CHAPTER II

THE WORKMEN

IT is estimated that between 70,000 and 80,000 men are employed in the manufacture of steel in Allegheny County. Their homes are clustered about the mills along the rivers, they are clinging to the bluffs of the South Side, and they are scattered over Greater Pittsburgh from Woods Run to the East End. Up the Monongahela valley are the mill towns—Homestead of Pinkerton fame, Braddock with its record-breaking mills and furnaces, Duquesne, where the unit of weight is a hundred tons, and McKeesport, home of the "biggest tube works on earth." Here are countrymen of Kossuth and Kosciusko, still seeking the blessings of liberty, but through a different channel,—high wages and steady employment. Here are British, German and Scandinavian workmen, full of faith in the new world democracy; and here are Americans, great-grandsons of Washington's troopers, and sons of men who fought at Gettysburg.

Fully 60 per cent of these men are unskilled; but the remaining 40 per cent, the skilled and semi-skilled, are the men who give character to the industry. This is the class from which foremen and superintendents and even the steel presidents have been recruited, and it is the class that furnishes the brains of the working force. It is of them, chiefly, that this book is written.

In a ten months' residence in the Pittsburgh District—eight months in the city of Pittsburgh and two months in the town of Homestead—I visited once every large mill in Allegheny County, and most of them I entered repeatedly in company with the regular mill guides, with officials of the steel companies, and with men well acquainted with steel manufacture but now in no way connected with the industry. Skilled workmen also volunteered their services and I owe much to the painstaking care with which they explained the part performed by labor in the process of iron and

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steel manufacture, from the blast furnaces to the piling beds. I watched the men at work under all sorts of conditions and in all sorts of positions, and often I talked with them as they rested between heats or during a "spell."

To understand these men you must first of all see them thus at their work; you must stand beside the open-hearth helper as he taps fifty tons of molten steel from his furnace; you must feel the heat of the Bessemer converter as you watch the vesselmen and the steel pourer; and above the crash and roar of the blooming mills you must talk with rollers and hookers, while five- and ten-ton steel ingots plunge madly back and forth between the rolls. You must see the men working in hoop mills and guide mills, where the heat is intense and the work laborious; you must see them amid ladles of molten steel, among piles of red hot bars, or bending over the straightening presses at the rail mills.

But the visitor in a steel mill may see only faces reddened by the glare of fire and hot steel, muscles standing out in knots and bands on bare arms, clothing frayed with usage and begrimed by machinery. The men do not differ materially from other workmen, and the visitor passes on and forgets them. The world is full of men in greasy overalls.

To really know them you must see them at home. There the muscular feats of the heater's helper and the rough orders of the furnace boss are alike forgotten, and you find them kindly, open-hearted, human. You grow into an understanding of them as they tell of hopes and plans or mistakes and failures, and understanding becomes sympathy as it comes home to you how close some half-spoken ambition or disappointment presses in upon them. Through the courtesy of friends, I obtained introductions to leading steel workers and these in turn gave me the names of others, paving the way for visits at their homes and long talks at the end of a "turn." In this way I got close to the lives and experience of typical skilled and semi-skilled men.

The skilled workers are generally of Anglo-Saxon, German or Celtic origin, the largest proportion being American born. They are not educated so far as school and university training are concerned, but they are graduates in the school of experience. By way of opening up a view of the general situation, I shall in-

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troduce some of these men and let them talk as they talked to me. Of course, the things they speak of could be taken up from another point of view,—that of the employer. These are the issues of life as seen by the men themselves. And we shall be in better position to disentangle these issues and study each one, if we see at the outset how, not singly but in combination, they enter into the work-experience of the individual man.

