted by the Stowe Township police, who took him into custody. (He went peacefully with the police and was released without being charged on the condition that

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28 The Pittsburg Leader reported that "When word calling for the walkout was spread yesterday, 3,850 stopped work simultaneously. Of these 1,000 were from the construction department, 1,000 from the passenger car department, 800 from the erecting department, 150 from the shearing department and 100 from the press department." (Pittsburg Leader, 14 July 1909.)

29 "Their strikes differed from the classic wage wars of the organized workers. The spontaneity and fierce violence of their actions, their festive demonstrations with flags were more like a peasant revolt than class-conscious workers’ action." (Puskás, 147.)
he would stay out of the Rocks for forty-eight hours.) When Pollitt failed to arrive at Turner Hall, the men moved in large groups through the town streets all night long.

Pollitt was referred to by the Leader not as an advisor to the strikers, but as a leader, perhaps prefiguring the press' eagerness for a strong American leadership influence over the volatile strikers, who were portrayed in the early days of the strike as an unruly, uncivilized mob. In any case, the early involvement in the strike of a middle-class community figure (a real estate agent) raises the question: Were middle-class forces merely reacting to the events of the strike, giving support to or withholding support from the strikers insofar as their methods were acceptable to polite society, as John Ingham has argued; or were they, rather, active participants in shaping events as they unfolded, seeking to make their values, especially their ideas about proper labor-management relations, known? Pollitt's statement to the company would certainly seem to support this claim; he asked not for an in-house resolution, but for an active role for the community: "we ask the business men and citizens of McKees Rocks to take this matter up before the board of commerce of McKees Rocks that we may live and let live."

Early the next morning (Wednesday the 14th), the strikers were still on the move; they stopped the streetcars going to the plant from North Side Pittsburgh and forcibly ejected any worker they found who had not yet joined their cause. They also prevented the arrival of 500 strikebreakers from Altoona on an early-morning train (it was clear that Pressed Steel had been expecting trouble). By 11 o'clock, 4,000 men, women, and children had once again gathered at the plant gates, and they threw bricks and stones at the few remaining American Pressed Steel workers who had managed to sneak in via an

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30 As in this description of the strikers' wives, given in the Leader: "Women forgot their sex and became primitive savages imbued with one desire — to kill." (Pittsburg Leader, 14 July 1909.)
"abandoned" stock car. Things got even fiercer when Chief Farrell and 40 officers arrived to protect the men inside the plant. The strikers brandished clubs and knives, the policemen drew their revolvers, and 50 to 100 people, including Chief Farrell, were seriously injured in the battle. Later in the evening, word came through the ranks that the company was attempting to bring their strikebreakers into the plant via the Ohio River entrance on the ferry Steel Queen. In a scene reminiscent of Homestead's "Battle of the Monongahela," several hundred of the strikers, armed with rifles, rushed the riverbank and fired upon the barge, forcing it to turn back. By the end of the day, the Pressed Steel plant was shut down, and 10,000 American and foreign workers and their sympathizers were out of work.

The next day (Thursday, July 15), in another development similar to the Homestead lockout, forty members of the Pennsylvania State Constabulary, known and feared as the "Black Cossacks," arrived in Presston and McKees Rocks. Through the course of the day, there were several skirmishes between the strikers and the mounted police, where some few were arrested (and in at least one case, dragged through the streets), many more strikers were wounded and one constable was knocked from his mount. As more constables arrived in the town, this initial burst of violence would subside into a sullen stalemate.

The strikers were also beginning to organize themselves. The morning of the 15th marked the first mass meeting at the Indian Mound. Though no details about the rally were given in the Leader's report, it can be safely assumed that the Americans were not yet in control of the strike. Unit leaders were decided upon, perhaps some of those whom

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31 Pittsburg Leader, 14 July 1909.
32 After this incident, the constables would be given "shoot to kill" orders. (Pittsburg Leader, 16 July 1909.)
International Socialist Review writer Louis Duchez would term “The Unknown Committee,” and the strikers began to function in orderly patrols, though more minor battles would disrupt the night. The men also sought the advice of “the lawyers of the Socialist division of McKees Rocks” in preparing formal demands to be given to Pressed Steel. It is likely that this meeting was when William N. McNair, future mayor of Pittsburgh, became engaged as counsel for the strikers. McNair would represent the strikers in a variety of legal matters for the duration of the strike.

The strikers divided themselves into groups based on nationality and elected a grievance committee of ten: Anthony Paviciek Vuk, Wondel Pajlovits, Anthony Derzick, Dave Dakatch (Takag), Tony Olenick, Joe Smith, Nick Signorelli, Georg Vassos, Larius Kike, and Jol Smith. On the 19th, the Leader reported that representatives of Pressed Steel were in a conciliatory mood, prepared to discuss the strikers’ wage demands. When they only invited two of the committee members, claiming that ten would crowd the company offices, the men refused for fear that those two might be easily bribed by the company.

At the same time, the company was attempting to split the skilled American workers from the foreigners – in all probability not a difficult task, as many of that group of men were not affected by the pooling system and were prevented from returning to work by the immigrants. However, the attempt to fission off the Americans failed, and at

33 *Pittsburg Leader*, 15 July 1909.
34 The *Leader* described the emerging strike organization apparent on the 15th: “They practically formed camps, each with its captain, and all under the generalship of one guiding hand whose identity is unknown, but the results of whose efforts are easily discernable.” (*Pittsburg Leader*, 15 July 1909.)
35 *Pittsburg Leader*, 16 July 1909.
36 The wage schedule drawn up by the grievance committee demanded 15 cents an hour for laborers and 20-35 cents for all other tasks (riveters, heaters, machinists, carpenters, etc.), time and a half for overtime, double time on Sunday, and permission to smoke on dinner break and overtime. (*Pittsburg Leader*, 19 July 1909.)
a meeting at the McKees Rocks YMCA, they decided to cast their lot with the “Hunkies.”

