Chapter 1

Homestead and the American Republic in the Gilded Age

A CENTURY HAS passed since the lockout of 1892 at Andrew Carnegie's Homestead Steel Works, located on the Monongahela River just six miles upstream from Pittsburgh. The dramatic events of the lockout—in particular, the pitched battle between the steelworkers and the Pinkertons—are among the most familiar of American history. For many people, the story of the Homestead Lockout is as famous for the violent events that punctuated it as for the way it ended—with a resounding defeat for unionism in the steel industry. Many also understand that Homestead always has held a special fascination because it was America's greatest philanthropist, Carnegie, who, in direct contradiction of his public support for trade unions, precipitated this most "savage and significant chapter" in the history of American labor.[1]

Homestead attracted national attention well before Carnegie's chief of operations, Henry Clay Frick, a notorious opponent of unions, inaugurated the dispute on 29 June by closing down the giant mill and locking out 3,800 men. For weeks newspapers had predicted that there would be a momentous battle between the nation's most powerful steelmen, Carnegie and Frick, and the workers, led by the country's largest trade union, the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers (AAISW). The expectations for drama were fulfilled when, on 1 July, the workers seized the mill and sealed off the town to prevent scabs from resuming operations. In the infamous battle of 6 July, 300 Pinkerton "detectives," dispatched to the mill by darkened river barge under an arrangement with the county sheriff, fought virtually the entire town; 3 Pinkertons and 7 workers were killed.[2] Four days later, 8,500 national guardsmen were called out at the request of Frick to retake the town and the mill. On 23 July, Alexander Berkman, a Russian Jewish anarchist, attempted to assassinate Frick but missed his mark. Soon after, guardsman W. L. Iams was hung by his thumbs for having jumped to his feet and shouted, "Three cheers for the man who shot Frick!"[3]

In succeeding weeks state authorities, acting in cooperation with the

Carnegie Steel Company and its chief lawyer, Philander C. Knox (who later would serve as U.S. attorney general and secretary of state) brought more than one hundred indictments against the leading steelworkers on charges of aggravated riot, conspiracy, murder, and treason. Only a few were tried, and none was convicted, but the combined authority of the state and one of the largest manufacturing establishments in the world proved too much for the workers. The AAISW held out until November; with its final defeat in Homestead, unionism in the national steel industry came to a virtual halt for four decades. For the workers who had led the resistance—most notably "Honest" John McLuckie, the burgess (mayor) of Homestead—Carnegie's victory meant permanent banishment from employment in steelmaking. For McLuckie it effectively meant banishment from the country: he was last seen in 1901 in Mexico, where he worked as a miner and well driver.[4]

Even before it ended, the Homestead Lockout became part of the folklore of industrial America. It entered popular culture as a quasi-mythical epic that pitted the aspirations of organized labor against the heartless rule of greedy tyrants. All over the country poets and lyricists commemorated it in verse that was often more melodramatic than the events themselves. The following angry song, widely known across America, was composed by William W. Delaney, a prominent New York songwriter.

FATHER WAS KILLED BY THE PINKERTON MEN

'Twas in Pennsylvania town not very long ago
Men struck against reduction of their pay
Their millionaire employer with philanthropic show
Had closed the works till starved they would obey
They fought for home and right to live where they had toiled so long
But ere the sun had set some were laid low
There're hearts now sadly grieving by that sad and bitter wrong
God help them for it was a cruel blow.

Chorus:
God help them tonight in their hour of affliction
Praying for him whom they'll ne'er see again
Hear the orphans tell their sad story
"Father was killed by the Pinkerton men."