John Griswold is a Scotch-Irish furnace boss who came to America and got a laborer's position at a Pittsburgh blast furnace when the common labor force was largely Irish. Those were the days before the advent of the "furriners." I sat in Griswold's sitting room in his four-room cottage one evening and he told me about the men who work at the furnaces, and about the "long turn."*

"Mighty few men have stood what I have, I can tell you. I've been twenty years at the furnaces and been workin' a twelve-hour day all that time, seven days in the week. We go to work at seven in the mornin' and we get through at night at six. We work that way for two weeks and then we work the long turn and change to the night shift of thirteen hours. The long turn is when we go on at seven Sunday mornin' and work through the whole twenty-four hours up to Monday mornin'. That puts us onto the night turn for the next two weeks, and the other crew onto the day. The next time they get the long turn and we get twenty-four hours off, but it don't do us much good. I get home at about half past seven Sunday mornin' and go to bed as soon as I've had breakfast. I get up about noon so as to get a bit o' Sunday to enjoy, but I'm tired and sleepy all the afternoon. Now, if we had eight hours it would be different. I'd start to work, say, at six and I'd be done at two and I'd come home, and after dinner me and the missus could go to the park if we wanted to, or I could take the childer to the country where there ain't any saloons. That's the danger,—the childer runnin' on the streets and me with no time to take them any place else. That's what's driven the Irish out of the industry. It ain't the Hunkies,—they couldn't do it,—but the Irish don't have to work this way. There was

* See Chapter XIII.

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fifty of them here with me sixteen years ago and now where are they? I meet 'em sometimes around the city, ridin' in carriages and all of them wearin' white shirts, and here I am with these Hunkies. They don't seem like men to me hardly. They can't talk United States. You tell them something and they just look and say 'Me no fustay, me no fustay,' that's all you can get out of 'em. And I'm here with them all the time, twelve hours a day and every day and I'm all alone,—not a mother's son of 'em that I can talk to. Everybody says I'm a fool to stay here,—I dunno, mebbe I am. It don't make so much difference though. I'm gettin' along, but I don't want the kids ever to work this way. I'm goin' to educate them so they won't have to work twelve hours."

There is a considerable difference between a blast furnace foreman and a Bessemer steel pourer. The furnace man gets rather low wages for a twelve-hour day and seven-day working week, while the steel pourer is well paid and works eight hours a day for six days in the week. It was Jerry Flinn who told me how he had worked up from his first job as laborer to a position as steel pourer. I met him just as he got home from the mill one day, and I asked how he managed to work only an eight-hour shift when other men had to work twelve. He told me that attempts have been made to introduce a twelve-hour day in the Bessemer department but without success. Two Pittsburgh mills have tried it and both went back to the eight-hour day because the heat is so great as to make it impossible for the men to work longer.

"It must be hard," said Flinn, "for the twelve-hour men to have to work alongside of us eight-hour men. During the twelve hours of their day they work with all three crews of the eight-hour men. One crew gets through and goes home soon after the twelve-hour men come out, the next crew works its eight hours and goes home, and the third crew comes out before those twelve-hour fellows can quit. The eight-hour men get a lot more pleasure out of life than the twelve-hour men do. We can go to entertainments and social affairs as we couldn't if we had to get up next morning and go to work at six o'clock."

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Flinn is fifty-two years old, and he tells you that his strength is not up to what it was, say, fifteen years ago. The men who went to work with him as young men are nearly all dead, and today he is one of the oldest men in his mill. He speaks lightly of the danger of accidents,* and says that he has encountered only the minor ones. Once when they were changing stoppers, the crane dropped the old one just as it swung clear of the edge of the ladle. It fell on him, burning him and breaking his leg. At another time he failed to lower the stopper in time, and the stream of molten steel struck the edge of a mold as the train was shifted; it splashed onto the platform, burning his legs so severely that for six weeks afterwards he was unable to turn over in bed. It is a common thing for metal to fly that way; the sparks strike his face, they lodge in his nose or his ears, and once he nearly lost the sight of an eye. He refers to these things as trifles.

