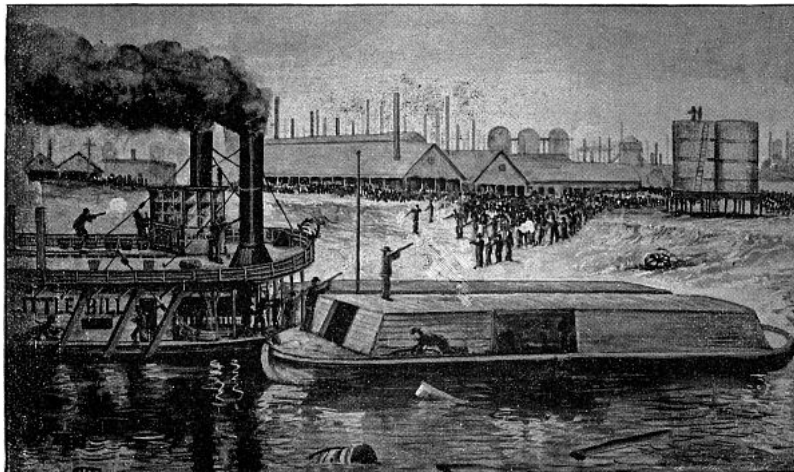


The Homestead Strike

BY BILL BIGELOW AND NORM DIAMOND

In Unit Two of *The Power in Our Hands*, students looked primarily at management initiatives. Now we turn to workers' responses. Is solidarity possible? Can workers of different backgrounds and at different levels in the workplace hierarchy unite? In the [Organic Goodie Simulation](#), our students are sometimes skeptical about the possibility of people working together when at least their short-term interests appear to be in conflict. Homestead is a historical test case — and maybe revelation — for such skepticism.

In this activity, students begin to explore some of the themes in subsequent lessons they encounter in *The Power in Our Hands*: different types of unions; the role of government intervention; new capital formations that stimulated industry-wide organization among workers.



The battle of the landing of the barges with the Pinkertons against the strikers at the Homestead Strike of 1892. Public domain.

Goals / Objectives

1. Students will explore some of the reasons for, and results of, industrial reorganization in the late 1800s.
2. Students will gain an understanding of the conflicts between, and common interests among, skilled and unskilled workers at the turn of the century.
3. Students will develop an appreciation of some of the difficulties associated with early craft unionism.
4. Students will explore the conflict between immigrants and native-born Americans at the turn of the century.

Materials Needed

- Student Handout A: The Homestead Strike
- Student Handout B: Skilled Worker
- Student Handout C: Unskilled Worker
- Secret Student Handout: Company Spy
- Student Handout D: Homestead Strike: The Outcome

Time Required

- Approximately one class period and two homework assignments.

Procedure

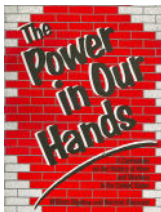
1. Distribute Student Handout A: The Homestead Strike. Assign students to complete the reading and answer the accompanying questions. A successful role play requires that students thoroughly understand the issues in the activity, so it's important that they grasp the content of the reading. You know your students best, but it may be a good idea to review this reading aloud. Also, we recommend reading the Zinn Education Project's "[How to — and How Not to — Teach Role Plays](#)" before leading any role play.
2. Discuss the questions on the reading.
3. Divide the class into two groups, skilled and unskilled, roughly proportional in size to those two groups at Homestead: 20 percent skilled, 80 percent unskilled. Give each student a copy of the appropriate role (Handout B or C). Note that we use the terms skilled and unskilled. Of course, these terms refer strictly to the work at Homestead. So-called unskilled workers had lots of skills, just not those required in the production of steel.
4. Choose a student in the unskilled workers group who is confident speaking in front of others, and inconspicuously give this person the Company Spy role.
5. Have the two groups, skilled and unskilled, meet separately for about 10 minutes to discuss and answer their respective questions. (The spy should meet with the unskilled.) Students may answer the questions verbally or in writing. Stress to both groups that they may choose to reach consensus as a group on their opinions, but that they do not have to. As long as students act consistently with their roles, individuals may disagree.
6. Call the "mass meeting" to order. Explain that you are a retired worker, respected by skilled and unskilled alike, whom the union has asked to chair the meeting. Your role during the meeting is to ask questions and ensure that each side presents its ideas. (See Homestead Strike: Notes to the Teacher for a list of some arguments that should come out of the discussion.)
7. At the end of the meeting, after everyone has had a chance to express their opinions, have all the workers vote on whether or not to support the strike.
8. Ask students to step out of their roles to discuss the role play. The following questions could be used as the basis for discussion, or for a writing assignment:
 - How did you feel toward members of the other group during the meeting?
 - Did people play their roles realistically?
 - *Unskilled*: What led you to reach your decision? Which arguments were most convincing? What might have made you decide differently?
 - *Skilled*: How well were you able to predict the unskilled workers' doubts? Do you feel that you spoke to these doubts adequately? How would you explain your success or lack of success in convincing people? What else could you have done?
 - What role did (name of the spy) play in the discussion? Did you suspect that they were being paid by the company? Why or why not?
 - If this were a real situation, what do you think would have happened after the meeting? Why?
 - Thinking over the role play as a whole, what would you say made it hard to get together? What made it easy?
9. Distribute Student Handout D: Homestead Strike: The Outcome. Students should complete the reading and answer the questions in class or for homework.