Ye prating politicians, who boast protection creed,
Go to Homestead and stop the orphans' cry.
Protection for the rich man ye pander to his greed,
His workmen they are cattle and may die.
The freedom of the city in Scotland far away
'Tis presented to the millionaire suave,
But here in Free America with protection in full sway
His workmen get the freedom of the grave.[5]

As familiar as the events of July 1892 are—perhaps, indeed, because of their very familiarity—few historians have adequately addressed the larger events that preceded and the larger questions that shaped the Homestead Lockout. For the most part, scholars have been so blinded by the melodrama that they continue to perpetuate received versions as a caricatured battle between labor and capital over wages and work conditions. And yet even the most reductive, sentimental, popular accounts at the time show more sensitivity to the complex issues that determined this episode. "Reduction of their pay," according to Delaney's song, was just one of the provocations that stirred workers; they were fighting for their jobs and for rights they had every reason to expect "here in Free America."

Indeed, since the publication some eighty years ago of that pioneering effort in urban sociology, the Pittsburgh Survey, Homestead has generated surprisingly little scholarship. The industrial studies research team assembled for the Survey by the labor economist John R. Commons—notably John A. Fitch and Margaret F. Byington—effectively enshrined Homestead in an academic hall of fame. And as the historian Herbert Gutman pointed out twenty-five years ago, the best available popular narrative we have, Leon Wolff's *Lockout*, is marred by glaring conceptual and bibliographic shortcomings: Wolff's failure to consult a single labor source left formidable explanatory gaps in his rendering of Homestead.[6]

Though there has been some renewal of interest in the Homestead Lockout, Gutman's judgment stands. Yet the conventional wisdom among scholars and lay readers alike continues to be that Homestead represents, as the sociologist Steven R. Cohen asserts, "one of the most . . . thoroughly researched strikes in American history."[7] If one were to tally the number of texts and monographs that include a section or chapter on Homestead and then point to this total as evidence of how much scholarly attention the lockout has received, Cohen's assertion might be on target. The truth is, however, that virtually all secondary accounts focus rather narrowly on the summer of 1892 and therefore fail to address the outstanding question raised by Gutman: How do the particular events of the lockout relate to the "larger context" of American politics and culture in the Gilded Age?[8]

The incidents and themes that have been itemized in standard accounts are important, to be sure. However, it is not simply a story about one violent and bloody conflict between unions and management. Nor is it a story whose outcome can be explained by simple textbook references to the political shabbiness of the times, times that allowed ruthless capitalists to ride roughshod over their employees. Nor, indeed, is it a story that begins in 1892.

The story of Homestead dramatizes the broadest issues and problems of nineteenth-century industrial America. It is about the endless

conflict between the pursuit of private interest and the defense of the common good. It is about the right of individuals to accumulate unlimited wealth and privilege versus the right of individuals to enjoy security in their jobs and dignity in their homes. It is about the aspirations and the frustrations of Americans who wanted their country to be a republic in fact and not merely in name. In short, as the nineteenth century was drawing to a close, Homestead posed the urgent question that remains with us still: Can—or how can—the new land of industry and technological innovation continue to be "the land of the free"? That is, how does one reconcile the undeniable attractions of material progress, implying as they invariably do a host of social and economic inequities, with the American commitment to democracy for all?

Twentieth-century history has demonstrated all too clearly the intensity of these dilemmas and the difficulties inherent in any putative solutions. That Homestead does not answer all the questions it raises, therefore, by no means limits its impact or importance. On the contrary, it is the very fact of having articulated these vital issues in an unforgettable manner that renders Homestead emblematic of an entire age of transition in America, one to which we are still very much heirs. And it is these issues, with their long and intricate history, in Homestead in particular and in post–Civil War America in general, that this book seeks to untangle and address.