What I said of the half concealed disappointments which are real and tragic in the life of a steel worker, would have been clear to you had you heard the story of Robert Smith, as he told it himself. As a boy he went to work in the coal mines of eastern Pennsylvania and did not get into the mills until he was about thirty years old. Then he came to Pittsburgh, took a laborer's position, and began to work up slowly year after year until he occupied a place of some importance, though not in the first class of skilled men. After he had been there a few years, a labor difficulty occurred in this mill and he left and went to another plant where he took a position similar to his last one. As a new man he could not advance as rapidly as he might have done in the old mill, and before he could get into the best of standing he was thrown out of work by further labor troubles. He secured a position in another mill where he remained for two years till forced by a strike to seek work in a fourth mill. Here he remained for ten years in a subordinate position. At the end of that time he was promoted and became, for the first time in his life, the first man in the crew. Then, in some way, he incurred the dislike of the superintendent, and the man on the opposite shift worked against him because he wanted Smith's job for a friend.

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So, after working for three years in a position for which, as he said, he had served a ten years' apprenticeship, Smith again lost his place and was obliged to apply for work in still another mill. He had been a leader in the union, and a feeling almost religious in its devotion bound him to it. To get into this new mill he had to agree to give up his union card. Today he says that he is a strong union man at heart, but his connection with the union is over. Now, at nearly sixty years of age, he is working in a semi-skilled position, although fitted to take his place among men of the best skill and to handle a crew.

Smith is a man of more than ordinary intelligence. He is a man of religious inclinations and a church member. He regrets the twelve-hour day now chiefly on the ground that it keeps the young men away from church. If he had not become a church member when he had an eight-hour day, he doesn't see how he ever could have become interested in religious matters. He lives in a comfortable home which he owns and where he spends most of his time when not in the mill. After supper he sits down to read for a short time before going to bed, but he told me with considerable regret that he was unable to do any systematic reading. A few years ago he read several of Shakespeare's plays, but he had to force himself to do it, he gets sleepy so soon after supper. Since that time he has not attempted anything more serious than the daily paper.

Jim Barr is a man thirty-five years old who came from England when he was a small boy. It has been only during the last ten years or so that Barr has worked in a steel mill, but he has lived in the steel district longer than that. He occupies a skilled position in one of the mills, where at the time I visited him he was working an eleven-hour day one week, and the next, a thirteen-hour night. On alternate Sundays he had the long turn of twenty-four hours. This Sunday work, he told me, came in after the union had been driven out, and the twelve-hour day is more general now than it was under unionism.

"Tell me, how can a man get any pleasure out of life working that way?"—Barr asked me this almost with a challenge. We were sitting before the grate in his comfortable and tastefully furnished

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parlor. There were pictures on the wall, a carpet on the floor, and the piano in the corner spoke of other things than endless drudgery. He seemed to interpret my swift glance about the room, for he went on, "I've got as good a home here as a man could want. It's comfortable and I enjoy my family. But I only have these things to think about. I'm at work most of the day, and I'm so tired at night that I just go to bed as soon as I've eaten supper. I have ideas of what a home ought to be, all right, but the way things are now I just eat and sleep here."

Barr works in a position where he encounters considerable heat, and he says that alone is very exhausting even when a man does not do hard physical labor. There is great danger, too, in the sweat that keeps a man's clothing wet all the time. If he gets into a draught he is likely to contract a cold or pneumonia. Working under such conditions shortens a man's life, to Barr's mind, and although he is only thirty-five years old he tells you he feels a decline in his strength. The men find that it costs more to live, too, when working in the mills, for they need the best of food and the warmest clothing in order to keep going. The little chance for recreation leads them to the saloons as the natural place for relaxation. They go there much oftener, in his opinion, than they would if they had more time for social enjoyment; and of course a good deal of money is spent there that is needed for other things. He says that men frequently spend twenty dollars in a single night after pay day. But the thing on which Barr seems to have the strongest conviction is the plan of the United States Steel Corporation of issuing stock to employes.* It's a scheme, he claims, to keep out unionism and prevent the men from protesting against bad conditions.

Now, just by way of contrast, listen to the story of George Hudson, who occupies a position similar to that of Barr, and has been in mill work about the same length of time. After having tried another line and found it unsatisfactory, Hudson came to the mills when about thirty years of age. He did what American young men dislike very much to do,—he took a common laborer's position along with the "Hunkies." Being a man of perseverance

*See Chapter XVI; also Appendix V, p. 306.

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and some education, he worked up very rapidly until he now occupies a skilled position.

