

A Brief Essay on the 1909 and 1919 Steel Strikes in Lyndora
By Edward Grystar

WORKING conditions for great numbers of Americans were not pleasant in the early 1900s. Wages, at a subsistence level in many industries, reflected the prevailing business view that labor was a "cost item" to be reduced to a minimum. Mechanization was also undermining the manual skills of the craft unionists and the defeat of the Homestead strike of 1892 led many corporations, especially in the steel industry, to believe the "climate" was right to suppress organized labor's efforts.

Just as today, remaining "union free" was the goal of many businesses. Paternalistic welfare schemes that encouraged dependency and loyalty, combined with the repressive power of blacklisting, company spies, anti-labor government bodies, and pressure from newspapers and the pulpit, helped to maintain the "open shop."¹ These kinds of conditions prevailed in Butler County, where histories of industrial workers and other salaried employees — working people who make the products by which our society measures wealth or perform the organizational chores that keep businesses running — are still largely unwritten.

This article seeks to document the 1909 and 1919 steel strikes in Lyndora, a small working-class community near Butler that is rarely mentioned in county histories. Born in America's great immigration experience of the early 20th century, Lyndora grew after the formation of the Standard Steel Car Company in 1902. (The town was named after a daughter of John Hansen, one of the founders of the plant.) From its inception, workers had to struggle for adequate wages and social respect. Most of the residents of Lyndora and employees of Standard Car were of Eastern European peasant descent. A great number probably arrived illiterate. Determining exact figures is difficult, but a survey reported in the *Charities and the Commons* of February 1904 estimated that 39% of

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1 David Brody, *Labor in Crisis, The Steel Strike of 1919* (New York: 1965) 13-44.

the Slavic and Eastern Europe immigrants were illiterate upon arrival in the United States.²

In Lyndora, a great many took up quarters in the infamous "Red Row" district of company houses near the plant and in other shanties. They were miserably crowded and reports show many homes had extra boarders whose beds were constantly in use with two 12-hour shifts at the plant. In Brandon's *A Concise History of Butler County*, he mentions the "Red Row" section of Lyndora as "the scene of much discord and strife."³ How true! The troubles stemmed mainly from racist attitudes against the new immigrants and conflicts between owners and workers. An example of the prevailing feeling is shown in an August 2, 1902, article in the *Butler County Citizen* that commended the manager of Standard Car for trying to hire Americans instead of foreigners.⁴ Millions of people immigrated looking for jobs and opportunity. But many companies also actively promoted immigration, paying agents to recruit and hire men, especially in Eastern Europe, to work in U.S. mills at wages lower than those demanded by earlier immigrants who had become American citizens.⁵

Such policies benefited the companies doubly: wages were kept low and divisions naturally occurred among the different nationalities within the labor force, hampering collective bargaining efforts. Equally important obstacles to unionization within the steel industry, especially, were the companies' repressive methods of dealing with organizers and the restrictive policies of the American Federation of Labor. From 1899 to 1910, only 20% of all immigrants were skilled workers and the A.F.L.'s craft structure effectively excluded the vast majority of steelworkers from union representation. About one-half of the workers at Standard Car were listed as "unclassified," or unskilled.⁶ A.F.L. leaders adopted the attitude that it was best to "permit the newcomers to sink or swim by themselves." Nonetheless, the crying need to organize the steelworkers brought on sporadic attempts to unionize during the period, including a small effort by the A.F.L. in 1909-1910.

In Lyndora, a bloody strike began on July 18, 1909. It originated with the riveters and later spread throughout the Standard Car plant and its

2 "Immigration and Its Relation to Pauperism," *Annals of American Academy of Political and Social Science* (July 1904) 176.

3 J. Campbell Brandon, *A Concise History of Butler County, Pennsylvania* (Butler: 1962) 73-74.

4 *Butler County Citizen*, August 2, 1902.

5 William Z. Foster, *The Great Steel Strike and Its Lessons* (New York: 1920) 201.

6 Bishop Frances J. McConnell, "The Steel Strike of 1919," in the *Interchurch World Movement Report of 1920* (New York: 1920) 190-93.

