A Strike in the Progressive Era: McKees Rocks, 1909

The attitude of the Progressive Movement of the early twentieth century toward labor has been variously interpreted. Some historians have seen it as friendly toward organized labor while others have found it to be quite hostile. This confusion, partially caused by ambivalence in progressive thinking, may be clarified by a study of community reactions to labor disputes. For example, the strike at McKees Rocks in 1909, used as a case study on community response to a strike and on community reactions to the techniques used by a large industrial concern to achieve labor stability, sheds light on the progressive attitude in Pittsburgh.

McKees Rocks is one of the typical mill towns that line the river banks in the Pittsburgh vicinity. In 1910, it had a population of 14,702, an increase of more than 8,000 since 1900. Only 4,218 persons were native born of native-American parents; 4,388 were native born of foreign parentage; 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.

1 Generally historians have tended to ignore the progressives' attitude toward labor or have dismissed the whole issue with vague, one-sentence generalizations. A few historians, however, have tried to delve more deeply. Several feel that the progressives were friendly toward labor and often see a direct line between the labor ideas of progressives and those of New Dealers. See Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Crisis of the Old Order (Boston, 1957), 23-25; James M. Burns, Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox (New York, 1956), 42; Charles and Mary Beard, The Rise of American Civilization (New York, 1933), 350; Arthur S. Link, American Epoch (New York, 1955), 72; Eric Goldman, Rendezvous with Destiny (New York, 1955), 60. Several other historians have viewed the progressives as basically hostile to the labor movement. See George Mowry, The Era of Theodore Roosevelt (New York, 1958), 102-103; Samuel P. Hays, The Response to Industrialism (Chicago, 1957), 85-86; William A. Williams, Contours of American History (Cleveland, 1961), 396. Richard Hofstadter, in his Age of Reform (New York, 1955), 241-242, arrives at conclusions closely paralleled by those in this article. He concludes that if unionism was of no more than moderate strength and represented middle-class aspirations of native workers and of business unionism, it was grudgingly accepted by the progressives.

In 1907, it was also one of the leading manufacturing centers in the county with an imposing list of steel fabricating plants employing 11,933 people. Its immigrants were noticeably segregated into their own community, chiefly in the “Bottoms” section along the Ohio River and in Presston, the company town of Pressed Steel Car Company, which was also situated along the river. The native Americans lived to the south on the higher ground, or across the river in North Side Pittsburgh. There was very little social contact between immigrant and native American at this time.

The McKees Rocks plant of Pressed Steel Car Company had been set up in 1899, the company itself being formed from a merger that year of the two top car building companies in the United States—the Fox Company and the Schoen Pressed Steel Car Company. The Fox Company, an English-owned firm whose star salesman was the almost legendary “Diamond Jim” Brady, had enjoyed a virtual monopoly in the making of freight cars until Charles T. Schoen, a former Philadelphia letter carrier, founded his concern. Schoen Pressed Steel proceeded to win so large a share of the market that Brady saw the wisdom of merging his Fox Company with Schoen to form the Pressed Steel Car Company, Charles T. Schoen serving as President and Brady as executive salesman. Almost from the moment the new plant opened in 1899 it was beset with labor difficulties which kept it from attaining its expected position in American industry. The attitude of management toward workers was notorious, and by 1901 had become so heavy handed that the American Manufacturer and Iron World, owned by the National Steel Company, commented on January 31 of that year:

One gross mistake the Pressed Steel Car Company has made is apparent. It has turned almost every man in its employ against it . . . [this] is evidenced by the numerous strikes among PSC workers . . . if the directors of the PSC company will impress upon their officials that laborers

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5 Pittsburgh Bulletin-Index, Mar. 12, 1936.
should be treated as human beings instead of like chattels, we believe the PSC company would assume its proper position in the financial world. . . . There is no cordiality between the company and its men, with disorganization of this kind the company cannot make the kind of showing it should in the financial world.

It was within the context of these difficulties that a new group of owners took control. In 1901, Brady needed money for a trip to Europe, so he sold his shares in Pressed Steel Car on the open market. They were quietly bought in by two men, Frank N. Hoffstat and James W. Friend, who enjoyed the financial backing of Henry Phipps of Carnegie Steel. As soon as Hoffstat and Friend gained a controlling interest in the company, they ousted Schoen, Brady, and the other officers.6

Hoffstat, the new president of Pressed Steel Car, was the forty-eight-year-old son of a prosperous leather merchant and banker of German descent. At the age of nineteen he had joined his father in the leather business, and in the early 1880’s he had formed a lifelong business partnership with James W. Friend. In 1886, these two young men bought out the iron and steel firm of Graff, Bennett, and Company, and in 1887 they purchased control of Clinton Iron and Steel Company. Then, in 1901, Hoffstat and Friend took over the Pressed Steel Car Company, of which Hoffstat was to be president until 1934. Hoffstat was also president of the German National Bank of Allegheny and was an investor in extensive coal lands, which he later sold to the major steel companies. In the early 1900’s, he moved his residence to New York City, where he died on December 25, 1938.7

The major problem which faced Hoffstat and Friend in 1901 was the solution to the labor difficulties which had been plaguing Pressed Steel Car. To this end, Hoffstat very early began to apply the principles of scientific management to the plant, ideas which were to make the company one of the most profitable ventures in the railroad industry.8 His most important managerial innovation was the institu-

6 Ibid.
7 National Cyclopedia of Biography (New York, 1945), XXXII, 464.
8 Between 1906 and 1931, Pressed Steel Car paid out $38,000,000 in dividends to its stockholders. Pittsburgh Press, Jan. 22, 1936.
tion of the track, or assembly line, system of production,\(^9\) a system by which electric cranes picked up the railroad car frames and ran them along a track while piece by piece the cars were put together and riveted, so that a completed car rolled off at the other end of the track. There were perhaps twelve positions on the track, and at each position a group of men performed one step of the process.\(^10\)

To accompany the track system, Hoffstot began to pay unskilled workers, who were mainly foreigners and who had caused most of the early labor disturbances, by straight piece work. The result was a distinct improvement in weekly earnings and a cessation of labor troubles in the plant for some time.\(^11\) But in 1909 the pooling system of wages was devised by Hoffstot as part of the track system of production.