“The Americans, all skilled men, want the foreigners to know that they have nothing to fear from the mechanics. They will not go back to work during the strike.”37

John Ingham has speculated that the Americans realized that the fight was going to be long, and therefore felt it in their best interests to ally with the strikers, or perhaps that they held a dim view of the strike committee’s ability to hold down violence (on the 19th, there were again rumors of strikebreakers entering the plant, and a group of strikers stormed the gates of the plant to investigate). While those these are valid observations, a letter sent by the skilled workers to company officials revealed that they had several grievances of their own:

To the Pressed Steel Car Company:
We, the workmen of the mechanical department of the Pressed Steel Car company deem it our duty to call the company’s attention to the fact that the skilled mechanics’ wages are below the wages of other shops in the Pittsburg district: therefore, we wish to inform said company of our grievances.
First – To abolish the present insurance plans.
Second – To a return to a ten (10) hour a day system.
Third – To receive – cents an hour for skilled mechanical workmanship and 1907 wage scale for shop hands and others. Time and one-half for overtime. Double time for Sundays.38

In any case, around the 20th an executive committee of Americans approached the foreigners to amalgamate the two groups. The leadership was reorganized under mainly American control and headed by C.A. Wise, a mechanic from the axle shop. It was at this point, when the strike came under the “responsible control” of the Americans, that it truly began to gain respectability in the eyes of the Pittsburgh community.39

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37 Pittsburg Leader, 19 July 1909.
38 Pittsburg Leader, 19 July 1909.
39 Ingham, 360-361.
During this early period, many other elements emerged that would cement public opinion behind the strikers. To all observers (even ones not so inclined to sympathize with the strikers as the Leader), it seemed as though the actions of the company and its president, Frank N. Hoffstot, went far beyond the bounds of acceptable business behavior. In the eyes of the progressive community, “Baby” Hoffstot went too far; while he was perfectly willing to call on legal apparatuses (such as the sheriff’s department and the State Constabulary), he denied that the public held any stake in the matter. He also made statements that he would receive no committee and submit to no arbitration, and in fact maintained for several weeks that there was no strike in McKees Rocks at all, merely some 600 disgruntled workers who would be laid off. The Leader summed up popular response to this attitude in its reaction to his most publicized statement about the strike:

“IT’s nobody’s business how I run my affairs,” said President Frank N. Hoffstot of the Pressed Steel Car Company, when asked how many strikers had gone back to work. “I do not propose to give any figures.” To the suggestion that the strike is the public’s business in view of the expense to the people and the danger to the public, President Hoffstot said he would not agree that the strike is anybody’s business but his own.\(^40\)

It also came to light that Sheriff Addison C. Gumbert had delivered several hundred blank deputies’ badges to the Pressed Steel Car Company so that the company could hire its own police force. Though the sheriff claimed responsibility for the actions of those men, it was Pressed Steel that paid them $5 a day for their services.\(^41\) These “Tin Plate” deputies (so named for the badges they wore, tin plates stamped with

\(^40\) Pittsburg Leader, 19 July 1909.
\(^41\) Pittsburg Leader, 17, 20 July 1909.
"P.S.C."), many of them Pressed Steel clerks, would gain notoriety during the later peonage investigation for being unprofessional and trigger-happy.\textsuperscript{42}

The members of the Pennsylvania State Constabulary, after the initial days of violence, were better received by the community. Their disciplined and highly visible presence were seen to bring order to the unstable situation in the Rocks, though perhaps they did not warrant the praise given to them by the writer of their official history:

"Malice toward none. Justice to all," ran their motto. With minds lifted above anger or personality, steadfast and unmoved they pursued their work of mercy and of right."\textsuperscript{43} In fact, their main duties were dispersing groups loitering in the streets and defending the plant from attack.

Hoffstot (who for much of the strike was a comfortable distance away in New York City) and Pressed Steel manager James Rider had two other main weapons to use against the strikers. The first was Pearl L. Berghoff, the successor to Allan Pinkerton as "king of strikebreakers." After its strong showing in sending men to break the Philadelphia Rapid Transit company's strike earlier in the year, Berghoff's Service Bureau was quickly contacted by Rider to supply the 500 men who boarded the Steel Queen on the 14th. Though unsuccessful in July, more than 1,200 of his hired men would take control of the plant by mid-August.\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{42} Congress, House, Committee on Labor, Peonage in Western Pennsylvania: Hearings Before the Committee on Labor of the House of Representatives, 62nd Congress, First Session, 1 August 1911, 34-109, passim. Two of the men giving testimony at the peonage investigation described the P.S.C. deputies thus: "As far as the Pressed Steel Car police were concerned, they were a lot of bums who couldn't do the work, that were put as guards, and I can point you to one man that hit a man over the head the other night because he wouldn't go to bed." "They were just as liable to shoot you as anything else if you argued the point with them. [Q: You say they shot several people?] I saw them make some very vicious attempts to shoot them...and if they were good marksmen they would have killed half of them."

\textsuperscript{43} Katherine Mayo, Justice to All: The Story of the Pennsylvania State Police (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1917), 135.

\textsuperscript{44} Levinson, 70-71, 76-78.
The second weapon at Pressed Steel's disposal was the control they held over the strikers' housing. Through their subsidiary agent, the Fidelity Land Company, they owned the 230 houses in Presston where many employees lived. By August 9th, 47 families (and their boarders) had been served with eviction notices. Many more would follow in the subsequent weeks, until all of the houses were vacated.45

The emerging story of the plight of the foreign workers was revealed in the Leader through a set of articles by journalists and clergymen that described the awful working conditions at the "Slaughter House," the graft that the workers were made to pay Pressed Steel managers, and the deplorable condition of the company housing in Presston. This tragedy, coupled with leadership of the strike by skilled American workers provoked two sets of reactions from Pittsburgh's progressive community. The first was the reactive sort of support for the strikers that ebbed and flowed according to how well the strikers' actions corresponded with their own middle-class set of beliefs about proper conduct. This response is most easily visible in the contributions given to the Leader's bread fund. On July 18, a letter arrived at the newspaper's office, which would spark donations to the strikers of more than $9,000 by the middle of September:

Editor Leader – That the unfortunate workmen of the Pressed Steel Car Company must be nearly destitute, and their families suffering for the actual necessities of life, is one fact in connection with the strike that admits of no dispute, and the one fact that will appeal to all humane people, however they may view the relations between the men and their employers.