two subsidiaries. Workers struck over a cut in wages and disputes over rent payments on company houses. During this strike, both the Industrial Workers of the World and the A.F.L. were trying to organize the steelworkers. The socialist-oriented I.W.W. attempted to unite all the workers into a single union while the conservative A.F.L. relied on its traditional "craft" structure. The State Police were called into Lyndora and fierce struggles erupted. The police shot and killed one workman and many were injured on both sides. The Lyndora women played an important role during the strike. According to the *Butler Eagle*, "The women are aggressors in defying the police. They shout at the officers as they ride along the streets calling them 'scabs,' murderer, and so on."⁷ The strike was eventually defeated due to disunity among skilled and unskilled workers — generally nationalized Americans and the foreign-born respectively — and the force of the State Police.⁸ Journalist Louis Duncchez reported that when the State Police arrived in Lyndora, "three of the strikers were stripped, tied to posts and beaten into insensibility."⁹

A similar strike was being waged in McKees Rocks, nearer to Pittsburgh, and the strikers, through their united efforts, forced a governmental investigation into their inhuman conditions. Again, Duncchez noted, "In McKees Rocks we have seen how a group of striking foreigners, because they stood firm, compelled the government to investigate conditions there. Why doesn't the government look into conditions prevailing at other places, such as Butler, where they are just as bad as they are at McKees Rocks."¹⁰

After the defeat of the strike, many of the strike leaders were evicted from company housing and forced to leave the area. These strike leaders were prominent and intelligent men whose loss also hurt local merchants, since many of them had unpaid debts.¹¹ Poverty level wages, crowded housing, no trade unions, and intense police repression — these were the conditions faced by the Lyndora working class during the early 1900s. The conditions which produced the 1909 disputes remained largely unresolved, causing the 1919 steel strike, the largest strike of U.S. workers to that day.

A shortage of labor during World War I and a new optimism gener-

7 *Butler Eagle*, July 19, 1909.

8 Philip Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States* (New York: 1964) vol. 4, 299.

9 Louis Duncchez, "Victory at McKees Rocks," *International Socialist Review* (October 1909) 296-300.

10 Duncchez, 299-300.

11 *Butler Eagle*, July 30, 1909.

ated by the federal government conceding to workers the right to unionize during the war prompted a fresh outlook and a new effort to organize. On October 1, 1918, the National Committee to Organize the Iron and Steel Workers (a coalition of 24 A.F.L. unions) moved its office to Pittsburgh.¹² In Lyndora, as throughout the country, the steelworkers were being signed into the union. According to National Committee statistics, approximately 2,519 workers had signed union cards out of a work force of 4,000 at Standard Car.¹³

By 1919 wage levels had become intolerable due to inflation. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that the cost of living rose 76% from 1915 to August 1919, and by December 1919 was 95% higher than in 1915.¹⁴ In Lyndora, as elsewhere, workers were often fired at the slightest hint of union sympathies. This was a major factor in the strike by Standard Car workers on August 6, 1919.¹⁵ (The majority of steelworkers nationwide did not strike until September 22.)

On the first day of the strike, a massive solidarity march of more than 3,000 people wound through the main streets of Lyndora and Butler. Many returning soldiers were among the marchers, and hundreds carried American flags. After the parade, the marchers returned home. Even though there was no trouble or disturbance, the "Riot Act" was posted in the Lyndora area by the local sheriff, prohibiting assembly by 12 or more people. The law was frequently used to ban picketing by workers.

The demands of striking workers were:

1. collective bargaining rights
2. reinstatement of all men fired for union activity with pay for lost time
3. eight-hour work days
4. one day's rest in seven
5. abolishing the 24-hour shift
6. increasing wages sufficient to guarantee an American standard of living
7. a standard scale of wages for all crafts and classes of workers
8. double pay for overtime, Sundays, and holidays
9. principles of seniority to apply in maintaining, reducing and increasing the work force¹⁶

12 Foster, 17-29.

13 *Interchurch World Movement Report*, 194.

14 Paul H. Douglas, *Real Wages in the United States 1890-1926* (Boston: 1930) 50-57.

15 Interview with Joe Rudiak, former Lyndora resident, Pittsburgh, January 1976.

16 *Butler Eagle*, August 13, 1919.

The wages and conditions of Lyndora steelworkers were similar to the national average: a work week of 68.7 hours, and one-half of the force worked 12 hours a day. In the Pittsburgh district, steel labor was the lowest paid of six major industries. For years, the annual earnings for 72% of all steelworkers were below the level set by government experts as a minimum comfort level for a family of five. In 1919, unskilled workers' annual earnings were more than \$109 below the minimum for subsistence and more than \$558 below the "American standard of living." The talk about "Americanization" of the "foreigners" was unrealistic given the 12-hour day. In fact, a large percentage of Standard Car workers had little time for "living" period.¹⁷

From August 6 to 14, little activity occurred in the strike and leader H. F. Liley cautioned the workers to remain peaceful throughout the strike. Police protection for the strike-breakers, however, became more blatant and on August 15, trouble broke out between the strike-breakers and picketers. The local sheriff summoned the State Police, who arrived and began to "maintain order." Their arrival incensed the people even more, as memories of the killing and bloodshed of 1909 were still vivid.