The system had been such that if any one group of men was slow the whole line was slowed down and the men lost time. But as long as the men were on straight piece work it did not materially affect their earnings. With the pooling system of wages, on the other hand, all the men’s earnings on the track were to be pooled and divided equally. From a manager’s point of view the pooling system was ideal: it made each man and each group of men their own monitors in keeping up speed and discipline. But the men were often forced to work at a feverish pace; they were responsible for mistakes made either by another gang, or by company foremen, which reduced their weekly earnings; and, finally, they had no way of knowing what was due to them since the company refused to post the rates.\(^12\) It was this rigorous but logical extension of the ideas of scientific management which led directly to the McKees Rocks strike of 1909.

One of the greatest problems Pressed Steel Car had to deal with was the division of its work force between native- and foreign-born workmen. The plant itself was completely nonunion, and had been so

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\(^9\) It should perhaps be emphasized that Frederick W. Taylor, the eminent efficiency engineer and proponent of scientific management, would probably not have approved of Pressed Steel’s scientific management plans. But the plan does represent one of the many variations and distortions which grew out of the Taylor system.


\(^11\) Ibid., 659–660.

for many years. Within the plant there were about 1,200 skilled American-born, English-speaking workmen who were employed in the machine shops, axle shops, carpenter shop, or who were electricians or crane operators. At the time of the strike in 1909 there were also about 3,500 semiskilled and unskilled immigrants in the plant. Besides these, since the plant was operating at only about half force, there were also some 2,000 to 3,000 additional men, mainly unskilled immigrants, who made up the company’s labor pool. Many of these were to join the strikers’ ranks during the 1909 dispute.

Perhaps the most important of the early labor disturbances at Pressed Steel had occurred in the summer of 1900, when the company had announced a cut in riveters’ wages from $2.50 a day to $1.90. As a result, about 200 of the foreign-born riveters walked off the job. What made the strike especially dangerous for the company was that the Knights of Labor took advantage of the unrest to organize a lodge in the plant, the first attempt at any organization of its workers. The company moved rapidly through injunctions against the troublemakers which smashed the fledgling union. The 200 strikers were discharged and evicted from Presston, the company town. Next, the company, in an effort to reach some sort of stability in its work force, brought in native Americans to fill the positions vacated by the discharged strikers. Some of the Americans were set up in Presston as “community leaders” to reduce the unrest in the village. Thus, native Americans were first introduced into the unskilled levels of the plant as strikebreakers, a step which created a continuing feeling of animosity between the native Americans and the immigrants.

As noted above, shortly after this strike, Frank Hoffstot took over Pressed Steel Car, and soon began paying unskilled workers by straight piece work, which greatly increased their weekly earnings. But this also did much to increase the antagonism between native

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14 Smith, 38.
15 Kellogg, 657.
16 McKees Rocks Gazette, June 29, 1900.
17 Ibid., July 6, 1900.
18 Ibid., July 20 and Aug. 17, 1900.
and foreign workers. By 1907, the riveters, punchmen, and pressmen, all unskilled jobs, were averaging $35 to $50 every two weeks, while the skilled native worker in the carpenter shop, blacksmith shop, or painting shop, men not on piece work, was only earning $2.00 to $2.50 a day. Needless to say, this situation created much jealousy and envy among the skilled American workers.

This sort of ill will was not confined to McKees Rocks and Pressed Steel Car; it was an area-wide and industry-wide problem. Pittsburgh, perhaps more than any other American city, experienced the abrupt change between 1890 and 1910 from the British and Teutonic immigration to the Southern and Eastern European. By 1910, there were 140,436 persons of foreign birth in the Pittsburgh district, and of these some 69,988 came from Southern and Eastern Europe. Each of these different strains had a tendency to colonize in a separate section of the city and to work in some particular mill. Generally they had little social contact with the native-American population.

In the iron and steel industry generally the years between 1890 and 1910 brought a similar change in the composition of the work force. By 1907 some 73.2 per cent of its foreign workers were Slovaks, Magyars, Germans, and Croatians. The animosity that existed between the native- and the foreign-born workers was abundantly evident to observers on the scene who viewed it as one of the foremost problems in the industry. The *National Labor Tribune*, whose readers were primarily skilled native steel workers, evinced their attitude on July 29, 1909, when it declared: "The Poles, Slavs, Huns, and Italians come over without any ambition to live as Americans live and . . . accept work at any wages at all, thereby lowering the tone of American labor as a whole." This, then, was labor’s social milieu when, on July 13, 1909, foreign-born riveters walked off their jobs at Pressed Steel Car, soon to be followed by 3,000 more men in what developed into one of Western Pennsylvania’s bitterest strikes.

19 *Wage Earning Pittsburgh*, 42.
21 Keller, Chart III.
On Monday evening, July 12, 1909, a group of employees from the plant had met to discuss the pooling system of wages, and had made up their minds to present their grievances at the plant offices. When, however, this committee tried to do so on the following morning, company officials refused to grant them an audience. In retaliation, nearly every employee in the plant, beginning with 600 men in the riveting department, quit work and left by mid-morning. Only about 500 men remained on the job, these being skilled native Americans in the wooden car department. About an hour later, several hundred foreign strikers appeared at the gates of the plant and shouted threats at those who had refused to go on strike.

That night the strikers held a meeting at Turner Hall. After policemen broke up this gathering, the strikers then marched the streets all night in massed formations, and in the morning stationed themselves at O'Donovan's Bridge leading to North Side Pittsburgh. There they planned to intercept the nonstriking American workers and prevent them from going to work. So successful were they at hauling the Americans off the trolleys that only a small percentage of them were able to get through. Thus, by July 15, some 5,000 men had been turned out of the plant and it was completely shut down. Among those out of work, however, were 1,000 to 1,500 skilled native-American workers who were not affected by the pooling system and had no desire to strike. They refrained from going to work only because they were afraid of physical violence from the foreigners.