After students complete the homework, ask for their reactions to the agreement of the unskilled to support the skilled workers. Often, students in the role play will not be able to unite or will have difficulty arriving

at an agreement. If this has been the case, explore with students why they had more difficulty than the Homestead workers had in real life. Could it have anything to do with students' sense of people's ability to stick together even when they have important differences, as we examined in the Organic Goodie lesson? What were the important factors uniting the skilled and unskilled workers at Homestead?

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The Homestead Strike

Arguments in favor of the unskilled workers supporting the strike

1. Changes planned by management might affect unskilled workers as well:
 - their wages, pegged to those of the skilled workers, would probably also be cut
 - work more monotonous
 - less autonomy, ability to regulate pace, make any decisions
 - speed-up
 - longer hours
 - layoffs, as productivity increases
 - worsened safety conditions with speed-up
2. Only chance of defeating these plans lies in unity.
3. If the strike fails, the unskilled workers would lose all hope of becoming skilled workers.
4. If the unskilled workers support the strike, they may be able to count on the skilled workers for help in the future.
5. If the strike is defeated, unskilled workers lose any chance of organizing or of joining a union in the days ahead. Thus they give up hope of improved conditions and protection and the means for securing more control over working conditions.
6. To scab would mean bitterness, possibly even violence from union members.
7. The solidarity between skilled and unskilled workers built during the course of the strike could provide the basis for a unified movement for changes that would be in all workers' interests.

Arguments against unskilled supporting the strike

1. Unskilled have much to lose if they strike:
 - easier to replace than skilled workers
 - could be evicted from company houses
 - could be blacklisted
 - could suffer violence at hands of company
2. Gains from striking unclear:
 - strike could fail
 - skilled could sell them out
 - skilled have never looked out for unskilled in past, so why do so now
 - skilled use ethnic slurs against them
3. Changes in the work process might even create more jobs for them — if they were content to remain unskilled.

Secret Student Handout

Company Spy

You have a special role. You are not only an unskilled worker, but also a company spy. Besides gathering information, you have been instructed (and well paid) to do whatever you can to sabotage the strike by setting the groups against each other and by trying to convince the unskilled not to support the strikers.

Do not reveal your role unless you are willing to give up your handsome paycheck.

Student Handout A

The Homestead Strike

At the outbreak of the strike, there were two different groups of workers in Andrew Carnegie's steel mill in Homestead, Pennsylvania, in 1892.

The 800 skilled workers were in the minority at the mill, which employed 3,800 men. They were members of a craft union, the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers, which had helped them gain wages ranging from \$35 to \$70 a week and an eight-hour day. It had also helped them gain an important role in making decisions about their working conditions. Committees of workers in each department decided who did what work and regulated many details of running the plant. Through their knowledge and organization, these committees decided everything, from what materials to use to how to get work done. Most of the skilled workers were native-born Americans whose ancestors came from countries in Northern Europe, especially Great Britain and Germany.

But the great majority of workers at Homestead were unskilled. They did the dirty work at the plant: lifting, shoveling, pushing. They worked a 12-hour day with only two vacation days a year and earned under \$10 a week. The union had little interest in organizing these people. Their view was: Why bother when we, the skilled workers, are the most important part of the process of making steel? They thought their union was powerful enough without the unskilled.

Furthermore, most of the unskilled workers were recent immigrants — peasants from Eastern Europe who could not speak English well. Some of the union members realized from their experiences that all workers cooperating together could run the country's industries without the need for bosses. They called their vision a "cooperative commonwealth." Most of the skilled workers, however, did not want to associate with the foreign newcomers.