State Police had acted mainly as strikebreakers since their creation. Lyndora workers and labor unionists expressed their feelings in a 1912 report by the *United States Commission on Industrial Relations* that "a state constabulary, properly employed, constituted an improvement over the former coal and iron police. But these hearings amply disclosed that management had used this new agency as a weapon against union labor. State policemen in the role of strikebreakers...had acted as an incitement rather than a deterrent to violence."¹⁸

The intervention of the State Police meant the arrest, clubbing, beating and intimidation of many Lyndora residents. Civil and human rights were suppressed. All stops were pulled in an attempt to break the strike. William Z. Foster, Secretary-Treasurer of the National Committee to organize the Iron and Steel Workers, said, "The strikers in Western Pennsylvania were given the worst of it. Typical Cossack conditions prevailed."¹⁹ In fact, according to Foster, the police and courts in Butler County were unique: "Except in Butler, Pa., where a score of strikers were arrested for stopping a car of scabs on the way to work (frameup by the State Police) and sent to the penitentiary, no strikers anywhere in the

17 *Interchurch World Movement Report*, 89-94.

18 Graham Adams, Jr., *Age of Industrial Violence 1910-1915, The Activities and Findings of the United States Commission on Industrial Relations* (New York: 1966) 194.

19 Foster, 177.

whole strike zone received heavy jail sentences."²⁰

John Fitzpatrick, President of the National Committee, testified at a congressional hearing investigating the 1919 strike. Part of his testimony describes the treatment of strikers by the State Police in Butler:

Mr. Fitzpatrick: It takes only about seven of them to handle 1,000-2,000 people. Just to give you an idea as to what they do Mr. Chairman, at Butler — these men had their horses trained — one of our men was standing on the sidewalk and a mounted policeman came along. The man did not think he was going to be interfered with, because he was standing there looking around to see what was going on in the street. When the horseman maneuvered his horse up close enough, the horse put his foot on the man's foot. Immediately the man put his hand to shove off the horse and as soon as he did that the policeman struck the man down in cold blood. The man was arrested for resisting arrest.

Chairman: The man who was struck down was arrested?

Mr. Fitzpatrick: Yes, he was arrested, jailed and fined for resisting an officer. First, the horse pinned him down on the street, then he was struck down by the policeman, then he was jailed and fined.²¹

Outside Lyndora, in West Winfield, head strike organizer Liley was arrested as a "suspicious character" while trying to organize miners in the area. It was later proven that the local police took \$85 of Liley's money while arresting him. He was released a day later and no charges were filed.²²

Further proof of the denial of civil and human rights during the strike was contained in the Interchurch World Movement's report titled "Public Opinion and the Steel Strike." The report was compiled by a group of ministers and bishops from different faiths. They reported police committed abrogations of legal and civil rights in Butler County, including the denial of unhindered public assembly, false charges of assault, harassment of businessmen and invasion of their property, and attempts to incite strikers to riot so as to intimidate them.²³

Standard Car did its share, as well, either evicting or foreclosing the mortgages on many strikers' homes. Foster remarked that "the much lauded housing schemes of the steel companies are merely one of a whole arsenal of weapons to crush the independence of their workers."²⁴

Joe Rudiak, who lived in Butler, noted that many families had to take

²⁰ Foster, 224.

²¹ U.S. Congress, Senate Committee Investigating the Strike in the Steel Industry (John Fitzpatrick's testimony), 1920, 68-69.

²² Senate Committee on Steel Strike (H.F. Liley's statement), 583-587.

²³ *Interchurch World Movement Report*; George Soule, "Civil Rights in Western Pennsylvania," in *Public Opinion and the Steel Strike* (New York: 1921) 181-183.

²⁴ Foster, 184.

in extra boarders throughout the strike, which put more pressure on already burdened strikers and contributed to the strike's defeat.²⁵

The strike was crushed nationwide, over in most major cities and Lyndora by January 1920. Given the obstacles confronting the strikers and their families, it is remarkable that the strike continued for so many months.

Workers won no immediate improvements in conditions, although the major companies eventually acquiesced to union, government and public demands. The companies instituted the eight-hour work day and granted a 25 percent wage increase in most shops in May 1923, some 14 years after the first strikes in this century sought humane conditions for the industry's workers. ■

25 Rudiak interview.