The first reaction of the community to this strike reflected diverse attitudes. The average citizen seemed to be at least fairly sympathetic to the strikers: "A feature of the demonstration was the attitude of the citizens. Most of them were in sympathy with the strikers and they were the quickest to hoot and cheer when the backs of the troopers were turned." Most of the "respectable" elements of the community, however, like the Gazette-Times, de-

24 Leader, July 15, 1909.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Closing the plant was in itself no mean accomplishment, since from 1901 to 1905 in the car building industry there had been 27 strikes and only one had succeeded in closing the plant and that for only two days. Bureau of Labor, Annual Report (Washington, 1905), XXI.
28 Leader, July 19, 1909.
29 Pittsburgh Gazette-Times, July 16, 1909.
explored this attitude, and the Leader was the only Pittsburgh newspaper to sympathize openly with the foreigners. However, within a few days the attitude of even the most respectable elements turned in favor of the strikers, due largely to the wholly stubborn and uncompromising attitude of Frank N. Hoffstot and the management of Pressed Steel. On July 17, Hoffstot made the following statement to the newspapers: "We will receive no committee from them [the strikers]. There will be no arbitration. . . . If they're not happy working for us, we don't want them. We will not change the pooling system . . . in fact, we intend to increase it." After this statement, the Gazette-Times editorialized: "the uncompromising attitude of F. N. Hoffstot . . . is not one that will recommend itself to a much interested public." From this time, the more established elements of the community began to sympathize openly with the strikers and Hoffstot was roundly condemned in all the newspapers.

It was also during these first few days that the attitude of the native-American workers began to change. One can only speculate on what influenced them, but it seems they realized that neither the company nor the strikers was going to give in and that it was going to be a long strike. Furthermore, the community attitude had shifted in favor of the strikers, so that the native-American workers felt it would be in their best interests to ally with them. Perhaps their most compelling reason was the failure of the foreigners' strike committee to hold down violence. The community might sympathize with the aims and grievances of the strikers, but it could not condone violence. Therefore, the need for more responsible leadership opened a golden opportunity for the native Americans to gain control.

About July 18 or 19, an executive committee of the Americans approached the foreigners and began to lay plans for the amalgamation of the two groups. There seems to have been only about fifty men in the American group, but they could probably count on the

30 Ibid., July 17, 1909.
31 Ibid.
32 The most widely publicized statement by Frank N. Hoffstot, and the one which symbolized to most people his general attitude was: "It's nobody's business how I run my affairs." Leader, July 22, 1909.
33 The foreigners' grievance committee was composed of: Anthony Paviciek Vuk, Wandel Pajlovits, Anthony Derzick, Dave Dakatch, Tony Olenick, Joe Smith, Nick Signorelli, Georg Vassos, Lavriva Kike, and Jol Smith.
support of the other 1,200 American workers. C. A. Wise, an engineer in the axle department at Pressed Steel, was the American leader, but most of the negotiations seem to have been carried on by their attorney, William McNair.\footnote{In 1909, McNair was a twenty-nine-year-old attorney, just six years out of the University of Michigan Law School, and an advocate of the Henry George Single Tax Program. Although he had built a fairly flourishing law practice among the Croatians on the South Side of Pittsburgh, politics seems to have been his first love and his almost consuming ambition. From 1904 to 1908, he had been an active supporter of the Democratic Party. Then, using the publicity and prominence he had gained during the McKees Rocks strike as a springboard, McNair ran for his first public office in November, 1909. He ran for county district attorney on the Democratic ticket and a progressive recall platform and lost. In 1910, McNair supported the Keystone (Prohibition) ticket. In 1921 and 1923, he ran for mayor of Pittsburgh on the Democratic ticket. In 1928, he ran for United States Senator as a Democrat, and in 1930 he was a Democratic candidate for state senator. In all these ventures he was unsuccessful. Finally, in 1933, he was chosen by David Lawrence to run for mayor of Pittsburgh and won. Shortly afterward, in a series of incredible, comic episodes, he broke with the Democratic Party. His wild antics finally caused him to be thrown into jail while he was still mayor and he tendered his resignation to the Council as they loudly cheered his downfall in October, 1936. McNair died on Oct. 9, 1948, while attending a Henry George School of Social Science in St. Louis. Pittsburgh \textit{Post-Gazette}, Nov. 14, and 17, 1933; \textit{Bulletin-Index}, June 25, 1936; Pittsburgh \textit{Press}, Oct. 10, 1948.}

On July 19, McNair had been hired as counsel by the strikers and under his direction the strike was reorganized. The original grievance committee was disbanded and the strikers were segregated into nationalities, each with representatives on the new committee.\footnote{\textit{Leadery}, July 22, 1909.} C. A. Wise was made president, J. H. Carr, first vice-president, Wandel Pajlovits, second vice-president, Anthony Derzick, secretary, and Thomas J. Morris, treasurer.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, July 24, 1909.}

The emergence of C. A. Wise as president of the executive committee can be directly attributed to the influence of the community upon the strike, on public desire for orderly process. Thus, Wise and McNair were able to prevent needless violence which might tend to alienate public opinion. Second, the Pittsburgh \textit{Leader} and other socially conscious groups in the community, such as the First English Lutheran Church and the Kaufman family, set up an extensive relief program with Wise as chairman, their aid contingent upon the strikers giving the Americans a major role in the leadership of the strike.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, July 25, 1909, and \textit{Gazette-Times}, July 20, 1909.} This latter conclusion is supported by the fact that six weeks
later, when dissatisfaction with Wise's conduct was running high, and the foreigners were calling for the resignation of the Americans, Wise warned: "If we step down and out, contributions will cease and you will starve. . . ."38

With the native Americans in control, progressive opinion came out unreservedly in favor of the strikers. "And not the least wonderful element in this situation," rejoiced Paul U. Kellogg, "was the 5 or 6 men of the American committee in the circle of foreign faces. They had never mixed with Hunkies before. Some of them had not struck, most of them had been repair men and electricians, not affected by the pooling system."39

What then was the motive of Wise and the other Americans in assuming leadership? Were they simply goodhearted, altruistic men who wanted to help their exploited fellow workers as many of the progressive sources implied? Or were they company men sent in by Pressed Steel to break the back of the strike as was claimed by the Industrial Workers of the World?40 Probably neither of these views is accurate. The primary concern of Wise and the Americans was simply to get back to work as soon as possible. They had not been affected by the pooling system and had not gone on strike. But every day the strike went on it was costing them money. Thus, it was imperative for them to end the walkout as quickly as possible. But they did not intend to sell the foreign strikers down the river. On the contrary, they would try as hard as they could to get the proper concessions for them so they would return to work happy and satisfied and so that there would be little chance of costly strikes in the future. However, when the company showed itself unwilling to compromise on any of the substantive issues, the obsession of the Americans with getting back to work caused them to compromise on these basic issues which were of such importance to the foreigners. Conflict between the native Americans and the foreigners was thus inevitable.