This fact appeals so strongly to me that I am sending herewith five dollars – the most I can spare – which I ask you to transmit in some way to needy workmen to buy bread for themselves and their families.

I would also suggest that the Leader accept contributions from others for this purpose, as I have no doubt many good people would be willing to contribute if they knew how to get the money into deserving hands. I hope the Leader will do this and I am sure there will be a

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45 Pittsburg Leader, 9 August 1909.
generous response to such an appeal. Please do not print my name in connection with my contribution. Just credit it to — A Workingman.

The “generous response” came from all corners of the community. Concerned individuals, church groups, union locals, and even businesses such as Kaufman’s contributed to the bread fund. The administrator of the commissary at Missic Hall was none other than the eminently respectable American leader C.A. Wise, a fact that Ingham states was crucial for the community’s continued support. When the strikers were becoming dissatisfied with his leadership, he warned them, “If we step down and out, contributions will cease and you will starve.”

The other strand of community response to the strike was commented on by Survey writer Rufus D. Smith: “One exciting cause of interest leading up to the consideration of the public’s rights in the matter, was the filing of a bill in equity by a taxpayer, representing the Public Defense Association, against the car company, its employes [sic] and the sheriff.” These legal proceedings were begun on July 17, with the Public Defense Association requesting an injunction be issued to restrain Pressed Steel from firing the strikers arbitrarily or importing strikebreakers. A week later, the Public Defense Association would attempt to use the courts to prevent either side (or the sheriff’s office) from causing collateral damage to taxpayers’ property through violence, and make them liable for such damages as would occur. Though Judge Brown of Circuit Court number 2 would deny these injunctions, they point to a more active role for the middle-class community than has previously been suggested. Several other developments also indicate this, like the petition drives to involve peonage investigators

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46 Pittsburg Leader, 6 September 1909, quoted in Ingham, 361-362.
47 Rufus Smith, “Some Phases of the McKee’s Rocks Strike,” Survey, 23 (2 October 1909), 44.
48 Pittsburg Leader, 17 July 1909.
at the end of August and Pennsylvania Governor Stuart as a dispute mediator at the
beginning of September. Even the Leader’s active maintenance of a bread fund and
commissary indicates a level of involvement with the strike that goes beyond
“cheerleading with their pocketbooks,” so to speak.

Rufus Smith made another comment that typified Progressive feelings about the
strike:

The strike provoked a strong sentiment in Pittsburgh for arbitration to settle difficulties of this sort rather than permit them to continue an indefinite time. On the side of the company the estimated loss is from one to three million dollars... On the other hand, Allegheny County has had to pay a large amount for the force of deputy sheriffs engaged in police duty... Why should this be allowed? is the question heard everywhere; why shouldn’t arbitration be used, and strikes involving large losses to all sides be settled in a peaceable way?... The struggle at McKee’s Rocks has given a new impetus and a stronger public opinion in favor of settlements by some other method than tying out the other fellow.50

Another of the interesting uses of the Pennsylvania common pleas courts during the strike was a push by the strikers for legally mandated arbitration. Their counsel, William McNair, submitted a plea to Judge MacFarlane under the “Voluntary Tribunal Act of 1883” to appoint an arbitration commission. This request was also denied, on the grounds that the law was compulsory, not voluntary at all; the wording of the law made it possible for one side to be fined in absentia if they did not agree to arbitration.51 This setback merely gave more ammunition to those who wished to see a national arbitration law enacted, like the editors of the Leader and the National Labor Tribune.52

49 Pittsburg Leader, 24 July 1909.
50 Smith, 44-45.
51 Pittsburg Leader, 20, 25 August 1909.
52 A bit surprisingly, The Iron City Trades Journal stated that “this decision is a victory for labor and one of inestimable value to the working people in their disputes with capital,” in that they feared, if such a precedent had been set, companies would request arbitration for easily-winnable strikes, and the union members would be at the mercy of the courts (27 August 1909).
Perhaps one of the things that made the strike such a cause to be taken up by people from all types of backgrounds was that it was not a union dispute. Hoffstot’s actions could be universally deplored because there was not the looming specter of “labor agitation” hanging over the scene, at least in the early part of the strike. Though *The Iron City Trades Journal* (the Pittsburgh-area A.F. of L. organ) deplored it as “an unorganized strike and one of the most dangerous kind the country has to contend with”, the *National Labor Tribune* could even reprint an editorial from *The Wall Street Journal* that disparaged Hoffstot and his methods:

President Hoffstot apparently is absolutely ignorant of those adjustments between the capitalist, the workman and the public which have made possible the enormous efficacy of the past ten years. His conception of the position of an employer of labor is half a century out of date, and half a century ago methods which even then were considered oppressive and short-sighted...This is no question of coercion by a labor union. The workmen are not unionized, and they are admittedly paid starvation wages...To say that production in such circumstances is economically unsound is only to repeat the experience of ages. The matter is something more than one of dollars and cents, and every decent man must feel that even if the Pressed Steel Car Company can thereby undersell its competitors, it would not be entitled to do so by methods so inhuman and sordid.”

