

Labor History: Homestead

By Ed Leavy

Andrew Carnegie and Henry Clay Frick are still remembered today, 95 years after their deaths. Hugh O'Donnell is not. This is not surprising, since Carnegie used the massive fortune he earned in the steel industry to build hundreds of libraries, Carnegie Hall, and Carnegie Mellon University; Frick bequeathed the world's largest privately owned art collection to New York City to form the Frick Museum. O'Donnell was a man who worked in the steel mills and did his best to represent his coworkers when Carnegie and Frick decided to suppress wages and break the union. When the strike at the Homestead Mill was over, 12 people were dead, the union was eliminated, workers saw their wages and the quality of their working conditions dramatically decreased, O'Donnell was injured and blackballed from any employment, and Frick and Carnegie went from being unimaginably rich to unimaginably richer.

The price of steel dropped dramatically in 1892, and although Carnegie Steel remained profitable the company looked to use this temporary downturn in profits as a way to leverage employee concessions. The workers received wages based on the price of steel for the year; when it was \$35 a ton (as it had been the previous year) wages went up, and when it decreased wages went down. The workers wanted to maintain a "floor" of \$25 a ton, so that there would be no further decreases when it went below that; the company wanted to move the floor to \$22 a ton. Additionally, the company wanted to set the price for the year on January 1, when steel prices were usually at a low point, from the established practice of establishing the cost in August. As Carnegie, who was away in Scotland and had turned over the daily operations of the company to Frick, made clear in his letters, he also wanted to destroy the union. He pledged to support Frick in however he chose to deal with the issue, knowing that Frick was legendarily confrontational in his business dealings.

Though only a small percentage of the workers were actually in the union, the rest of the workers joined them and went out on strike. Hugh O'Donnell, a skilled roller in the mill, was elected chairman of the advisory committee that would organize the strike. The workers, who viewed the factory where they worked twelve hours a day as theirs, surrounded the facility for weeks to prevent looting and, not coincidentally, scab workers. As weeks dragged on, Frick hired a group of workers from Illinois. He had them brought to the factory by boat, accompanied by detectives from the Pinkerton agency; the Pinkertons had gained fame as strikebreakers in often violent confrontations. The boat arrived early in the morning, but if Frick had been counting on surprise he was mistaken. An alarm was sounded, and the entire town headed to the river. They followed the boat as it was about to dock, knocking down a fence and going on to company property. As the boat docked, both workers and Pinkerton agents began yelling threats at one another.

Hugh O'Donnell stepped forward and tried to take control of the situation. "We, the workers in these mills, are peaceably inclined. We have not damaged any property, and we do not intend to. If you send a committee with us, we will take them through the works... and promise them a safe return to their boats. But in the name of God and humanity, don't attempt to land! Don't attempt to enter these works by force."

Captain Heinde, leader of the Pinkerton force, was firm. "We don't wish to shed blood, but... if you men don't withdraw, we will mow every one of you down and enter in spite of you. You had better disperse, for land we will." As usual in these cases, it is unclear who fired the first shot, but soon two detectives and two workers had been shot. When O'Donnell raised his hand in an attempt to calm down the frenzied crowd, he too was shot and wounded. An all-out battle erupted; when the Pinkertons finally surrendered at the end of the day, nine strikers and three Pinkertons lay dead. O'Donnell helped the other Pinkertons and the scab workers leave town in relative safety, and the strikers declared victory.

Their win was short-lived. Frick was later shot and wounded by an anarchist who had been following the strike in the newspapers; though the shooter had no connection to the strikers, the workers began to be associated with dangerous radicals. The Governor of Pennsylvania used the battle with the Pinkertons and the assassination attempt to justify calling in the militia, and thus ensure that scab workers could begin working in the mills. Strike leaders such as O'Donnell were arrested for murder and, somehow, treason. O'Donnell saw the writing on the wall, and encouraged the men to return to their jobs; the strike was lost, and the union broken. The workers ended up with the wage structure originally proposed by Frick and Carnegie. A dangerous, difficult job became much worse.

Frick and Carnegie became among the wealthiest men in the world, but their partnership frayed. Carnegie, whom I find one of history's biggest hypocrites, blamed Frick for the violence. Frick resented Carnegie's protestations of innocence, since Carnegie had supported him every step. O'Donnell, meanwhile, was a broken man. Though he was acquitted on all charges, the trials took a great financial and emotional toll. He was blacklisted from all area companies for his role in the strike, and he was also despised by his former coworkers for his inability to get them what they wanted. He has been forgotten by history because he was neither a hero nor a villain; he did his best to help his fellow workers, but was defeated by a system and men too powerful to defeat.

Most of the information for this article came from Meet You in Hell by Les Standiford.