Still, all the workers had important things in common. The accident rate in the steel mills at that time was tremendous. Deaths and injuries



"Blast Furnace" by Thomas Hart Benton, Whitney Museum of American Art

from explosions, burnings, asphyxiation, electric shocks, falls, crushing, and other causes were frequent. Although skilled and unskilled workers lived in different neighborhoods, their houses were often owned by the company. People who opposed management could be evicted without warning. Losing one's job automatically meant losing one's home.

The skilled workers had the union to defend them from the employer; the unskilled did not.

In 1892, the union contract was about to expire. Three years earlier, Carnegie had tried to eliminate the union and failed. To make the maximum profits, he needed to tighten control over the work process. Like other industrialists around the country, Carnegie had begun laying plans to reorganize his steel mill. Complex tasks, until then done by skilled workers, were to be broken down into single motions and divided among lower-paid, unskilled people. Machines were to

be brought in. Those troublesome skilled workers would no longer be needed, the union would be eliminated, and productivity and profits would soar.

Carnegie imported a professional union-buster, Henry Clay Frick, to run the Homestead plant and gave him the following policy statement: “There has been forced upon this Firm the question whether its Works are to be run ‘Union’ or ‘Non-Union.’ As the vast majority of our employees are Non-Union, the Firm has decided that the minority must give place to the majority. These works, therefore, will be necessarily Non-Union after the expiration of the present agreement. . . . This action is not taken in any spirit of hostility to labor organizations, but every man will see that the Firm cannot run Union and Non-Union. It must be one or the other.”

Frick built a 12-foot-high fence, three miles long, around the entire plant, topped it with barbed wire, and bored holes for guns every 25 feet. Then he gave the workers an ultimatum: take a pay cut — even though business was still booming in the steel industry — or the union will be broken. Two days before the old contract was to end, he closed the mill and locked out the workers. In response, the union’s advisory committee voted to strike.

The Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers called a meeting of all the workers at the plant. Their goal: to win the support of the unskilled workers for their strike. If everyone would agree not to work at the mill during the strike, then Frick would have a hard time keeping it running. But, if the unskilled went to work as scabs, the strike would be lost.

The big question was: Would the unskilled workers support the strike?

Questions

1. Why does Carnegie want to get rid of the union at Homestead?
2. What do the skilled and unskilled workers have in common?
3. What differences are there between these workers?
4. What could the unskilled workers lose from supporting the strike? What could they gain?
5. How can the skilled workers get the unskilled workers to support the strike?

Student Handout B

Skilled Worker

You are proud to be a member of the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers. With 24,000 members, it is the most powerful craft union in the United States. Nobody pushes around a member of the Amalgamated.

You've worked here in Homestead for about 15 years. You have a highly skilled job as a puddler in the steel-making process, a skill taught to you by your uncle. You generally work an eight-hour day, six days a week. You earn from \$35 to \$70 a week, depending on the price of steel. (If steel prices go up, your wages go up — when prices go down, wages go down.) But even \$35 a week is great compared to what unskilled workers earn: They make less than \$10 a week.

In some ways it's really the skilled workers who run the Homestead works. We say, "Carnegie may know how to make money, but the skilled workers know how to make steel." Even if you don't own the mill, you're proud of the control and independence that skilled workers have. It's your skill and control that keep wages up.

For a lot of reasons, you're glad to be an American. For one thing, you speak English, like most people in the country. Sometimes you feel there are about a thousand different languages at Homestead. But mostly you're glad because all the good jobs go to the Americans. If you were an unskilled Hungarian or Romanian, not only would you have the heaviest, dirtiest job, but you'd live in the most crowded, unsanitary housing. If the unskilled were permitted to join the union, not only might they outnumber you, but they might make it easier for the bosses to lower the wage scale.

Even though you look down on the unskilled foreigners, you depend on them. As a skilled puddler, you need unskilled helpers. Homestead is a dangerous place for everybody, so all the workers — skilled and unskilled — need to look out for each other. Hundreds of people are killed or injured in the steel industry every year.

You will soon be attending the mass meeting called by the Amalgamated. It will be your job to convince the unskilled workers to support the strike. At the conclusion of the mass meeting there will be a vote to determine if the unskilled workers will support the strike,

For the next period of time, you will meet with other skilled workers so that you can come up with arguments as to why the unskilled should join the strike. In your discussion, consider the following questions:

1. What do you have in common with the unskilled workers? What differences are there?
2. What doubts might the unskilled workers have about the strike?
3. What arguments could you give to convince the unskilled to support you?
4. What changes could you make in your behavior or in your strike plans that might convince skeptical unskilled workers? Think about what you could reasonably offer to persuade them to join you on strike.