Even though the skilled American leadership of the strike had a great deal of support behind them, they did not wish to have a prolonged confrontation. They had the most to lose from not working, and the least to gain from reform of the pooling system. Accordingly, they sought quick settlement. The “Big Six” leaders of the strike (C.A. Wise, John H. Carr, Wondel Tajlovis, Dave Takag, J.E. Carr, and T.C. Snyder) were in deliberations with the company by the end of July, and on August 1 they announced that Pressed Steel had agreed to their demands: abolition of the pooling system; pay by hour;

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54 *National Labor Tribune*, 9 September 1909.
day, or piece; removal of James Farrell, the company’s chief of police; a regular grievance system; and suspension or removal of all grafting foremen. However, when the “Big Six” disclosed that they had conceded to the company that the company could deal with individuals, not all of the men as a group, and that there was no assurance that all of the original 600 strikers would be rehired, the immigrant workers repudiated the deal. Another similar offer came on August 8, when John E. Carr of the Big Six announced that the company had agreed to switch to a straight piecework, 10-hour day system. This second offer, however, also prohibited dealing with the strikers as a group, and it, too, was rejected by the great mass of immigrant workers.

The foreigners’ confidence in the Big Six’s ability to negotiate a settlement was being eroded. Added to this situation were the continuing attempts by the company to import strikebreakers. Some men arrived from New York on July 27, more on August 13. Though the Leader reported that these men were quick to leave their positions once they found out that they were being brought to break a strike, it seemed that the company could soon be successful in reopening the plant and winning the conflict. From this position of strength, the company could exercise its other tool: control over the strikers’ housing. As discussed above, the sheriff and his deputies would serve many strikers with eviction notices over the next several weeks.

The way that the Leader dealt with the eviction of the strikers was characteristic of their ambiguity about the immigrant workers. When they were passive recipients of

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55 Pittsburg Leader, 1 August 1909.
56 Ingham 363-364.
57 Pearl Berghoff’s Service Bureau had advertised in New York City, Philadelphia and Chicago its need for “Portable Riveters, Hydraulic Riveters, Bull Riveters. Only men used to heavy work and can make good need apply. Good wages, free board and transportation. Come prepared to work, as we positively ship today.” (Pittsburg Leader, 22 August 1909.)
indignities and abuses, the press were inclined to view them as pitiful, ignorant creatures, for example:

It was a heartrending scene as Sheriff Addison C. Gumbert walked up the steps to the house and was met by [Mr.] Polock, standing in the doorway and holding a baby in his left arm. With the other he was waving a small American flag, that of his adopted country, to attract the child’s attention. Stolidly the man stood and heard the sheriff read a notice which he did not understand. An interpreter explained the situation to Polock, who gazed now to the right, then to the left and then down at the child, the tears streaming down his cheeks.\(^{58}\)

When they fought back, however, they were often described as insensible and bloodthirsty:

Every man and every woman in the mob watched [the constables] with glances in which curiosity and hatred were intermingled. The bonds of restraint were strained to the breaking point. The slightest evidence of hostility on the part of the armed representatives of the law would result in their being crushed like eggshells under the maddened rush of medieval savagery.\(^{59}\)

With their homes and their jobs being stripped away from them, these immigrant workers were reaching their breaking point. Where the leaders of the strike were “determined on drastic action,” like publishing a list of grievances against particular company officials and making threats to keep the plants inoperative indefinitely,\(^{60}\) the immigrant workers had by this time formed their own “Unknown Committee,” which had larger and more radical plans. These plans would fundamentally distance the immigrants from the Americans in terms of methods and goals, and they would severely shake the foundations of middle-class support for a foreigners’ strike.

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\(^{58}\) Pittsburg Leader, 12 August 1909.  
\(^{59}\) Pittsburg Leader, 15 July 1909.  
\(^{60}\) Pittsburg Leader, 9 August 1909.
Part Three: Rifts in the Ranks

On the night of August 11, the strike gained a martyr. That night, immigrant pickets on patrol in the yards of the Pittsburg and Lake Erie Railroad, nervous over news that more strikebreakers were on their way, were on the lookout for Charles Sailes and his father, two black strikebreakers who were known to pass by there. They mistook a different man, Major Smith, for Sailes, and accosted him. He attempted to convince the strikers that he was employed not in the Pressed Steel works, but at Pennsylvania Malleable. The crowd, not believing, set upon him. He drew his Colt automatic revolver and fired several times before being overcome and severely beaten. One of his bullets killed Steve Horvath, a Croatian.61

Horvath’s funeral cortège was thousands strong. It was clear, however, that neither the skilled American leadership nor the local authorities were going to let the foreigners get out of hand. All available police lined the procession route, ostensibly to “clear the thoroughfare” for the marchers, and the strike leadership informed the foreigners who brought their national colors (possibly in an expression of Puskás’ “peasant uprising” mentality) that only the American flag was permitted to be flown, supposedly on the order of Pittsburgh Mayor McGee.62 If a dubious story is to be believed, shortly after Horvath’s death the “Unknown Committee” sent a letter to the State Constabulary (or some other force aligned with Pressed Steel) stating: “For every

61 It is interesting to note that Pressed Steel was alleged to have issued Colt automatics to its employees (Pittsburg Leader, 12 August 1909) and that Smith’s $2500 bail was posted by “C.W. Friend of the Pennsylvania Malleable Works” (National Labor Tribune, 19 August 1909). The Tribune was not noted for its typographical accuracy (Horvath’s name was misspelled “Marvath” in the same article), and Smith’s benefactor may have in fact been J.W. Friend, Frank Hoffstot’s longtime business partner (Ingham, 355).
62 Pittsburg Leader, 14 August 1909.
striker’s life you take, a trooper’s life will be taken.” It was clear that the strike situation was becoming increasingly polarized.

John Ingham places the decisive moment of fission at the discovery, in the week after Horvath's death, of dynamite in the hands of the foreign-born strikers. It was intended to blow up the ferry Steel Queen, which was engaged in bringing hundreds of Pearl Berghoff’s strikebreakers into the plant. Though a hopeful Pittsburgh Leader continued to report that most of the imported men were deserting as soon as they could, the company now had the police manpower to ignore the strikers’ pickets and to bring in men any time they wished. The “Big Six,” however, would not allow the foreign strikers to violently put an end to this use of Pressed Steel’s river entrance, and seized and sank the dynamite.\textsuperscript{64}

For many American workers and middle-class participants, this could no longer be a “respectable” strike. They had not signed on for violence. Indeed, many of them had not even signed on at the beginning of the strike, but were only out because the foreigners had precluded them from returning. They had stayed on strike in solidarity with the foreigners because they felt they were all working with the same objectives and methods in mind. Now, the tenuous coalition of native and immigrant forces was beginning to break down.