The ability of the company to put up such stiff resistance to the strikers' demands was conditioned by its willingness to use all the weapons, legal and extralegal, available to employers. The company owned, under the name of the Fidelity Land Company, 232 double

38 Leader, Sept. 6, 1909.
39 Kellogg, 665.
houses in Presston, which it rented to its workers at $12 per month. The workers, in turn, took in boarders to help defray costs.\textsuperscript{41} Recognizing the houses as a lever, the company, as early as July 22, while the rent was still paid up, began to serve eviction notices.\textsuperscript{42} The strikers were also in debt to indirectly owned company stores, which demanded payment of their bills. The company also had the advantage of its own "Coal and Iron Police," as well as the support of the sheriff's department and the state constabulary. But its most effective weapon was the use of strikebreakers procured through the New York detective agency of Pearl Bergoff. Throughout the month of August, Bergoff's men poured into the plant.\textsuperscript{43}

As the company's actions undermined the strength of the strike, the strikers' executive committee, or "Big Six" as it was called, became more anxious to reach a settlement. The increasingly compromising attitude of the Big Six caused the foreign strikers to create an "unknown" committee, which was specifically designed to halt the wholesale importations of Pearl Bergoff's strikebreakers.\textsuperscript{44} The only effective weapon the foreigners had to stop this influx was violence, which increasingly characterized their activities throughout the latter part of July and the entire month of August, with violent rioting on July 30 and 31.

Recognizing this disturbance as a direct threat to their control of the strike, the Big Six arranged a meeting with company officials on July 31, when they discussed the basic terms of the foreigners: abolition of the pool system of wages; pay by the hour, day, or piece; removal of T. A. Farrell as chief of the Coal and Iron Police; and suspension of grafting foremen. After a conference of six and one-half hours, Wise emerged proclaiming that the strikers had won a great victory.\textsuperscript{45}

But when the foreign strikers were told of the concessions Wise had made in order to reach an agreement, they became incensed. Their main complaint was that the company would not accept them back in an organized body, but insisted upon hiring them individu-

\textsuperscript{41} Kellogg, 663.
\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Leader}, July 22, 1909.
\textsuperscript{43} Edward Levinson, \textit{I Break Strikes} (New York, 1935), 70.
ally as new men, with no guarantee that all the original strikers would be rehired.\textsuperscript{46} That night, a large body of foreign strikers ascended the Indian Mound near the plant to discuss the ineffective action of the Big Six. It may well be that at this time the decision was made to contact the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.). On Wednesday, August 4, the foreign strikers unanimously rejected the settlement proposed by the Big Six on the grounds that it would amount to a complete capitulation.\textsuperscript{47}

Four days later, the executive committee announced a new company proposal: the men were still to be taken back individually as new men and there would be no wage increases, but the men would be allowed to earn all they could in a ten-hour day. Efforts of the Big Six to describe the proposal as a victory were scorned by the foreigners, who rejected these terms as they had the earlier offer.\textsuperscript{48}

The Big Six realized that a crisis in their control had been reached, and that the strikers would not accept a weak settlement. Worse yet, at the same time, Samuel Welch, realty agent for the Fidelity Land Company and general foreman at the plant, declared that the company refused to deal any longer with the strikers as an organization, and that all negotiations for a settlement were called off. Welch also disclosed plans to evict forty-seven families from company houses.\textsuperscript{49}

The reason the company was now able to take such a strong stand was that the first large load of Pearl Bergoff's workers had arrived. On August 13, about 350 strikebreakers were brought down the Ohio River on the \textit{Steel Queen} and landed at the plant amid a hail of bullets and stones from the strikers. About 300 more arrived the next day. It was obvious to the foreign strikers that violent action would be necessary to prevent these wholesale importations, and, further, that if the shipments of new men were not stopped, the strike would be lost. Therefore, the foreigners made plans to dynamite the \textit{Steel Queen}, but when the Big Six heard of this they seized most of the explosive and sunk it in the river.\textsuperscript{50}

This action by the Big Six seems to be the turning point in their relations with the mass of violently inclined foreign workers, for it

\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Leader}, Aug. 2, 1909.
\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Leader}, Aug. 8, 1909, and \textit{Gazette-Times}, Aug. 9, 1909.
\textsuperscript{49} \textit{Leader}, Aug. 10, 1909.
was precisely this kind of violence that the Big Six had sworn to prevent. It therefore seemed clear to the foreign strikers that the Big Six would have to be replaced by a new set of leaders more responsive to their needs.

Thus commenced a definite split between the American and foreign elements which became evident when separate meetings of strikers began to be held. On August 18, the following announcement appeared in the Pittsburgh Gazette-Times: "For the benefit of about 500 of the strikers who reside in the North Side, special meetings are now being held daily at the head of Forsyth street, Woods Run, simultaneously with the meetings held on the Indian Mound at McKees Rocks." Since almost all the native-American workers lived on the North Side, and nearly all the foreigners lived in McKees Rocks, the split between the two groups is clear. Also, on August 16, William E. Trautman of the I.W.W. had made his first appearance at McKees Rocks and had addressed a meeting at Indian Mound. From this point on, the Big Six, operating among the Americans, and the I.W.W., operating among the foreigners, were directing the strike at cross-purposes.

