
The Homestead Horrors

by Eugene V. Debs

Published in *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, vol. 16, no. 9 (Sept. 1892), pp. 771-774.

Reflecting men are asking themselves, whither are we drifting? Are the Homestead horrors the dark shadows portending coming events? Are the free institutions of the republic and the liberties of the people in danger?

From the center to the circumference of the land there is unrest. It is asserted in Congress, in the dignified and conservative Senate that there are mighty forces in operation ominous of conflicts, the results of which cannot be contemplated with any degree of composure.

It will doubtless occur to many that the supreme demand of the times is to find the causes for the effects which we daily witness and which daily assume more alarming proportions.

Transactions at Homestead serve to bring into prominence other incidents which, though less serious, are of the same tenor and are the results of similar causes, and grouping these malignant symptoms, the conclusion is that peaceful remedies must speedily be found if Homestead horrors are to be avoided.

The employment of Pinkertons by capitalists to aid them in overcoming their employees, who, having been mercilessly plundered, resolve upon resistance, has been fruitful of universal discontent.

It has been well known from the first that the creatures called "Pinkertons" are, in a large majority of cases, made up of characterless vagabonds, ready and willing, for small compensation, to murder men unhesitatingly if ordered to do so.

These outcasts, organized and armed, have been for years hired by piratical capitalists, when circumstances demanded their assistance to overcome employees who had struck because wages were insufficient to purchase subsistence, or who resisted humiliation and degradation imposed by some vulgar beast permitted to act as boss. The term "Pinkerton" long ago became the synonym of all that is odious, hate-

ful, and abominable in human affairs. They were known to be callous hearted villains, characterless dwellers of slums, criminals by instinct, and dangerous anywhere, but when armed and equipped by piratical plutocrats, as in the Homestead horror, they become a thousand fold more dangerous to life and liberty and to the peace of communities.

These mercenary thugs, operated in defiance of all law, and those who employed them, whatever the difference in wealth and position, were of the same genus; therefore, H.C. Frick, who employed 300 of these murderers to do bloody work at Homestead, in all regards stands forth as despicable a wretch as the vilest of the gang.

These thugs cause the Homestead horror, for which one man, H.C. Frick, is responsible; all the bloodshed at Homestead, on the morning of July 6 [1892], stains his soul. A man of wealth and surrounded by all the luxury wealth can purchase, was still a monster of such insatiable greed, that rather than yield to demands for wages under which the Carnegie mills were making fabulous fortunes for their owners, he deliberately prepared for the scenes which resulted from his villainous plans.

The demand now is to suppress Pinkertonism by law. Laws are made by representatives of the people in legislatures and in Congress.

Workingmen, if united, can, in a majority of cases, elect men pledged to the suppression of Pinkertons.

If true to their interests, two years will not elapse until the Pinkerton disgrace of the country and of the age will be effectually suppressed.

The supreme hour for workingmen to act has come. If the question of crushing out Pinkertonism does not unite workingmen to vote *only* for men *pledged* to annihilate Pinkertonism, destroy it root and branch, then the question arises, what question is likely to demand, with greater emphasis, the united vote of workingmen?

It will not fail of notice that organized capital has already placed John McLuckie¹ and Hugh O'Donnell² under bonds of \$10,000 each to stand trial for murder in the second degree, the charge growing out

¹ **John McLuckie**, a former steelworker of radical pro-strike views, was the mayor of Homestead, PA.

² **Hugh O'Donnell**, a young skilled steelworker active in the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers (AAISW), emerged as the leader of the Carnegie millworkers in the Homestead strike. The prosecution of O'Donnell and McLuckie was an attempt to decapitate the leadership of the Homestead strikers.

of the killing of a number of Pinkerton thugs when they were murdering Homestead workingmen.³

Now, then, H.C. Frick admits that he hired 300 Pinkertons, equipped them with deadly rifles, mustered them upon barges, and shipped them to Homestead.