At the broadest level, Homestead enacts a nationwide debate on the meaning of democracy and republican values in an age of rapid technological transformation; more locally, it dramatizes the specific social and political changes that ushered in the Age of Steel in Western Pennsylvania. From six miles up the Monongahela, Homestead tells the story of the redefinition of Pittsburgh from a city of workers and engaged citizens into one ruled by the greatest steelmakers and industrialists of the era. Homestead is also about the efforts of a notable group of immigrant workers—from the British Isles and Eastern Europe—to halt the advance of these industrial barons and to rescue and recast the most sacred political traditions of America.[9]

Received wisdom has interpreted Homestead as an isolated community subject to a discrete series of events in the early 1890s. The truth is that it was not isolated but fell squarely within the influential orbit of Pittsburgh—with all of its industrial and political upheavals. Similarly, the industrial and political redefinition of Pittsburgh was in good measure a significant by-product of the radical changes in metalmaking technology that transformed it from the Iron City into the Steel City. Indeed, it was the productive effects of these new techniques that ultimately thrust the United States into its position of economic dominance in the modern world. Like all technological advances, however, these innovations were neither politically nor morally neutral. Just as technical

changes in the metal industry would alter the social and political structure of Pittsburgh, and ultimately America, so too, these innovations were themselves informed by a specific set of ideological presuppositions that had shaped Western culture since the Industrial Revolution.[10]

The chapters that follow chronicle important changes in Gilded Age America that mark its history in the inter-related spheres of industry and technological development, labor and labor organization, and political thought and discourse. The technological innovations that transformed American industry in the 1860s and 1870s—in particular the Bessemer process of steelmaking—elicited a wide variety of responses. These ranged from the unqualified enthusiasm of men such as Andrew Carnegie, Abram Hewitt, and Alexander Holley (the engineer who, in creating the Bessemer steel industry, also pointed the way to "scientific management") to the determined revolt of thousands of workers who, like John McLuckie, saw frightening signs of their own displacement and disenfranchisement in the march of technological progress. Between these two polarized responses, most workers reacted with a mixture of hope and trepidation appropriate to a period of great social indeterminacy.

Hesitations about the impact of the new technologies invading the workplace were compounded by the broader uncertainties bequeathed to workers, and all Americans, by the Civil War. Among the most troubling of these was the place of labor, white and black, within the new social order. In the view of many Americans, the "free" enterprise system—the very system that promoted technological innovation and industrial efficiency—rather than ensuring their freedom, had effectively locked them into an insidious form of wage slavery. Thousands of working Americans responded to these circumstances by demanding a new kind of abolitionism.[11]

In Pittsburgh this demand was met by efforts to build unions and create an independent workers' movement; the ensuing experience of industrial conflict shaped a political project for thousands of Pittsburghers from the late 1860s to the early 1880s. To end wage slavery and halt the drift toward permanent "dependence," labor leaders in greater Pittsburgh knew that the workers' movement had to cope with two specific challenges. Not surprisingly, the first was that posed by technological innovation in the struggle for control of the workplace. Just when businessmen and their allies were hailing American technical genius at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876, the *National Labor Tribune*, the voice of the Pittsburgh labor movement, identified "machinery" as "the Grand Problem" of the era. In the view of the newspaper and many of its readers, new technologies, most notably of steelmaking, posed a question that addressed the democratic principles from which the labor movement drew its inspiration: How could workers convert the grand problem of machinery into a grand opportunity for building a

cooperative society? The second challenge, which labor leaders saw as inextricably bound to the first, lay outside the shop floor, in the political arena. Here the question was how to mobilize the workers of Pittsburgh to wrest the reins of government from the supporters of "organized capital."[12]

The Pittsburgh workers who joined the labor movement did not stand alone. Across the country they had thousands of counterparts—in rural villages, in small towns, and in the largest cities—all determined to build an alternative to industrial capitalism. The efforts of these workers met with equally determined opposition; from Reconstruction until the 1890s, hundreds of thousands of Americans fought a war over the future definition of their country.[13]