"The Steel Corporation is a fine one to work for," said Hudson to me with enthusiasm. "It gives every man a chance for promotion, and listens to every workman who has a plan for improvement. All the intelligent men are satisfied. If you can find any dissatisfied men, you will find that they are men who would be discontented anywhere you put them. Take the way they loan money to men who want to build homes. A good many men have their own cottages now just because the company helped them. The company has a savings department, too, and it pays 5 per cent on all deposits, and that is more than the savings banks pay. Then, on the other hand, it charges only 5 per cent interest on the money loaned, and that is a lower rate than you can get anywhere else. The company owns houses which it rents to employes at 30 per cent or more below what other people charge. I pay twenty-five dollars rent, and I've got a friend in a company house which is better than mine, and he pays only eighteen."

Hudson is ambitious, and he was very proud that his department during recent months had succeeded in beating all previous records known.

To turn to the question of church attendance raised by Smith in our talk before his fire,—if number of organizations were any criterion, the churches in the mill towns would be strong. I found a considerable number of loyal church members among the steel workers. Such of them as have to work on Sunday chafe under the necessity that drives them to disregard the Sabbath. Especially does this bear heavily on the wife who must attend church alone, while her husband is in the mill or at the furnaces. A Scotch Presbyterian mother at whose home I called one afternoon, just as the man was preparing to go to the mill for the night, spoke regretfully of having left Scotland. They might not have been able to live so well there, but "Oh, man, we could have brought up the childer in the fear o' God and in a land where men reverence the Sabbath." There are, too, men like Smith who fear the effect of twelve-hour work on the morality of the boys.

In spite of this religious sentiment which exists among the

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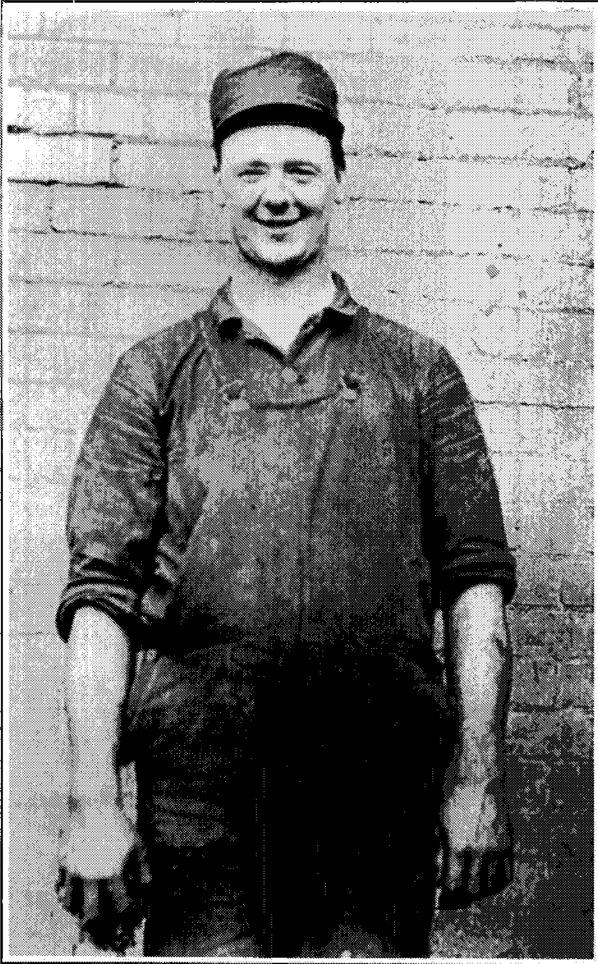

Photo by Hine

ONE OF THE TWENTY-SIX PER CENT AMERICAN BORN

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In the Light of a Five-ton Ingot

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workers, there is, on the other hand, a good deal of feeling that the churches do not understand the needs of the workingmen.* Frank Robinson, for instance, believes that they are not interested in some problems which are very real to him.