The strategy of the I.W.W. was to halt the use of strikebreakers and to force the company to agree to the foreigners' terms of settlement. To stop the importation of the new labor force, some kind of violence was necessary and the I.W.W. was not at all reluctant to provide the means. It should be realized, however, that there was nothing necessarily radical in the I.W.W.'s resort to violence. During the Homestead strike of 1892, the native-American workers of the conservative Amalgamated Association had faced the same sort of problem and had reacted by violence. When a company resorted to bringing in large numbers of strikebreakers under the protection of armed guards, force seemed the only alternative.

The turn to organized and premeditated violence by the foreigners caused a distinct change in public opinion, which now condemned the lawlessness. The reaction of the community is perhaps best shown by an editorial in the Gazette-Times: "Regardless of the grievances of the strikers, no matter how well founded they may be, they have no

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51 See also Leader, Aug. 16, 1909. While this was going on, Samuel Welch announced that another 350 families would be evicted if they did not return to work in the morning.

52 Gazette-Times, Aug. 16, 1909, and Perlman, 264.
commission from any source to kill and destroy in an attempt to obtain redress . . . the mob cannot be permitted to dominate."\(^{53}\) According to the *National Labor Tribune*: "The rioting leaves this paper with a profound feeling of regret."\(^{54}\) The comments of all other organs of public opinion were strikingly similar.

The I.W.W. often bore the brunt of this general condemnation, but it was actually only the scapegoat for the general disapproval of disorder. The newspapers and other sources did not seem to know much about the I.W.W. and vaguely referred to it as a "socialistic" organization which was blamed for agitating the foreigners to riot but was never fully recognized as a "radical" organization in itself. That the reactions against the I.W.W. were a result of the part it took in the disturbances rather than its political views is reinforced by the fact that the socialist Eugene Debs was praised when he addressed the strikers at Indian Mound and pleaded with them to refrain from violence.\(^{55}\) Only near the end of the strike did the I.W.W. begin to be attacked for its political views rather than for just its actions alone.

Violence, which began on August 17, when the I.W.W. assumed leadership of the strike, rapidly approached a dangerous riot stage during the next few days, a reaction to the literally thousands of strikebreakers Pearl Bergoff attempted to pour into the plant.\(^{56}\) Then, on Sunday, August 22, the riot stage was reached in a series of gun battles between strikers and police. The final score sheet for the day tallied six dead, six dying, and forty to fifty injured.\(^{57}\) This disastrous affray turned a formerly favorable local press decisively against the strikers. Even the *Leader*, which had been the first to champion their cause, now condemned the rioting.\(^{58}\) Thirty additional state troopers were sent to McKees Rocks and virtual martial law was imposed.\(^{59}\) On August 25, the troopers began a systematic search of the foreigners' houses under the law of January, 1909, which prohibited aliens from keeping deadly weapons in their homes.

\(^{55}\) *Leader*, Aug. 25, 1909.
\(^{56}\) See Levinson for the best account of these clashes between the strikers and the strikebreakers.
\(^{58}\) *Leader*, Aug. 23, 1909.
Guns, knives, and other weapons were confiscated, while the Americans were allowed to retain theirs. All this helped to tip the balance of power in favor of Wise and the Big Six. Since the middle of August they had been busy trying to regain their ascendancy. Several times, Wise presented the strikers’ petitions to the company, only to procure dubious proposals which were speedily rejected by the foreigners. Then, on August 21, an event occurred which was to help restore control of the strike to the Big Six. On that day, one Albert Vamos, who had been employed by Pearl Bergoff as a strikebreaker, managed to escape from the plant. He went to Edgar L. G. Prochnick, vice-consul for the Austro-Hungarian government in Pittsburgh, and described how he had been mistreated in the plant and retained there against his will. He and Prochnick then got in touch with William McNair, attorney for the Big Six. All three went to the office of the United States Commissioner, W. T. Lindsay, and swore out peonage affidavits against Frank N. Hoffstot and Samuel Cohen, Bergoff’s chief lieutenant.

The resulting peonage investigations were to do much to strengthen the hand of the Big Six. Since the activities of the foreign strikers had already discredited them with the public, and the lurid facts brought out about Pressed Steel in the peonage investigations had put the company in an equally bad light, the Big Six found themselves in the admirable position of being the only “untainted” element. This had much to do not only with helping them reassume leadership of the strikers, but also in bringing the strike to a conclusion.

In the peonage investigations, William McNair emerged as the most important figure. Throughout the strike, he had been trying to bring legal or political pressure upon the Pressed Steel Car Company to settle with the Big Six, and the investigations now provided just the leverage he needed for ultimate success. During the hearings,
many witnesses were called before federal district attorney John H. Jordan, H. W. Hoagland of the Department of Labor, and McNair. Several of them testified to the fact that they were brought to McKees Rocks under false pretenses, given abominable food, paid less than promised, and, finally, when intolerable abuse made them desire to leave the plant, they were threatened with physical harm by Bergoff's "nobles." The findings of the investigators triggered several other independent probes which greatly increased pressure on the company. A. P. Schell, chief of the law division of the Immigration Department at Ellis Island, began his own investigation, as did the county district attorney, William A. Blakeley, and, ultimately, Charles P. Neill, United States Commissioner of Labor, who arrived in McKees Rocks to survey conditions for himself.

The pressure of all this notoriety gave Wise and the Big Six an opportunity to reopen negotiations with the company. Secret meetings commenced, and on August 31 Wise announced that a settlement seemed in sight. On September 2, the executive committee again went to the plant for a conference, and later had a four-hour meeting with the chamber of commerce of McKees Rocks. The chamber of commerce had earlier offered its services for mediation because of the deleterious effect upon the local retail business. But the terms of the settlement which Wise was able to present to the foreign strikers were still far from what they had expected to achieve, since the company had still not materially changed its original proposals. When Wise presented the terms at the Indian Mound, Ignaz Klawier of the I.W.W. leaped to the platform and implored the strikers not to go back to work until all demands were met. The strikers remained true to the I.W.W.

But the Big Six were far from defeated. The next day, September 7, Charles P. Neill, United States Commissioner of Labor, arrived in town and met with General Manager James Rider of Pressed Steel and then with Wise. As a result of these discussions, the company finally declared that it was ready to compromise on most issues.