Adding to the Americans’ distress was the arrival on August 16 of General Organizer William E. Trautmann of the Industrial Workers of the World. The Leader reported:

The first trouble at any of the meetings on the mound occurred this morning. It was caused by the activity of Socialist agitators seeking to

\textsuperscript{63} Fred Thompson, The IWW: Its First Fifty Years (Chicago: Industrial Workers of the World, 1955), 43.
\textsuperscript{64} Pittsburgh Leader, 13-15 August 1909.
make proselytes to their opinions. A number of representatives of the Industrial Workers of the World, a Socialist organization, attempted to take charge of the meeting this morning and partially succeeded. These organizers were explaining their doctrines and trying to persuade strikers to adopt them, when several strikers interrupted and demanded that they be given information about the strike, instead of discourses on theories of society.

The speakers paid no attention, and about 300 strikers left the meeting. They went at once to headquarters and informed President C.A. Wise...Mr. Wise immediately went back with them and compelled the Socialists to desist. Mr. Wise afterward issued the following statement:

"Neither myself nor any member of the executive committee will permit Socialist organizers for any association or society to come here and take charge of our meetings. These meetings are held for the purpose of holding the men together and to explain to them the progress of the strike. We propose, and have now under way, plans for the formation of the Industrial Car Workers of the World. This will be our own organization, and we will immediately apply for a charter and feel fully capable of maintaining it. We want no socialism here."

Wise's remarks point to at least one reason why the foreigners would contact the IWW for leadership and support. They were intensely dissatisfied with the failure of the "Big Six" to get Pressed Steel to bargain with them as anything more than individuals. Wise also failed to mention that "our meetings" were now being held separately for American and foreign workers. The immigrants still met on the Indian Mound, but the Americans who lived on the North Side were holding their own gatherings apart from the mass.

A word should be said about the gatherings on the Indian Mound. This ridge, overlooking the Ohio River on the edge of town, one mile from the plant, was the site of almost daily mass meetings throughout the strike. Several thousand strikers and their families turned out to rally and hear reports, translated by a well-organized system of interpreters into half a dozen languages spoken by the various nationalities. The very existence of such a system of interpreters (none of whom, most likely, was native-born
American) points to an immigrant organization deeper than the two token foreigners (Takag and Pajlovits) on the “Big Six” committee. Indeed, it seems that the “Unknown Committee” was responsible for maintaining roving groups of pickets (both male and female), establishing a lookout and signal corps to alert the strikers if more strikebreakers approached the plant, and maintaining the two or three patrol boats the strikers had in their possession.66

Historian Philip Foner and contemporary reporter Louis Duchez were quick to emphasize the fact that several of the foreign strikers had strike and revolutionary experience in Europe: “many of the Hungarians on the [Unknown] committee had participated in the great railway strike in Hungary; the Russians had taken part in the “Bloody Sunday” massacre at St. Petersburg; the Swiss had participated in the railroad strike in Switzerland; the Italians in the resistance movement of Italy, and the Germans had been members of the “Metallarbeiter Verein (Metal Workers’ Industrial Union) of Germany.”67

Activists with such experiences were most likely aware of the existence of the IWW and of its message. Foner claims that three of the members of the “Unknown Committee” were actually Wobblies before the strike began, though this is unclear.68 The IWW offered an organizational principle – industrial unionism – as well as a strong belief in the ability of foreign-born workers to organize and strike effectively.69 More

65 *Pittsburg Leader*, 16 August 1909.
66 Ingham, 204; Foner 288; Levinson 78; Louis Duchez, “Victory at McKees Rocks,” *International Socialist Review*, 10 (October 1909), 293.
67 Foner, 287, paraphrasing Duchez, 295-296.
68 Foner, 288, citing Duchez, 295.
69 The IWW also set up parallel relief structure. Its small relief fund was intended to provide for workers at simultaneous strikes in Butler and New Castle, PA as well as McKees Rocks. The fund was under the supervision of one Albert Henyey, a McKees Rocks Wobbly. (*Industrial Worker* (Spokane), 26 August 1909.)
importantly, perhaps, the IWW did not belittle the foreign strikers, nor fear their occasional outbursts of violence. Instead, they viewed it as the natural response to the indignities and horrors that the immigrants had suffered. The response of their official organ, the *Industrial Worker*, to the violence of mid-August exemplified this:

The account of the affair, while distressing, is a reminder that the fighting spirit of the workers is not dead, and that the working people are realizing that they have no rights to life, liberty, or the pursuit of happiness unless they have the power themselves to enforce those rights. It is not for the parlor, kidglove revolutionist to preach meekness and “peaceful methods” to these brave workers who are fighting for their lives and to protect the honor of their families, nor for other working people to lay down hard and fast rules for those who are goaded and stung by tyranny and oppression!\(^7^0\)

Their leadership, however, constituted a shift to a most un-American sort of strike, one unacceptable to the progressive community at large.

All during the weeks around Steve Horvath’s death and the arrival of the IWW, Pressed Steel had been successful in bringing Berghoff strikebreakers to the plant while simultaneously evicting hundreds of strikers from their shacks in Presston. Though the Wobblies counseled nonviolence, events were coming to a breaking point. That breaking point occurred on Sunday, August 22, in what would later be called the “Bloody Sunday” riots.\(^7^1\)

The strikers, aroused from a restful day at 7 PM by reports of more strikebreakers approaching McKees Rocks by boat, rushed to O’Donovan’s Bridge. When one of the

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\(^7^0\) Ibid.