Did he order them to murder the Homestead workingmen? That has not been shown, but they did perpetrate murder and committed the awful crime with rifles which Frick purchased. Does that render him liable to arrest upon a charge of murder in the second degree? Why not? If McLuckie and O'Donnell were liable to such a charge because they were identified with the Homestead strikers, why is not Frick also liable, by being identified with the Pinkerton murderers?

For a few days there was talk of having Frick arrested. Those who studied the matter closely were forced to the conclusion that in a moment when organized labor should have had courage, enough and to spare, it, from some cause, became weak and timid, and trembled in the presence of the power of organized capital.

Frick's own testimony, showing him to have been in collusion with the Pinkerton murderers was far more explicit than any testimony brought against McLuckie and O'Donnell. In any event, if it was shown that McLuckie and O'Donnell were implicated in the proceedings resulting in the death of Pinkertons, proof still more positive was at hand showing that Frick was more directly involved in the plot by which a number of workingmen were killed.

It is barely possible that the attempt upon the life of Frick by Alexander Berkman, the Russian refugee, Jew, and anarchist, served to postpone legal proceedings against Frick, but if the wretch pulls through it is to be hoped that as soon as he is able to walk about the necessary papers will be served upon him, as it will be interesting to know to what extent wealth obscures murder in Pennsylvania.

The history of the Homestead horrors discloses the fact that the sheriff of Allegheny County, in which Pittsburgh and Homestead are situated, could not, after numerous trials, summon a sufficient number of men to take charge of the Carnegie mills. In this fact is a lesson of wonderful significance, demonstrating as it does, that public sentiment was hostile to Frick and all of his murderous schemes. The

³ The death toll of the "Battle of the Barges" outside the Homestead works included 7 strikers and 3 Pinkertons killed, with many others wounded in the protracted gun battle that followed an attempt of the Carnegie Steel Co. to land armed guards to hold the mill in the early morning hours of June 6, 1892.

people, except to a beggarly extent, would not obey the sheriff's summons. They did not want to be the tools of Frick to be used against honest workingmen. They could not be made to act as guards of mills transformed into forts for the purpose of killing workingmen. They knew the man, Frick, to be a tyrant who had used his power to impoverish and degrade workingmen, and what is true of Pittsburgh is also true of every city in the land, and a vast majority of the American people.

The Homestead horrors disclosed a purpose on the part of plutocratic employers to disrupt labor organizations, and those who are students of labor problems see, in the stand taken by the Carnegie concern, the coming conflict between organized capital and organized labor, or, more properly speaking, between an alliance of capitalists and labor organizations. Everywhere throughout the country the capitalistic alliance is in course of perfection. It is not demonstrative in its preparation. Its movements are stealthy and therefore all the more dangerous.

This is seen in the Frick program to overthrow the amalgamated order of iron workers. First, he fortified his mills, made elaborate preparations to kill workingmen if found necessary, by electricity and hot water. Then, quietly, he hired and armed mercenary murderers. These things accomplished, Frick was prepared to measure arms with a powerful labor organization.

The amalgamated order was scarce less confident. It had a large fund, reported at \$250,000. The conflict came. The Pinkerton thugs were defeated. That is the *one* plume in the cap of the amalgamated order, and has been said, ought to lead to the enactment of laws in every state for the suppression of the armed thugs. But in all else, in so far as the Homestead mills are concerned, Frick has won. The amalgamated order is overwhelmingly defeated and there is rejoicing in the camps of the capitalistic alliance. It is a notable victory for the alliance.

Organized labor may, we think, contemplate the situation with profit.

How did it happen? What forces came to the relief of the Carnegie concern to enable it to defeat the Homestead employees?