65 Testimony covers some 100 pages in "Peonage in Western Pennsylvania."
68 Ibid., Aug. 27, 1909.
Wise called the strikers back to Indian Mound and informed them that the company was acceding to most of their demands except that of a signed agreement recognizing them as an organized group. He pointed out that there would be no Sunday work and only half days on Saturdays, and that, although the company could not reinstate the 1907 wage scale at the present time, it had promised a ten to fifteen per cent increase in sixty to ninety days. Wise then announced that the settlement offer, which as yet included no signed agreement and still insisted on individual rehiring, would be put up to formal vote on September 8.\(^{70}\)

After eight weeks of bitter striking it seems that only 2,511 strikers bothered to cast ballots on that day, and, of these, only twelve cast negative votes.\(^{71}\) A crucial element in the voting procedure, however, was that the representatives of the Big Six and of the chamber of commerce investigated each striker before he was allowed to vote.\(^{72}\) By September 10, some 4,500 men were back at work at Pressed Steel and their families began returning to the company houses. On the same day, the Gazette-Times announced that the government had called off itspeonage investigations of Pressed Steel.\(^{73}\)

The settlement of the strike was hailed as a great victory by Wise and by almost all organs of public opinion. Yet an investigation of the settlement terms announced by Wise reveals no clearcut victory for the strikers, a fact underlined by the official company statement released by Pressed Steel: "The company has not agreed or promised to increase at this time the wages of its workmen, but does expect that as general business conditions improve its workmen will share the benefits. . . . The company has not promised to abandon the pooling system . . . [but] The company will not tolerate any graft.\(^{74}\)

All this raises the intriguing question of how Wise and the progressive forces were able to regard such a settlement as a victory. It

\(^{70}\) Leader, Sept. 7, 1909, and Gazette-Times, Sept. 8-9, 1909.

\(^{71}\) National Labor Tribune, Sept. 16, 1909.

\(^{72}\) Leader, Sept. 8, 1909. This investigation was conducted, according to the Big Six, to make sure that no nonworkers voted. Thus, they were ostensibly checking the workers' brass time checks. Many of the foreign strike leaders, therefore, would be automatically excluded from voting, since, when the company paid out its last payroll during the strike, it confiscated the brass checks of more than 600 of the original strikers. Gazette-Times, July 27, 1909.

\(^{73}\) Ibid., Sept. 10, 1909.

\(^{74}\) Independent, Sept. 16, 1909.
seems as if both native-American workers and progressive forces thought a settlement that returned the plant to a pre-strike status quo was desirable. It allowed the American workers to resume work after six payless weeks. For the progressive forces in the community, it meant an end to the destructive violence engendered by the strike. And, perhaps most important for both groups, they hoped it would end the I.W.W.'s influence with the foreign workers.

But the I.W.W. was not yet defeated. There were still about 1,500 foreign strikers, including the original leaders of the strike, who had not been re-employed. These men met on September 10 and decided under the advice of the I.W.W. to continue the strike. To thwart this move, Wise filed a complaint with the sheriff's office against William Trautman, the I.W.W. organizer. The sheriff demanded that Trautman produce a charter proving that he was an organizer for the I.W.W. When Trautman could not or would not produce the charter, he was arrested and put in jail, charged with being a "suspicious person." The I.W.W. continued to function, nevertheless, under the leadership of Joseph J. Ettor.

Meanwhile, the foreigners who had returned to work began to discover that the claims of victory by the Big Six were rather hollow. T. A. Farrell, chief of the company police, was still at his old post, and the company announced that the promised abolition of Sunday work would not go into effect immediately. Consequently, on September 15 many of the foreigners refused to work and gathered angrily at the plant gates, but all the Americans entered as usual.

By the next morning, at least 4,500 workers had again laid down their tools and had assembled at the Indian Mound, where they formally denounced the Big Six as their representatives. Shortly thereafter, Wise, accompanied by some 500 American workers, climbed the Mound to address the strikers. If they were dissatisfied with his leadership, Wise told them, he and his colleagues would gladly step down. Joseph Ettor of the I.W.W. then suggested that the various nationalities comprising the strikers hold meetings of their own and set up a regularly elected strike committee. Wise agreed, but when elections were attempted, the Americans disrupted

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75 Leader, Sept. 10, 1909.
77 Leader, Sept. 14, 1909.
all the meetings to such a degree that they could not continue. The Americans then persuaded about 1,000 of the foreign strikers to return to work in the morning. About 3,500 men, however, remained true to the I.W.W. and continued to strike.

The next morning at 6:45 A.M., the Big Six, carrying a huge American flag, led some 2,000 men back into the plant. At least 500 of the Americans armed themselves for this march. Thus, the 3,500 men led by the I.W.W., who had formed a mass picket line in front of the gates of the plant, were forced to part their ranks as the massed columns of the Big Six marched through. In this way the second McKees Rocks strike was broken. The rest of the foreigners, realizing they had been defeated, followed the Big Six back to work. Shortly after most of them had returned, Wise went onto the grounds and pointed out to the plant managers the ring leaders among the foreigners who had started the second strike. Each man he denounced was promptly discharged.

The actions of the Big Six were universally applauded by the progressive press, even though, in this instance, they had clearly acted as strikebreakers. The Survey, most jubilant of all progressive publications, reported as follows:

The second strike ended the morning of Friday, September 17, when, headed by the American flag, all the American workingmen and most of the foreigners employed at the Pressed Steel Car Company marched to the gates in spite of the opposition of the most radical among the foreigners and again took up their jobs. . . . Pittsburgh can thank its lucky stars that a situation so vexed and full of difficulty and of all the elements of danger, has been settled with as little friction and menacing aftermath as this seems to exhibit. . . .

The Pittsburgh Leader, the National Labor Tribune, the Pittsburgh Gazette-Times, the Outlook, the Independent, and nearly all other publications expressed virtually the same sentiments.

