
Someday perhaps a competent and experienced scholar may succeed in producing an equitable report of the Homestead strike. Such an account unquestionably is needed. Leon Wolff's Lockout conceivably might have met the requirement. At least the book serves to demonstrate the lack of a dispassionate history, compiled without prejudice, fair to all concerned.

What Mr. Wolff has done is, as his publishers proudly say, "an exciting narrative." But it is not, as Roger Butterfield affirms in the foreword, "the first [publication] to explore fully the human passions and suffering involved." Rather, it is a rewriting of the efforts of Arthur G. Burgoyne (Homestead, 1893), Myron R. Stowell (Fort Frick, 1893), James Howard Bridge (Inside History of the Carnegie Steel Company, 1903) and numerous other frankly partisan interpreters who, as William Allen White remarked in a later but similar connection, "got only the facts and not the truth." No mention is made of the contribution of Erasmus Wilson to the literature concerning the events of the spring and summer of 1892 at Homestead (History of Pittsburgh, 1898); and another conspicuous omission is that of the testimony of Herbert N. Casson (Romance of Steel, 1907).

Naturally, Mr. Wolff's difficulties were multitudinous. His theme was alien, his sources at best only hearsay. Failing to discover new data, he perforce was obliged to rehash the old material even when he was aware that it was not trustworthy. It is with unconcealed pathos that he confesses:

Even the disinterested accounts of esteemed historians . . . contradict each other flatly . . . I have done what I could to emerge from this labyrinth with an account which approaches the elusive goddess Truth.

If Mr. Wolff had been content merely to postulate the still unsolved problems of Homestead, he might have succeeded in his major purpose more notably. Even the title, Lockout, is curiously inept after he concedes that:

Both sides, in fact, were locked out . . . No further entries into the plant were permitted whatsoever, aside from designated strikers who regularly inspected the premises. The situation was, of course, fundamentally unstable. It was close to anarchy, even revolution; nor could it long endure by any stretch of the imagination. In all economic history there had never been a two-way lockout on such a scale. Their first flush of enthusiasm having somewhat paled, the men of the Advisory Committee were now worried over the immensity of their act and its illegality.
This is but a sample of the confusion prevailing at Homestead on July 4, 1892. What matters now is that after seventy-three years there still are doubt and misunderstanding about almost every detail of the strike. To illustrate, it is normal for a reader to wish to know who started the shooting on the morning of July 6. Mr. Wolff relates in detail how “thousands of men, women and children were warned: ‘The Pinkertons are coming!’” He admits that “several union look-outs in a skiff . . . fired blindly at the cabin” of the tugboat, Little Bill; “the strikers opened up with a rifle, pistol and shotgun fusillade” and “swarms of men followed . . . running along the shore, firing from close range.” Also, he stipulates:

The people in question now numbered ten thousand, some of whom had taken positions on the opposite bank of the river; and they were heavily and strangely armed. The exact number of the armed strikers will never be known, but several hundred of them carried weapons dating back to the Civil War: carbines and shotguns, but mostly pistols and revolvers. Thousands more, including women and young boys, moved toward the excitement with sticks and stones and alarming-looking nailed clubs torn from fences.

But Mr. Wolff is less explicit about who stirred these people to such a deadly pitch of wrath. When he holds Andrew Carnegie and Henry Clay Frick responsible for the carnage, his narrative becomes more definitely biased. Doubtless his sympathies prompted him to make light of the political aspects of the Homestead tragedy as an incident of the presidential contest of 1892. The same motivation may have guided him in belittling the significance of the strike in relation to the coming panic of 1893. Agrarian-free trade opposition to the McKinley tariff likewise was enlisted in behalf of the strikers. Not to be forgotten either was the convenience of Homestead to the promoters of the sensational “yellow journalism.”

All of these disturbing factors have contributed to the result that Lockout is a provocative and not a constructively helpful book — which is a pity because the author almost certainly did not intend it to be a mere continuation of the ancient quarrel between capital and labor.

At the close of his text, Mr. Wolff proposes “other strike books,” including “relatively complete narratives dealing with Ludlow, Lawrence, the railroad uprisings of 1877, San Francisco’s general strike in the mid-30’s, steel in 1919, and others just as engrossing.” May we suggest that these volumes should be prepared with deliberate care to give both sides of every argument fairly? That principle of justice is fundamental in theory in American life and surely should be honored by all concerned in practice.

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