\(^7^1\) There had, in actuality, been increasing violence over the course of the weekend. On Friday, a man believed to be an ex-Berghoff strikebreaker threw a canister of nitroglycerin into the Pressed Steel lot, causing some structural damage. Minor rioting and two notable events marked Saturday. First, a sharpshooter shot out the searchlight that had been installed in the P.S.C. lot by the Constabulary to monitor the Ohio River. The official history of the Constabulary claims that “a noted long-distance shot [was] brought in from afar for this special business” (Mayo, 132). Second, a group of women organized a daring raid on Pressed Steel’s company restaurant, where they secured “three barrels of potatoes, a barrel of onions, a quantity of cooked meats, and several hundred loaves of bread” (*Pittsburg Leader*, 22 August
roving bands of pickets, checking streetcars for strikebreakers, happened upon Deputy Sheriff Harry Exley, the trouble began. Exley was infamous for being the agent of many of the evictions, and when he did not disembark the car, but instead pulled his revolver and said, “Get away or I’ll kill every last one of you!” he was mobbed and killed.

Fierce rioting continued throughout the night. Another streetcar, this time holding several off-duty Pennsylvania Constables was stopped and two of the troopers were killed. Gun battles raged all night, and by the next morning, the death toll was at six (three of them strikers), about a dozen were seriously injured, and many were wounded.

In the aftermath of “Bloody Sunday,” there was an intense police crackdown on the immigrants of McKees Rocks. Through the application of a January 1909 law preventing foreigners from owning deadly weapons, the constables were able to search every still-occupied house in Presston and Schoenville, and seized a number of knives, revolvers, and rifles. They also accosted foreigners and those associated with them on the street, and the sheriff’s deputies (who were chosen and employed by Pressed Steel and were mainly untrained in the use of firearms) were issued repeating rifles, which they carried on their rounds of the plant.

Chairman Wise, in the meantime, had physically distanced the executive committee from the foreign strikers by moving the strike headquarters across the river into Pittsburgh. At the same time, McKees Rocks businessmen, who had been selling

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1909). This seems to suggest that the Leader’s strike commissary was not wholly fulfilling the needs of the striking workers.

72 In fact, the last photograph taken of Exley, just hours before his death, was of him placing a baby buggy atop a pile of strikers’ belongings in the street (Pittsburgh Leader, 23 August 1909).

73 Pittsburgh Leader, 23 August 1909.

74 Pittsburgh Leader, 23 August 1909. It is impossible to estimate how many, since the strikers often spirited away their wounded rather than take them to the hospital.

75 Pittsburgh Leader, 25 August 1909.

76 Pittsburgh Leader, 23 August 1909.
goods to foreign strikers on credit, now felt “compelled” to end this aid because of the strain it put on their inventories. The immigrant strikers were losing their support in the progressive community and were being actively separated from the “good” Americans. Even a visit to the Indian Mound by Eugene Debs to address the foreigners could not rouse much more than a passing mention in the Leader.

Debs’ address attracted a crowd of almost 10,000 to the Indian Mound. He called the strike “the greatest labor fight in all my history in the labor movement...[It is] a harbinger of a new spirit among the unorganized, foreign-born workers in the mass-production industries who can see here in McKees Rocks the road on which they must travel – the road of industrial unionism.” He declared that the violence had not been caused by workers but by the company’s men who had been “hired to assassinate workmen.”

Amid the chaos of late August, however, there arose another chance for the Americans to reassert control over the strike. On the 20th of the month, a brick with a note attached was thrown out of the Pressed Steel stockade. The note read: “We are undergoing hardships. Don’t want to be here. We were brought here through lies and we want out. Can’t you help us? Signed, ‘The Gang.'” The executive committee, whose efforts at getting court-ordered arbitrators appointed were flagging, moved quickly to bring President Hoffstot up on charges of peonage. They were aided by the Austro-Hungarian vice-consul, since an escaped strikebreaker, Albert Vamos, was a Hungarian

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77 *Pittsburg Leader*, 29 August 1909.
78 *Pittsburg Leader*, 25 August 1909.
79 *New York Call*, 26 August 1909, quoted in Foner, 291.
80 *Pittsburg Leader*, 20 August 1909.
citizen and appealed to his government for help.\textsuperscript{81} The case brought a swift response from the federal government, and although Federal District Attorney John Jordan would only allow Pressed Steel, not Hoffstot himself, to be charged with wrongdoing, investigators led by Assistant Labor Commissioner H.W. Hoagland were soon entering the plant to ascertain conditions there.\textsuperscript{82}

Hoagland held several days of hearings, where testimony was presented that the strikebreakers had been virtual prisoners inside the plant, forced to work at gunpoint by the hired deputies and Berghoff's enforcers, led by "Big Sam" Cohen. These guards frequently abused the strikebreakers – one brought with him a shirt covered in his own blood from contusions caused by the deputies. They were quartered in squalid barracks inside the plant, and fed spoiled food. There were reports of widespread ptomaine poisoning. When the strikebreakers – many of whom were initially unaware that they were being brought to a labor dispute – attempted to leave, they were beaten and harassed, told they had to pay off the cost of their train fare to McKees Rocks, or thrown in the box car that Pressed Steel was using as a holding cell.\textsuperscript{83}

The horror stories emerging from the Pressed Steel plant\textsuperscript{84} and the violence of "Bloody Sunday" had turned public opinion against both Hoffstot and the immigrant workers. This left the Americans and the "Big Six" in the position of being the only "untainted" faction, and they exploited it to bring a quick end to the strike.\textsuperscript{85} Though peonage charges against Pressed Steel would never materialize, by September 2, lawyers

\textsuperscript{81} Pittsburg Leader, 20-22 August 1909.
\textsuperscript{82} Pittsburg Leader, 25 August 1909; Ingham, 367-368.
\textsuperscript{83} See Peonage in Western Pennsylvania.
\textsuperscript{84} There was even a rumor that three men (possibly three members of a contingent of foreign strikers who entered the plant in order to get the strikebreakers to leave work), were killed and cremated in the furnaces. (Pittsburg Leader, 29 August 1909.)
\textsuperscript{85} Ingham, 367.
for the company and for the “Big Six” were in secret deliberations, and the strikebreakers were told to vacate the plant.86