In the first place the laws of Pennsylvania were on the side of Frick — more properly speaking, on the side of the capitalistic alliance. The sheriff being unable to find men to oust workingmen and guard the mills and shoot down employees, the Governor of the state

was appealed to. For a few days the Governor thought the civil authorities had the power to respond to the request of Frick, but after repeated demands the entire military force of Pennsylvania, 8,000 men, with muskets and batteries, was ordered out under the command of an aristocrat, who had no more sympathy with workingmen than if they were prairie dogs, and with all the pomp and circumstance of war, the standing army of Pennsylvania,⁴ with guns, banners, and music, concentrated at Homestead, and the old employees of the Carnegie mills, whose only offense was that they resisted degradation, were at once subjected to all the annoyances, oppressions, humiliations, and degradations which a military machine had the power to inflict. The scenes enacted by this standing army were the same as distinguish the military machine in the meanest despotisms that curse the world. So disgraceful were they, so well calculated to create universal abhorrence, that the Governor had to interpose and reduce the army, General Snowden and all his shoulder-strapped lick-spittles, to mere deputy sheriffs; but this was not done until the whole country regarded Pennsylvania as the co-worker with Frick in perpetrating the most damnable outrages that ever disgraced the country.

It is seen that the powers the laws of Pennsylvania confer are all for the purpose of subjugating workingmen. This, Frick fully understood, but the amalgamated order seems to have been entirely oblivious of the fact.

Again, Frick knew that the country was full of scabs, men who would gladly take the places of the locked out employees, provided they could once again obtain admission to the mills. And here again, the standing army of Pennsylvania was utilized to afford the scab element protection and thus enable Frick to reduce wages to any level his degenerate soul might designate. Viewing the whole affair, it is seen that Frick has won a series of notable victories, and that the amalgamated order has suffered disastrous defeats and will not again be recognized by the Carnegie concern, the forces arrayed against the amalgamated order being capital, the military machine, and scabs.

The amalgamated order having a large membership and a large fund, having been able to dictate terms in numerous instances, concluded it was able to "go it alone." This confidence was the natural outgrowth of success and was natural, but the result of the Homestead conflict clearly indicates that the leaders of the amalgamated

⁴ Actually, the Pennsylvania National Guard.

order were wanting in that astuteness which provides for extraordinary occasions, such as Frick inaugurated.

The amalgamated order had small comprehension of the powers of endurance which capital possesses. It had a large fund, but it does not seem to have calculated how rapidly a fund disappears when it is applied to the support of 5,000 people. In fact, aside from its power to stop the operation of an industrial enterprise, it does not seem to have had any views at all as to the final outcome of a conflict with the Carnegie concern.

It is not the only order of workingmen in the United States that has made the mistake of fighting organized capital or the capitalistic alliance, singlehanded or alone; nor is the Homestead defeat of labor the first on record in which a labor organization overestimated its strength, nor is it the last if labor organizations continue to disregard the power and importance of federation.

It is worthy of notice that labor organizations throughout the country are passing resolutions of sympathy with the Homestead workingmen and denouncing Frick, Carnegie, and all other wage robbers. This is well if it leads to that general uprising in the ranks of labor which sets men to thinking how labor may unify for the triumph of labor against the capitalistic alliance. If it does not do this, if labor organizations form aristocratic notions, jealousies, or from any other cause prefer isolation, then the Homestead horrors will result in no benefits whatever to labor. One by one, labor organizations will disappear or be shorn of their power whenever the capitalistic alliance deems it prudent to crush them out of existence or leave them as mere skeletons, to rattle around for the “moral, social, and intellectual improvement of their members.”

It is reported that men in some of the Carnegie mills struck out of “sympathy” for the Homestead workingmen. “Sympathy” is not the word; the better term is *principle*. Frick concluded not to recognize the amalgamated order. Here is something upon which labor organizations can unite, a vital principle, and upon which they must unite if labor organizations hope to withstand future attacks; otherwise, defeat is inevitable.

Edited by Tim Davenport

1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR · May 2017 · Non-commercial reproduction permitted.
First Edition.