Despite the diversity of their backgrounds and work experience, and despite what the historian Isaac Kramnick has characterized as America's "profusion and confusion of political tongues," the opponents of organized capital all looked to the legacy of republican thought to help define and legitimize their criticisms and aspirations. However colloquial their version of popular republicanism may seem, it derived nonetheless from the classical republican tradition that had been recast during the Renaissance by Machiavelli and subsequently embellished by British political theorists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Briefly, it was built upon four premises: (1) that the goal of society should be to preserve the common good, or commonwealth; (2) that in order to do so, citizens had to be virtuous, that is, able to subordinate their private wants to public needs; (3) that the virtue of all citizens was contingent upon their independence from the control of others; and (4) that to guard against "tyrants" (as well as for individuals to realize full selfhood), all citizens had to participate in public life. Failure to stave off the encroachments of tyrants in the common realm would lead inevitably to corruption. To these four premises Americans in the Revolutionary Era added a fifth: the idea of equality, that is, the idea that all citizens are entitled to natural, inalienable rights under a representative system of government.[14]

Like all interpreters of the republican tradition, critics of organized capital in the late nineteenth century produced their own functional version of these principles to defend. Stressing the ideas of the common good, virtue, and independence all the while, they rejected neither the idea of private property nor that of material prosperity achieved through the kind of individual effort that republican thought itself had helped to unleash. They did, however, challenge the emerging inequalities of power—"vices"—that arose from unchecked accumulation; and they did search for ways to translate their customary notions of nonmarket justice and mutual obligation into tactics that would place the interests of the common good above those of individuals.[15]

Yet those who defended capitalism also looked to the republican tradition to define and legitimize their beliefs in the sanctity of property and the virtue of accumulation. Publicly there was no more visible defender of republicanism during that period than Andrew Carnegie himself; he repeatedly endorsed the principles of individual rights against the injustices of the "feudal" social system from which he had escaped as a youthful idealist. In his eyes, private "vices"—the pursuit of individual advancement that America offered him—became the chief means of ensuring the public good. For people such as Carnegie and his friend Abram S. Hewitt, the accumulation of capital was the civilizing force that guaranteed the stability of the commonwealth; the preservation of an untrammeled right to accumulate was the main purpose of American democracy. Indeed, by the 1870s, Carnegie and his colleagues had squarely attached the ethos of accumulation and self-interest to the definition of democracy itself. In their eyes the preeminent natural right that Americans enjoyed was the right to limitless appropriation and property.[16]

In the view of labor reformers of the time, there existed no natural right to unlimited accumulation; a social system predicated on such a notion of right was false and therefore needed to be transformed. As Thomas Armstrong, the editor of Pittsburgh's *National Labor Tribune* wrote in the mid 1870s, the workers' movement had drawn a "bill of indictment against the civilization of the nineteenth century" which "challenges the very framework of society and declares it to be based on false principles. . . . The supremacy of the principles which labor is seeking to establish undermines the foundation of the existing order . . . [and] would ignore the present and accepted theories of value."[17]

The principles labor sought to establish, according to the *Tribune*, were grounded in notions of right and justice markedly different from the belief that self-interest is the universal, beneficent arbiter of human relations. The campaigns for "amalgamation" that punctuated Pittsburgh's labor history arose from the sense that industrial capitalism ignored "natural justice" by denying workers "a certain degree of comfort and measure of happiness which they should enjoy regardless of the empirical and cruel law of supply and demand." A shared desire to ensure such happiness by securing what American workers since the Revolutionary Era had called a "competence"—a sufficiency of means for living comfortably—provided the raw material out of which skilled industrial craftsmen and their less skilled colleagues tried to forge the requisite solidarity to attack the "unnatural" wage system.[18]

In criticizing the wealthy and staking out a claim to a competence (which typically included the ownership of a small house), workers assigned to property rights an instrumental and subordinate position. To workers, having a competence was a means to an end, and the end was a dignified life. To live with dignity meant having a modicum of material

security and, therefore, a job that guaranteed security. While labor reformers rejected the hypothesis that there was a natural right to limitless amounts of private property, they accepted the argument that labor—work itself—was the property of the laborer. To deprive the worker of his work, as employers often did, was thus to deprive him of both his right to property and his right to a competence. The introduction of new technologies, along with the hard-line market ethos of industrial managers, threatened both of these.