With the foreign element soundly defeated, repression began in earnest. When 150 heater boys were locked out by the company on September 18 for protesting a cut in wages from seventeen to thirteen
cents, Wise prohibited a strike on their behalf. Another 280 riveters were discharged when they refused to work alongside former strikebreakers who were retained to fill the jobs of discharged foreigners.\(^{81}\)

The next day, the Civic Federation of Pittsburgh announced that because of the violence of the uneducated Slavs at McKees Rocks, it was going to inaugurate a night school program to teach them English and instruct them in American institutions.\(^{82}\) Four days later, the Big Six informed the press that a new union had been formed and had elected them as its officers.\(^{83}\) Simultaneously, Pressed Steel declared that it would be glad to deal with this newly formed organization because "it saved them from dealing with the radical and socialistic organization of the I.W.W."\(^{84}\) All this was done—formation of the union, election of the officers, and sanction by the company—without consulting the workers, who were simply presented with the *fait accompli*, an organization called the United Car Workers of the World, Benevolent Protective Association. About 1,000 men, approximately the number of the American workers in the plant, joined this union.\(^{85}\)

Thus, by the end of September, Pressed Steel had attained a stability in its working force which it had not had before the first strike, even with all its espionage systems, company houses and stores, and the Coal and Iron Police. Once again it was in a position to dictate its desires to the workers without the fear of a successful mass strike.

A comparison between the two McKees Rocks strikes of 1909 establishes the want of a workers' organization as the reason for such success as the first strike could boast. When the majority of foreigners walked out, the Americans had no choice but to stay out also. As more than one skilled American said at the time of the strike:

\(^{81}\) *Leader*, Sept. 18–19, 1909.


\(^{83}\) The officers were: C. A. Wise, president; J. H. Carr, vice-president; John E. Carr, secretary; L. S. Snyder, business agent; Thomas Morris, treasurer; and David Takog, interpreter.

\(^{84}\) *National Labor Tribune*, Sept. 24, 1909.

\(^{85}\) *Leader*, Sept. 27, 1909. Wise explained that the purpose of the organization was to provide death, sickness, and accident benefits for workers rather than to bargain for wages and hours. Since the various Slavic associations supplied this service to the foreign workers, they had little interest in it or need for it.
"We are not on strike, and we don’t sympathize with the strike. We are just afraid to go back to work."

But what a difference in the second strike! Again, 3,000 to 4,000 foreigners walked out, determined to force concessions from the company. But this time the 1,200 Americans were well organized under Wise. The day following the strike, he and his fellow Americans, with another 800 or more followers, marched down the hill and into the plant, and the second strike was broken in a day. The foreigners did not dare to oppose a force of 1,200 American workers, at least 500 of whom were armed.

The McKees Rocks strike thus offers an interesting variation on Dr. David Brody’s theory of nonunion stability in the steel plants. In his book, *Steelworkers in America: the Nonunion Era*, he advances as his central idea that "the varied elements (skilled workers, immigrants, and mill towns) acting together, created in the mills a situation of labor stability." He sees the elimination of all traces of unionism among skilled workers as being the prime necessity for steel manufacturers, but in the case of Pressed Steel Car, at least, stability was not achieved until a union of some kind had been formed among the skilled workers to eliminate the possibility of the entire work force going out at any one time.

For several years the company avoided any large scale walkout because of the two conflicting labor organizations in the plant. The I.W.W. did not simply fold up and leave the scene as some historians have charged they have done in other strikes. On the contrary, a fairly active local continued to exist at McKees Rocks for at least three years more under the personal direction of Joseph J. Ettor. It is not known how many foreigners at Pressed Steel belonged to the I.W.W., but its local 286 seems to have been quite active. It set up a union store and held several picnics for its members. The extent of Wobbly strength was shown in July, 1910, when the American workers tried to persuade the I.W.W. to go out with them in an attempt to win the ten-hour day. The foreigners refused and the strike died aborning in the wake of a bitter statement issued by the official organ of the I.W.W.: "What for? Do you want us to take the Hunkies up on the hill again, make us do the picketing and offer

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87 David Sapposs, *Left Wing Unionism* (New York, 1926), 144–152.
ourselves as targets for the Cossack's maces and bullets and then you will take your flag and march back to work as you have done before? Then you will play your usual trick—tell us to go to hell and spread it broadcast that our union left us on the street. Nothing Doing!" The organizational split between the native and foreign workers thus not only stopped any effective strikes by the foreigners for several years, but also worked to the detriment of the native workers when they wished to protest their grievances.

The principal idea that has been discussed in this article is the reaction of a community in the progressive era to an especially violent strike. In many ways its response was comparable to that occasioned by the Homestead strike in 1892. As in the Homestead strike, there was general community support for the strikers and hatred for the company, until the strikers resorted to violence, but the community reaction to the McKees Rocks strike was somewhat more complex because of the variety of groups involved. Perhaps the general progressive attitude was best expressed by the Rev. Lyman E. Davis, pastor of Grace Church in Pittsburgh:

In the original controversy public sentiment was unequivocally with the strikers and hardly a voice has been raised in any quarter in behalf of the car company. But the industrial and humanitarian elements of the question have been so obscured by the emerging violence of the past few days, that a demand for the suppression of the spirit of anarchy has displaced every other sentiment. . . . It is time to eliminate every other consideration but that of the consideration of the social fabric in every community as will prejudice no main interest and limit no man's equal rights and privileges.

Community sympathy turned against the foreigners when they were forced to resort to illegal actions, and the I.W.W. also came under general condemnation because of its part in this program. But the I.W.W. was not marked for any special condemnation as a radical or socialistic organization until the strike was virtually ended.

88 *Solidarity* (official organ of the I.W.W.), New Castle, Pa., Aug. 26, 1910. The last evidence of the I.W.W. at McKees Rocks is on Dec. 5, 1912, when they closed down the plant for one week and won a raise of six cents a day. *Industrial Worker* (Spokane, Washington), Dec. 5, 1912. Although it was fighting a losing cause at Pressed Steel, as it was in the rest of the nation, it is significant that the I.W.W. gave the foreigners there by far the most effective organization they were to have for decades to come.


