
From Americans to Slavs and from Independence to Slavery

by Eugene V. Debs

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The *New York World* is entitled to a vote of thanks from every labor organization in the land for its exposition of the coke curse of Pennsylvania.

When the representative of the *World* visited the coke region, there were 15,000 men on strike, "of whom," says the *World*,

it is a fair estimate to say 12,000 are Slavonians, 1,500 are Germans, and the other 1,500 are composed of Irish, Scotch, negroes, and native white Americans. Not over 1,000 of the strikers, including the negroes, were born on American soil, and not over 2,000 of them can speak the English language. The great mass of the strikers, and especially the Slavs, are ignorant of our manners, customs, and language, and mean to stay in this country only long enough to save a few hundred dollars, when they hope to return whence they came, there to live in comparative ease on the money they have taken with them. They are the Chinese of the coke region.

This condition of the population of the coke region was brought about by the H.C. Frick Company,¹ a twin monstrosity of the Philadelphia & Reading Railroad Company, the history of which the *World* gives as follows:

¹ In July 1892 anarchist Alexander Berkman unsuccessfully attempted to assassinate the proprietor of the H.C. Frick Company, Henry Clay Frick. Two gunshots missed their mark but Frick was stabbed three times before Berkman was restrained. Berkman was sentenced to a term of 22 years, of which he ultimately served 14 before being released.

Years ago the mines and coke ovens were worked by native Americans, most of whom were born in the vicinity, and many of whom owned their little homes on the hillside and tilled a little plot of ground and kept a cow or two in connection with their work about the mines. As late as 1880 there were only about 3,000 coke ovens in this 400 and more square miles, which make up what is known as "The Connellsville Coke Region." Now there are nearly 16,000 ovens. But with the growth of the industry the native American has almost disappeared, and the work he used to do is now done by the imported "pauper labor of Europe."

In the foregoing, the reader has a word picture pleasing to the American ear. An artist could reproduce it on canvas and it would please the eye. The H.C. Frick Company has transformed this rural, this industrial district, where a few years since the people were contented, thrifty, and virtuous, into a hell, "where blood and carnage clothes the ground in crimson"² — where men, women, and children are evicted from their hovels and made to take their chances with rats and reptiles, foxes and groundhogs, to live and die, not even Frick or the devil caring what calamities overtake them.

About 1880, so says the *World's* account, there was a boom in the iron industries of the United States; an era of prosperity had dawned, but not for American workingmen; the men who should have reaped their full share of the prosperity were, instead, impoverished. From 3,000 coke ovens the number was increased to 8,000, and now to 16,000. With the demand for coke and the increase of ovens, came the absorption of small concerns by the larger ones, and now of the 16,000 ovens, the Frick monstrosity owns 10,000. With the boom in the iron industry, came the increased demand for coke, and it was then that the christianized H.C. Frick began the importation of European cheap labor. The *World* says:

The Frick Company sent to various employment agencies in Baltimore and Boston for laborers, and through these agencies the first installments of Slav immigrants were secured.

² Origin of the phrase is uncertain. The phrase was used in an 1854 essay "On War" by Pat Murphy, published in *The Opal*, a monthly magazine published by the patients of the New York State Lunatic Asylum in Utica, but this may well have been borrowed from an earlier poetic source.

When these Slavs arrived in the coke regions they were set to work at wages which, while far below those which the company was paying to its native employees, were still greatly in excess of the wages which the Slavs had been able to earn in their own country. The agents of the company induced many of them to send for brothers, cousins, and friends whom they knew at home to come to this greatly-favored land where so much could be earned in so short a time, and where what was, to them, a fortune could be saved in a few years.

But these Slavonians, almost before the operators were aware of it, had been induced to join the labor organization, and in 1886 there came a strike — a strike which at that time proved the largest and longest that the coke region had known. The Slavs went out with the rest of the workmen and stayed out until the strike was won. The operators then as new tried every means to fill the places of the strikers. Then as now families were evicted in scores, in the hope of frightening the others back to work. Then as now this refinement of coercion failed and the operators cast about for new men to fill the vacant places. The employment agencies had helped them before, why not again? And so to the agencies they went, with the result that within a few weeks hundreds of newly-imported Slavs came swarming into the region to take the places of the men who were fighting, as they said, for bread for their wives and babies.

These Slavs, or Slavonians, are, if possible, more degenerate than the Chinese. They are as distinct a class of foreigners as ever invaded American shores. Trained to work for wages upon which an American would starve, to live in dens that an American dog would bark at, and to live upon scavenger food that would make an average hog turn up its snout, they could not stand Frickism. The degradations and robberies inflicted by Frick under the laws of Pennsylvania were so infamously worse than they had ever known in Slavonia that the miserable creatures struck for their rights, struck against robbery, against further degradation, and what is the result? Some of them have been shot down like dogs, some of them are writhing in the agonies of their wounds, some are starving, and all are mad. There are at least 12,000 of these idle men in a strip of country 8 miles wide and 50 miles long, and area of an ordinary sized county in a western state.

The H.C. Frick Company found cheap labor. It exiled American labor. It imported Slavs. It has secured strikes, and first and last has been damaged to the amount of about \$4 million — and the miserable Slavs have doubtless lost half that amount. The World says that

the present price of coke is \$1.90 a ton; that an oven every other day will produce four tons of coke — and that the net profit is \$1.00 a ton. This is equivalent to supplying the H.C. Frick Company with 2 tons of coke from its 10,000 ovens daily or a net profit of \$20,000 a day, for say 315 working days of the year — a yearly profit of \$6,300,000.

From this work Americans are driven to make room for Slavs and now the Slavs are driven out by Italians and negroes — but to enable these creatures to be robbed and still further degraded Pinkerton thugs with shotted guns must constantly stand guard. The policy is Satanic, altogether infernalism. Why talk of a future hell? Here is one right under the nation's nose.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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