Here, then, was the undergirding of a politics that did indeed indict nineteenth-century industrial civilization: a notion of right that ensured a competence. For the very idea of a competence presupposed that the unchecked pursuit of self-interest, a pursuit sanctioned by John Locke's apparent endorsement of the right to unlimited appropriation, would, by virtue of the marketplace laws of supply and demand, render meaningless the natural justice under which workers should enjoy "a certain degree of comfort and measure of happiness." The idea of a competence did not merely challenge the putative right to unlimited appropriation, however: it also asserted an important moral and political distinction between property for use and property for accumulation. Locke seemed to have removed the distinction. Labor reformers understood that it existed. However, in the end, they lacked a coherent strategy that would: (1) provide all citizens with sufficient property for a competence; (2) check unlimited property accumulation; and (3) ensure the individual pursuit of happiness that stood at the center of their cherished republicanism.[19]

The late nineteenth-century conflicts between organized capital and organizing labor thus embodied, to no insignificant degree, a contest over the meaning of republicanism in modern America. The defenders of capitalism privileged the rights of property and translated the republican emphasis on the development of moral personality into a quantitative process measured by the calculus of the market. The adversaries of capitalism saw a discrepancy between republican ideals and daily experience and sought to stave off the "corrupt" encroachments of a new tyranny of capital. At stake in this contest over the meaning of republicanism and the control of instruments of power and production was the very definition of public culture and the public interpretation of reality.[20]

These, then, were the issues and challenges that generally shaped the struggles between labor and capital in America in the Gilded Age and specifically underwrote both the initial growth and the eventual defeat of the labor reform movement in Pittsburgh. From the late 1860s onward, miners, metalworkers, and glassworkers in Pittsburgh actively sought to challenge the "morality of improvement" that informed the discourse of their employers by promoting the virtues of "amalgamation" and "labor republicanism." Their efforts were guided by the dedica-

tion of labor leaders such as Thomas Armstrong, John McLuckie, and Thomas W. "Beeswax" Taylor, an English immigrant whose long career as a labor activist was punctuated by a seemingly contradictory blend of radical Chartism and personal ambition. By the 1880s, however, workers in Pittsburgh had met only limited success; plagued by internal dissension and external assault, the labor movement there abandoned its original hopes for political insurgency. As possibilities for constructing an alternative political agenda narrowed and the concerted attacks from business interests intensified, more and more Pittsburgh workers made their accommodation and retreated to what the *National Labor Tribune* itself called a "healthy conservatism."[21]

Next door in Homestead, however, the fortunes of labor in the 1880s took a distinctively different, defiant turn, one that has not been adequately appreciated by historians of this era. The standard version of Homestead we have inherited is a tale of yet another—perhaps the most dramatic and resounding—defeat of labor in America in the late nineteenth century, a Homestead summed up by the outcome of the lockout of 1892. Homestead in the 1880s, however, was very different: worker solidarity and political empowerment withstood the forces that were crushing labor throughout the country, not to mention a mere six miles away. Whereas workers in Pittsburgh were unable to sustain an organized resistance to assaults from without and tensions within the labor movement, Homesteaders succeeded in consolidating the disparate strains and discourses of labor into a united community strong enough to check the nation's mightiest steelmasters. Twice, in 1882 and 1889, the Homestead steelworkers defied the immeasurable resources of men such as Andrew Carnegie to defend their "American" rights. When they were challenged yet again in 1892, the entire nation looked at Homestead, knowing that the outcome of this third confrontation might well foretell the future of all steelworkers.

How and why the Homestead steelworkers succeeded, for one bold decade, in achieving the solidarity that Pittsburgh workers could not are questions that have not been addressed by scholars of Homestead's "failure" in 1892. The story of Homestead's pursuit of a "workers' republic" urges us to rethink the meaning of labor insurgency beyond the simple plot of its rise and fall.