Student Handout C

Unskilled Worker

You are an unskilled worker at Andrew Carnegie's Homestead steel works. You have only been in the United States for about four years. In your native village, when times were rough, it was common for different families and different workers to help each other out. As the rough times became more frequent, you and your family left Hungary and came to America, hoping for a better life.

Hearing there was work in the steel mills, you left New York City and headed for Pennsylvania. You had never seen a factory like the one you saw at Homestead; huge and loud, with smoke belching everywhere. And, sure enough, you were hired right away.

For four years you've put up with this life. A work week is six, sometimes seven, days. Most days you work 12 hours, averaging about 14 cents an hour. This comes out to a little less than \$10 a week!

Though you work for Andrew Carnegie, your immediate boss is really one of the skilled workers at the mill. You are considered his unskilled helper. He is paid a certain amount for every ton of steel he makes — the more steel he makes the more he gets paid. And the more he gets paid, the more you get. But when his wages go down, yours go down too.

The skilled workers act superior because they were born in America, speak English, and know more about the technical aspects of the work. They also think of themselves as superior because they're organized into a union. However, they don't want you to belong. "The union is for us skilled workers" is their attitude. Mostly, you socialize with other Hungarians, rather than with Americans.

But although the skilled workers hold themselves above the unskilled, the work is dangerous for everyone. Hundreds of people are killed or injured in the steel industry each year, so you need to help and watch out for one another while you work.

Your living conditions are bad: two rooms, poor sanitation, not enough money for good food, for nice clothes and furniture or to take vacations or to educate your children. What would you do if you made any less money?

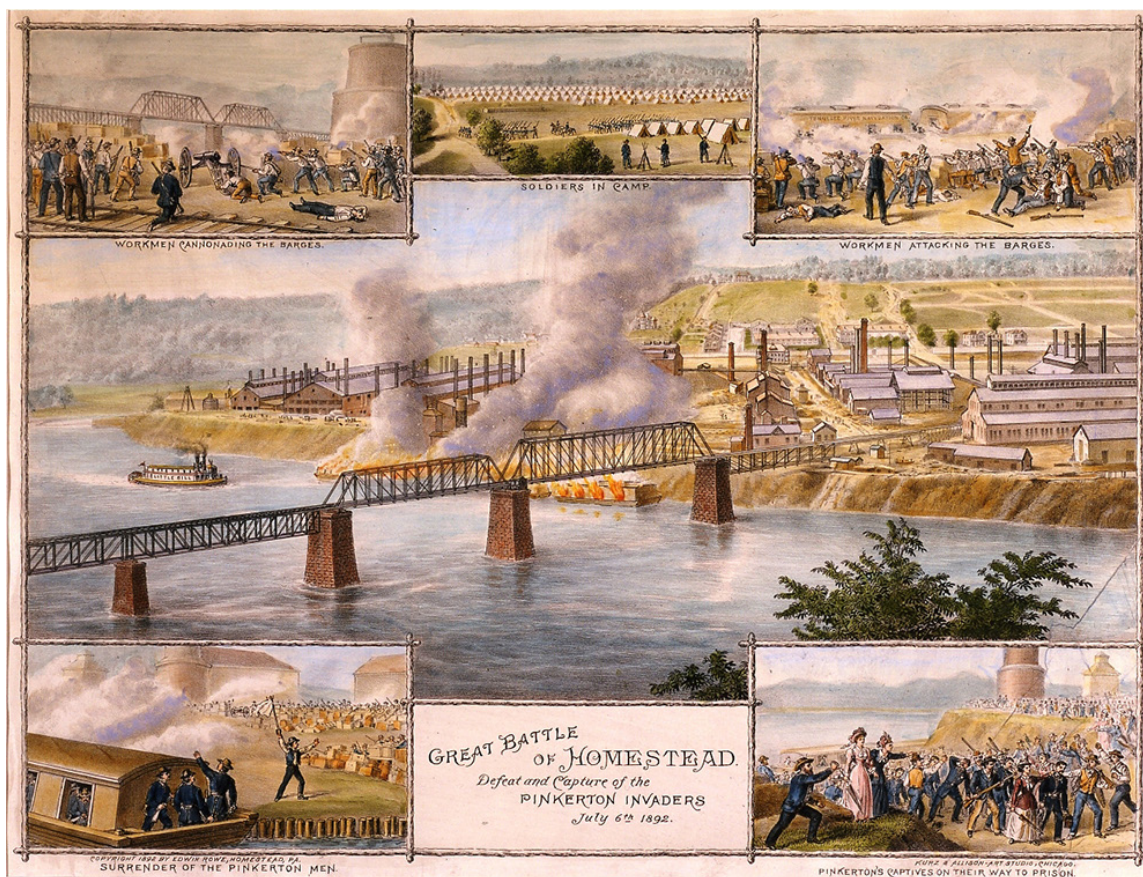
Soon you will be attending the mass meeting called by the union. The skilled workers will try to convince you to support the strike. At the conclusion of the mass meeting there will be a vote to determine if the unskilled workers will support the strike.