"There are a good many churches in this borough," he said to me one day, "and they are supported generally by the women. The preachers don't have any influence in securing better conditions for the men,—they don't try to have. They never visit the mills, and they don't know anything about the conditions the men have to face. They think the men ought to go to church after working twelve hours Saturday night. The preachers could accomplish a lot if they would try to use their influence in the right direction; let them quit temperance reform until they get better conditions for the men. It's no time to preach to a man when he's hungry; feed him first, then preach to him. The same thing with a workingman; get a decent working day with decent conditions, then ask him to stop drinking. Let the preachers go into the mills and see the men at work in the heat, and outside the mills let them notice the men with crushed hands or broken arms or with a leg missing. If they would stop their preaching long enough to look around a little they could do something for us, if they wanted to try."

Unionism is not entirely dead in the mill towns; at least the spirit of it is to be found among the men, though the form is absent. Some of them expect to see again an organization in the mills. Others have given up hope of gaining shorter hours or higher wages through collective bargaining, and are looking for government interference and a legal eight-hour day. There is considerable variety of opinion as to how this is to be brought about. Pittsburgh steel workers are traditionally republican in politics; Speaker Cannon himself does not fear "tinkering" with the tariff more than they. The majority of them have been hoping that their representatives would after a while consider and pass the labor legislation that the workingmen desire. However, there has been much loss of faith in the last few years.

A good many men in the mills are socialists at heart, and

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though they still vote the republican ticket, they would vote with the socialists if that party were to manifest strength enough to give it a chance of carrying an election. A considerable number of others have gone the whole way and are active working socialists. One of these is Ed Jones, a skilled steel worker. He was left an orphan, came to Pittsburgh from New York as a boy of eighteen years, and worked for a short time as a laborer in one of the mills. After trying his hand at several unskilled trades he went back to a small mill in New York, where his wages were $1.25 a day. He was determined to work up in the industry, and after a year or so as a laborer he found himself in a semi-skilled position with wages correspondingly better. A year or two later he returned to Pittsburgh and at length secured a skilled position at $5.00 a day. Since then, in spite of reverses, he has worked up slowly until now he holds one of the most important positions in his mill. Jones has never been a union man. He says that he does not believe in unions, because they accomplish things only in prosperous times and go to pieces in a panic. "It is no use for them to try to regulate wages, anyhow," he says, "for labor is a commodity and its price is regulated by supply and demand. The only way out for the laboring men is to get together in a labor party,"—and this to him means the socialist party.

"We must go back to the condition when workmen owned their own tools," declares Jones. "We must own the instruments of production. Labor is now the helpless victim of capital, and capital must be overthrown. The workman is given enough to buy food and clothes for himself, and no more if the capitalist can help himself. They keep these workmen employed twelve hours a day at some work, while if every man in the country would work two hours a day, all the labor that would be necessary to support the population of the country could be performed. Now all of this excess, this ten hours over the necessary amount, goes to the employer in profits, and many people throughout the country are living in idleness because other people are working overtime for them." Jones himself is in comfortable circumstances; he owns his house and he owns some United States Steel stock, but he says he is one out of thirty-eight men in his whole plant who could have done as well.

One of the near-socialists who hopes for both unionism and

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governmental relief, gave me a statement of his belief one Sunday afternoon as I sat in a comfortable chair in his little parlor. "I think there will be a labor organization in the mills again," he said. "It may not come in our day, but it is bound to come; the men will be driven to it. There would be a union now but for the foolishness of the men. They begin to talk as soon as a movement is started, and of course the news reaches the ears of the bosses before the organization is really on its feet. Then the men, who are not in a position to resist, are threatened with discharge. That has happened in this very mill. It may be that political action will be necessary before a union will be possible. There are two things that we've got to have,—an eight-hour day and restriction of immigration. I think that we will have to get together in a labor party. I'm not a socialist myself, though quite a good many of the mill men are, and there are a good many things about socialism that I like, all right. I would vote with them if I thought they were going to win and there are others who feel the same way. I used to vote the republican ticket, but I'm tired of it. They haven't done much for the workingmen when you consider the length of time they've been in power. I'm disgusted with the whole thing and I haven't voted at all for several years."