That Wise and the Americans were anxious to settle the strike is clear. On September 1, Wise made a statement to the Leader about the talks that his actions and events would soon belie: “We know all the verbal inducements being offered to individuals, but this will not do. They must be in writing and must include the men as a whole. I do not believe that there is a man who will return unless they all go back...In fact, we are rapidly Americanizing the foreigners and they seem to take well to the treatment.”87

Though their negotiations faced opposition from the IWW and its supporters, who accused them of capitulating to the company, they pressed ahead. By September 7, with the help of a visit from U.S. Commissioner for Labor Charles P. Neill, Chairman Wise announced on the Indian Mound that Pressed Steel had given in to most of the strikers’ demands. In fact, the company had only acquiesced to giving the strikers “practically” all that they wanted. Where the strikers wanted a restoration of the 1907 wage scale, they were promised a wage increase of 10 to 15 percent within 60 to 90 days. P.S.C. promised modification, not abolition of the pooling system, as demanded. Instead of being fired, the company’s chief of police, T. A. Farrell, was to be “suspended indefinitely.” The company promised that the wage rate was to be conspicuously posted in each department, and that grafting managers were to be discharged. For all of these promises, there was to

86 Pittsburg Leader, 2 September 1909.
87 Pittsburg Leader, 1 September 1909.
be no written agreement. As the Leader reported, “Company refuses to give written promise, but Manager Rider’s assurances are equivalent to a formal written agreement.”

In light of these dubious promises from a company that had practiced underhanded tactics since before the strike, the “Big Six” had to go to great lengths to engineer a victory among the men. The vote was held under the supervision of Wise and the Chamber of Commerce, and each worker had to present his Pressed Steel brass time check. However, when P.S.C. disbursed its last payroll during the strike, a paycheck that the striking immigrants sorely needed, the company confiscated more than 600 time checks, so the final vote count was 2,511 in favor and 12 against settlement, out of more than 5,000 strikers.

As another tactic for quelling resistance to the settlement, Burgess J. G. Steedle, who had been present for the ballot counting, was dispatched by Wise to deal with IWW leader William Trautmann. Steedle went to Wobbly headquarters on Chartiers Avenue with a policeman and arrested Trautmann on charges of “being a suspicious person” and “not a real organizer.” Trautmann’s place, however, was quickly filled by Wobbly organizer Joe Ettor, of later fame in the Lawrence, Massachusetts textile strike.

Over the course of the next week, as men were rehired by the thousands, it was increasingly clear that the company did not intend to keep its tenuous promises. On September 10, the Wobblies held a meeting on the Indian Mound for all of the men not yet rehired; there, they agreed to stay out on strike. They were joined on September 15 by several thousand of the rehired men, as the company reneged on its promises to

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88 *Pittsburg Leader*, 8 September 1909.
89 Ingham, 369; *Pittsburg Leader*, 8 September 1909; *National Labor Tribune*, 16 September 1909.
90 *National Labor Tribune*, 16 September 1909.
91 *Pittsburg Leader*, 10 September 1909.
suspend Chief Farrell and abolish Sunday labor. That morning, 4,500 men, mainly foreign-born, gathered at the Indian Mound where they repudiated Wise and the “Big Six,” and reorganized under a system of one representative striker from each nationality. Concurrently, the executive committee held its own separate meeting, where it decided to break this second strike by a show of patriotism.

A contingent of American workers led by Chairman Wise then went to the Indian Mound and attempted to break up the IWW-led meeting. Wise told Ettor and the foreigners that if they were unsatisfied with the strike leadership, they were perfectly free to elect new representatives – though they so disrupted the meeting that this was impossible. About 1,000 of the strikers left with the Americans. The remaining 3,500 were left to contemplate the crisis of patriotism that Wise had forced. Should they continue the strike? Should they repudiate the flag that the “Big Six” were using to carry the men, and all of the sympathies of Pittsburgh’s middle class, back into the arms of Pressed Steel?

The Leader was obviously on the side of the Big Six. Showing its belief that the Americans were the only true leaders of the strike, the paper editorialized: “The men trusted them. They believed them. They knew that the executive committee could be relied on, and so, controlled only by a spirit of affection and sublime confidence, they obeyed. Then came the many insidious ramifications, all tending toward disruption of

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92 Pittsburg Leader, 15 September 1909.
94 Ingham, 371.
95 The Leader showed the lengths to which public opinion had turned against the foreign strikers when it reported, in a completely accepting manner, Pressed Steel’s order for 800 to 900 skilled workers to fill the place of “the dissatisfied foreign element.” The workers were to be supplied by none other than the Pearl L. Berghoff Agency. (Pittsburg Leader, 16 September 1909)
the forces, and a consequent defeat. The committee was adamant. Its members met every issue squarely, grappled with every difficulty, and were victorious.\textsuperscript{96}

As the Americans marched back to work at 6:45 on the morning of the 17\textsuperscript{th}, they faced no opposition from the immigrants. The IWW picket line parted for the Americans, and the second strike was over.\textsuperscript{97}

\textsuperscript{96} \textit{Pittsburg Leader}, 9 September 1909.