For the next period of time, you will meet with other unskilled workers. Talk about your feelings toward the union and the strike. In your discussion, consider the following questions:

1. What do you have in common with the skilled workers? What differences are there between you?
2. How could you benefit from supporting the strike? How could you lose? What other pros or cons can you think of?
3. What questions could you ask of the skilled workers? What demands could you make?

Student Handout D

Homestead Strike: The Outcome



Source: Heinz History Center museum collections

At the mass meeting on June 30, 1892, more than 3,000 of the plant's workers jammed into the Homestead Opera House. After discussion, they overwhelmingly voted to support each other and to strike.

A woman who interviewed some of the participants wrote: "The strike began June 30. The Association, which had been so recently indifferent to the conditions of the day men [unskilled workers], now realized, since many of the latter could be put into the skilled positions, that the strike could not be won without their assistance. A call was thereupon issued for them to strike, and the day men, with everything to lose and almost nothing to gain, went out too, and remained faithful

supporters to the end."

Henry Clay Frick, the Homestead manager, hired a private army of hundreds of armed mercenaries to force the strikers back to work. Local sheriffs' deputies had been unwilling to oppose the strikers. When Frick's army was beaten by the workers, with people killed on both sides, the governor of Pennsylvania sent in the state militia. Upon seeing that the troops were friendly to the workers, the general in charge forbade them to talk with strikers or even to walk in the town unless supervised by an officer. The general wrote, "[The workers] believe the works are theirs quite as much as Carnegie's."

Strikebreakers were brought in from different

parts of the country, and gradually production resumed. Often they weren't told of their destination until they arrived; many times they were brought in sealed railroad cars after having signed up to go to other Carnegie plants. A number of these men escaped along the way. Afraid for their own safety or unwilling to take other workers' jobs, forced to live inside the plant and work in poor conditions, some managed to get away after arriving.

Still, the workers stayed out on strike. Legal charges were brought against almost 200 of them for crimes that included treason against the state of Pennsylvania. Found innocent by juries on one set of charges, they were immediately rearrested and tried for other supposed crimes. Ultimately, no striker was ever found guilty of any charge, but the constant prosecutions took the money they had saved for the strike, demoralized them, and kept their leadership locked up during crucial times.

Carnegie owned other mills and was able to continue to produce and sell steel while the strike went on. Workers in other mills also struck, briefly, in solidarity with the Homestead workers. Nevertheless, after four and a half months the strike was lost. With winter approaching, the strikers were forced to return to work on Frick's terms.

Having beaten the union, it was relatively easy for Carnegie and the rest of the steel corporations to introduce changes in work practices and to bring in new machinery. At Homestead, wages were cut, hours were increased, and the number of workers employed was drastically reduced.

Carnegie and Frick decided to change more than work relations at Homestead. They thought that if they could influence the private lives of the workers in their mills, they would have a more obedient workforce. They did this by encouraging

the workers to marry and take on family responsibilities. Instead of renting houses and thus controlling workers through the threat of eviction, they now would sell the houses. Owning a home, workers would be tied to their jobs and would have to keep up house payments.

This was a time when just a few corporations came to own many of the steel mills. There were attempts in other mills to strike; however, the union still excluded the unskilled, so the workers seldom agreed to follow the leadership of the skilled. Even when there was solidarity between skilled and unskilled workers in one mill, the corporations were able to shift production to other mills and wait out a strike. Within 10 years, Carnegie Steel merged with other corporations to become United States Steel, a company that controlled 60 percent of the entire industry.

*Margaret Byington, *Homestead: The Household of a Mill Town* (New York, 1909-1914), p. 9.

Questions

1. Based on the outcome of your role play, does the actual decision of the unskilled workers at Homestead to support the strike surprise you? Why or why not?
2. What are the reasons the strike was not successful? Think of the actions taken by both Frick and the government.
3. (a) As a result of their victory, what changes were Carnegie and Frick able to introduce in the workplace (feel free to use what you know from earlier lessons) and in the community? (b) Why did they want these changes?