Still relatively new and unknown in the East, the presence of the I.W.W. on the scene did not as yet raise visions of syndicalist societies being built in respectable cities.\footnote{This attitude toward the I.W.W. differs markedly from its reception in its later strikes. At Bethlehem, Pa., in 1910, the I.W.W. were refused the privilege of speaking to the strikers solely because of the opposition of the chief of police to its aims and ideas. United States Committee on Industrial Relations, Final Report and Testimony (Washington, 1916), IX, 10946. At Lawrence, Mass., in 1912, official society acted swiftly against the I.W.W. in an attempt to drive it from the city. The predominantly Irish officialdom used the radical leadership of the strikers as their main excuse for opposing the strike. Donald Cole, Immigrant City: Lawrence, Massachusetts, 1845-1921 (Chapel Hill, 1963), 184-190. The progressive press, however, was more sympathetic toward the I.W.W. in this strike. As the press saw it, the I.W.W. by some ironic twist of fate had somehow gotten involved in a "religious force of world-wide awakening." Robert A. Woods, "The Clod Stirs," The Survey (Mar. 16, 1912), XXVII, 1932.}

Of all the groups involved in the McKees Rocks strike, the native Americans and the Big Six received the most universally favorable accolades from the community. Progressive publications such as \textit{Survey}, \textit{Outlook}, and the Pittsburgh \textit{Leader} openly took the side of the native-American workers throughout the strike. The \textit{National Labor Tribune} called the Big Six "fine types of conservative working-men."\footnote{National Labor Tribune, Sept. 26, 1909.} John Mitchell, the most "progressive" of all labor leaders, and then with the National Civic Federation, congratulated the Big Six on their victory.\footnote{Ibid., Oct. 21, 1909.} Even the Pittsburgh \textit{Gazette-Times}, owned by the Oliver family and organ for the steel interests, showed sympathy for the native Americans.

Perhaps the most interesting of the community responses was the complete lack of sympathy for the management of Pressed Steel Car. Professor Brody has termed this strike "of immense importance" because it "created an image of the autocratic employer and the downtrodden steelworker."\footnote{Brody, 160-161.} He sees this as eventually leading to labor reform within the steel industry by the time of World War I. There can be little doubt that the image portrayed by Dr. Brody was of vital importance in turning public opinion against the steel industry, but the lack of community support for Pressed Steel Car requires some additional explanation. Although the company and its president were what might be termed "progressive," as far as the adoption
of the principles of scientific management to their operations, their heavy-handed attitude toward their workers and the general community went against the grain of the progressive ethic. This feeling had existed prior to the strike, but the strike had crystallized the issue before the public. President Hoffstot was, furthermore, an outsider to Pittsburgh and the upper-class groups which controlled the progressive movement in that city. Of German descent, Hoffstot maintained his chief ties in Pittsburgh with the German social elite which was to a large degree separate from the larger Pittsburgh elite. Also, for the seven years preceding the strike, Hoffstot had been a resident of New York City, and was married to a woman from that area. Thus, he appeared to many as an outsider and an absentee owner, even though he had been born and raised in Pittsburgh.

Progressive society, then, displayed an attitude of qualified friendliness toward organized labor. Progressive reformers were friendly to the workingman, but only to the type of workingman consonant with their ideal of a harmonious society. They could not countenance a militant, class-conscious union such as the one the I.W.W. was attempting to forge at McKees Rocks. Instead, they wanted a union made up of men who thought in middle-class patterns and advanced the ideals of class collaboration and social solidarity so enthusiastically endorsed by the National Civic Federation. Both

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95 Even in 1901 the editor of the McKees Rocks Gazette had complained editorially of the inability to get any news of happenings at the Pressed Steel Car plant. In 1909, the Iron Trade Review and the Wall Street Journal both took Hoffstot to task for his belligerent attitude.

96 That the progressive movement in Pittsburgh was primarily an upper-class affair has been established by Samuel P. Hays in “The Politics of Reform in Municipal Government in the Progressive Era,” Pacific Northwest Quarterly, LV (1964), 157-169.

97 One evidence of this is the fact that Hoffstot’s only continuing associations in Pittsburgh, outside of Pressed Steel Car, was with the German National Bank.

98 Even while Hoffstot was still living in Pittsburgh, he was never accepted in the older, more well-established upper class. He maintained his residence in the somewhat less socially acceptable East End rather than in the North Side or Sowickly. Most of his associates in Pittsburgh were in the newer Carnegie group, rather than with the older upper class. (His first wife was the sister of Henry Phipps, and Phipps helped to finance his ventures at Pressed Steel.) The author is presently working on a study which shows the sharp social cleavages between the newly rich steel manufacturers of the Carnegie ilk and the older, better-established upper class of Pittsburgh. Many of these new rich, like Hoffstot, failing to achieve total acceptance in Pittsburgh society, in the years after the turn of the century migrated to New York City, where they were accepted far more readily. Aspects of this phenomenon in another city can be seen in Philadelphia Gentlemen by E. Digby Baltzell.
Hoffstot and the foreign strikers incurred the wrath of contemporary society because they refused to think in societal terms, being more interested in their own "selfish" concerns. However, Hoffstot and Pressed Steel Car were able to reach a compromise with progressive society soon after the strike, and once again basked in its favor. But the foreigners were doomed to be ostracized from society, at least until they had become "Americanized." Reformers, businessmen, and government saw the image of trade unionism worthy of their promotion in the activities of C. A. Wise and the Big Six.

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In order to gain the favor of progressive society, Pressed Steel, like the rest of the steel industry, turned to reform. The first organized recreation was set up in Presston in 1912 and a Welfare Committee was organized under Samuel Welch. A playground was opened in the village and an athletic program was provided by the Y.M.C.A. The committee also sponsored English classes for foreigners. On July 4, 1914, a new auditorium was dedicated. At the same time, a Men's Civic Club was formed among plant employees. Various other civic clubs were set up for women and children of the company town (sponsored by the upper-class Shady Side Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh). Also a Pressed Steel Car Band was formed among plant employees and yearly garden contests were held. A generally vigorous program was maintained at Pressed Steel until 1921, when activity decreased and by the 1930's the clubs had ceased to function. Brand, 30-31.