\textsuperscript{97} This is not to say that the IWW simply gave up all hope. In his editorial letter to the \textit{Leader}, Joseph Ettor attempted to explain the Wobblies’ actions: “It was decided that in view of what had taken place in the forenoon [Wise’s disruption of their meeting on the Indian Mound], and the further fact that the so-called Americans had decided to return to work; therefore, in order to avoid inevitable trouble, the men decided with unanimity to resume operations on Friday morning, September 17.” (\textit{Pittsburg Leader}, 17 September 1909) Presumably, this meant that the IWW’s strategy was to consolidate its membership in the plant and to “strike on the job” until all of its wage and condition demands were met.
Was the strike a success? Pressed Steel, a company of the mighty Steel Trust, had in theory capitulated and immigrant workers, in theory, had triumphed. The strike had given the world an example of the possibilities for organizing foreign and native-born workers on an industrial basis. “The foreigner takes on a new, higher aspect after this demonstration of good qualities, and a certain type of business men and management goes deeper into eclipse,” wrote an enthusiastic reporter for the Survey. It also showed the worst possibilities for using patriotism and xenophobia as a lever to bring “the foreign elements” into line. The same Survey reporter characterized the immigrant strikers as an “undisciplined horde...Slavs, Poles, Russians, Croats and Italians, most of them of less than the ordinary intelligence or opportunity.”

After the close of the strike, if the situation at Pressed Steel did improve, it did not improve beyond the *status quo ante*. Having effectively split the American from the immigrant workers, and with C.A. Wise as a willing lieutenant, President Hoffstot and General Manager Rider were able to bring their labor force firmly under their control. When 250 heater boys were locked out on September 18 for protesting a wage cut, Wise prohibited a walkout on their behalf. On September 24, it was announced that the United Car Workers of the World, Benevolent Protective Association was to be the official organ for dealing with Pressed Steel, with C.A. Wise as its president. Its membership was estimated at 1,000, approximately the number of American workers in the plant. It was the equivalent of a company union for the skilled workers, and it effectively prevented any further cooperation between skilled and unskilled workers.

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89 Ingham, 371-372.
The Industrial Workers of the World attempted to maintain their foothold in the steel industry. Their Car Builders’ Industrial Union could claim several thousand members shortly after the strike, and it seemed the rest of the industry was ripe for organization after the Wobblies’ “victory.” They got quickly involved in labor disputes in Butler and New Castle, Pennsylvania, though in neither of these could they claim even the partial success that they had in McKees Rocks. The local at the Rocks continued on for several years, but the movement never gained enough momentum to fulfill the prediction of the Industrial Worker, one of the IWW’s official organs, that “Western Pennsylvania bids fair to be the storm center for the IWW and the working class of the country from now on.”

One commentator summarized the IWW’s most important activity in Pennsylvania as the manner “in which it anticipated the CIO...Both the IWW and the CIO came into being because the AFL ignored the needs of the semi-skilled and unskilled workers.”

The Wobblies, and Trautmann and Ettor in particular, learned valuable lessons in how to conduct a large-scale strike of mainly immigrant industrial workers that would serve them well in their later conflicts. Philip Foner states that during the 1912 Lawrence, Massachusetts textile workers’ strike, a circular was distributed by an anti-Wobbly group that said: “That the strike leaders’ methods in conducting the Lawrence strike were not new or experimental is shown by the history of the strikes against the

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100 Industrial Worker (Spokane), 9 September 1909, quoted in Melvyn Dubofsky, We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969), 206.
Pressed Steel Car Company at McKees Rocks, Pa. …[it] reveals the similarity in the methods of the IWW leaders there and in Lawrence during the recent strike.”102

It seems that all the progressive elements in the Pittsburgh community wanted out of the conflict was a rehabilitation of what they viewed as a poor corporate citizen. John Ingham writes that in the years following the strike, Pressed Steel undertook a vigorous campaign to reform its image by instituting playgrounds, athletic programs, and civic clubs in the town. They also began English classes for their foreign workers, something that must have satisfied progressive reformers like Paul Kellogg, who characterized the strike as one of “the half-assimilated, the half-Americanized, the half-skilled.”103

So, what does the McKees Rocks strike signify? How does it help us gain a fuller picture of steel in “the nonunion era?” First, it shows that immigrant workers were open to unionization and could be effective strikers within a framework sympathetic to their backgrounds and experiences, as the IWW was. Second, it displayed the gigantic obstacle that patriotism and anti-alien sentiment placed in the path of unified action. Melvyn Dubofsky stated the problem thus:

The skilled Americans apparently despised the immigrants as dirty aliens and detested the Wobblies as dangerous subversives. They preferred, if possible, to collaborate with management. Given the anti-union structure of the steel industry and its mill towns, any labor union would have found it difficult to maintain stable organization among the immigrants. McKees Rocks proved that the IWW was not the union to do it, for it lacked the money, the men, and the administrative ability. Yet the IWW left an idea as its legacy. In the future steel workers would strive for the goal of industrial unionism that cut across the lines of nationality and skill. But they would have to wait for a more opportune time and better labor leadership to achieve that elusive ideal.104

102 Foner 305.
103 Kellogg, 656.
104 Dubofsky 209.
Progressive Pittsburghers were not even remotely full-blown supporters of organized labor. They were willing to support workers insofar as the workers were led by responsible American workers, not uncontrollable foreigners or socialist agitators. Their reactions to the foreign workers' initiatives for self-government during the strike were unfavorable at least and hostile at greatest. However, they also did not view kindly the heavy-handed tactics of the Pressed Steel Car Company, which refused to abide by the standards of business ethics and fair dealing which the middle class saw as appropriate. They were willing both to lend support to the strikers and undertake actions on their own initiative, such as the Public Defense Association's suit for an injunction against strike violence, to further their agenda. This is a more active role for this community than has been previously described; however, in the absence of real victory for their allies, they seemed willing to accept Pressed Steel's self-imposed reforms that restored a semblance of respectability to their business dealings.

In sum, the conflict at McKees Rocks opened a brief window of opportunity for a broad coalition of forces to attain victory over a seemingly invulnerable foe. However, the solidarity formed between immigrants, native workers, and community reformers was a tenuous one, based on the subordination of the first group to the interests of the other two. Thus, it was not hard for the groups to fragment and lose the moment. The course of action for present-day movements suggested by the strike is that coalition efforts along these lines must be more accepting of the beliefs and dignity of all members, and that leadership of such an effort must be well-organized and inclusive of all involved groups. If such an effort were to be coordinated and carried out, it is difficult to think of a force that could stand unchallenged against it.
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