Several of the men had said to me: "Go to see Joe Reed; he can tell you more about the mills than anyone else." So one day I climbed the hill to his home, and found him. I had been led to expect a good deal and was not disappointed, though he was just recovering from an illness and was unable to talk as much as I had hoped. Reed is just the man that one would pick as a leader,—six feet tall, broad shouldered, with strong, intelligent features,—and he was in truth a leader of the Amalgamated Association years ago, before the steel mills became non-union. He took a prominent part in a strike that was of considerable importance in the steel district. He is a skilled man, and if he had cast his lot with the company in the dispute, it is quite likely that he would have best served his personal interests. But he stood by the men, and when the strike was lost Reed left the steel district. He might have had his former position again, but he was too proud to ask for it and lived away from Pittsburgh until the bitterness

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engendered by the struggle had begun to die out. After several years he came back and got a job again in a Pittsburgh steel mill. It is a non-union mill and of course Reed is a non-union man.

Reed told me how during the strike he had received letters of encouragement from all over the country, from men prominent in many walks of life. I asked him what he had done with them. He shook his head. "I burned them," he said, "when I came back to the mills. I have nothing in my possession now which would suggest in any way that I ever had connection with the union. When I came back here, I knew I was coming to a non-union mill and I took a job in good faith as a non-union man. That is a chapter in the history of my life that is ended. The whole matter of unionism is a thing of the past, and as an employe in this mill, I have no part in it." This fine sense of honor in conforming to the new régime is not so unusual among men of his sort as some people would expect.

These are the steel workers. I have not chosen extreme cases; on the contrary, it has been my aim to select men who are typical of a class,—the serious, clear-headed men, rather than the irresponsibles,—and with one exception, each case is fairly representative of a large group. The exception is the man whom I called Hudson. Not over three men out of the hundred and more with whom I talked at length indicated like sentiments, and he is the only one who gave them such full expression. It should be understood that these are the skilled men,—it is only among the skilled that opinions are so intelligently put forth. The number of positions requiring skill is not large, relatively speaking, and competition for them is keen. The consequence is that the skilled workers are a picked body of men. Through a course of natural selection the unfit have been eliminated and the survivors are exceptionally capable and alert of mind, their wits sharpened by meeting and solving difficulties. Through this disciplinary process have risen men like John Jarrett, consul at Birmingham during Harrison's administration; Miles Humphreys, now chief of the fire department of the Smoky City; M. M. Garland, collector of customs for Pittsburgh; A. R. Hunt, general superintendent at Homestead; Taylor Alderdice, vice-

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president of the National Tube Company; A. C. Dinkey, president of the Carnegie Steel Company; and W. B. Dickson, vice-president of the United States Steel Corporation.

In telling about their fellows who are numbered today among the rank and file, I have tried to introduce the leading types,—the twelve-hour man, the eight-hour man, the church member, the man who is at outs with the church, the union man and the socialist. There are many others who talk and think as Flinn and Smith and Robinson do, and I could furnish examples of much more radical thought and speech. These are typical cases representing different degrees of skill and different shades of opinion. It is highly significant that there are such men as these in the Pittsburgh mills. In a discussion of the labor problem in the steel industry, it must be borne in mind that these men are more than workers; they are thinkers, and must be reckoned with.

That representative workmen in one of the great groups of American manufactures regard their employment in such light, that there are more than 70,000 men so employed in a single county, means that the issues of life and labor as they see them may become formidable matters both in industry and in popular sovereignty. These opinions have in part been molded by the conditions in which the men have spent their lives. With such men in mind, the elemental forces, the heat, the speed, the hugeness of the appliances for reducing, melting, lifting and rolling out the tonnage of steel and iron, to be described in the next chapters, will be of more than technical interest. They react powerfully on human nature. To arrive at an understanding of the labor issues in their broader bearings, we must thus familiarize ourselves with the work processes; we must also have a knowledge of the unsuccessful struggle of the workers throughout a generation to control the terms of their employment, and of the actual conditions of hire and labor under the employers' régime now in full sway. These factors are taken up in turn in the three main divisions of this book. They will lead us to final chapters which will discuss the policies by which the employers seek to retain control, and the spirit of the workers toward the existing situation.

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