
Conflict and Consensus: The Steel Strike of 1959 and the Anatomy of the New Deal Order

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ABSTRACT

This article places the 1959 steel strike—the largest work stoppage in US history—within the trajectory of the New Deal order. We provide a multiscale account of the strike that stretches from the mills and corporate boardrooms, to Congress and the Oval Office, and back to the homes of steelworkers themselves. The strike crystallized the limits of postwar collective bargaining and Keynesian policy making to manage postwar economic growth. Those limitations allowed steelworkers to lay claim to the New Deal’s promise of industrial citizenship and defend the moral economy of their home life—but only for a brief time. Therefore, unpacking the steel strike along these lines recasts the entire New Deal order as a complex formation composed of multiple layers of social activity, each powered by its own internal dynamics, and each in contradictory relation to the others.

They handed us an issue,” United Steelworkers of America (USWA) President David McDonald remarked in early January 1960. Days earlier, his union and steel industry representatives, with a little help from Vice President Richard Nixon, had reached an agreement to end what by then had become the largest strike in the history of the United States. “I couldn’t have written the script

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better myself.”¹ The “issue” was the industry’s “8-point-plan to break the union,” devised by R. Conrad Cooper, United States Steel Corporation (US Steel) human resources director, productivity expert, and chief negotiator.² Cooper’s ambitious counteroffensive rested on a seemingly technical point: the elimination of Section 2-B from the industry standard collective bargaining agreement. First secured by the USWA in 1947, 2-B established that steel mill managers could not alter established work practices unless the introduction of new technology required it.³ Unwilling to expend the capital needed to modernize overbuilt and obsolescent plants, steel executives believed that future profitability hinged on their ability to wring more labor out of fewer workers.

The assault on union work rules became just the issue needed to mobilize a membership battered by a recession-plagued economy. For 116 days in the summer and fall of 1959, more than half a million workers across the country shut down the massive basic steel industry. In terms of person-hours idled it was, and would remain, the largest work stoppage in US history. And when the USWA won, the stakes were not lost on contemporary observers. In an essay published only days after the final agreement, Paul Sweezy and the editors of the heterodox Marxist journal *Monthly Review* declared that the fight over 2-B had mobilized a long complacent union membership; they concluded that the strike portended a period of “intensified class struggle in the United States.”⁴ Jack Metzgar’s moving memoir, *Striking Steel*, remembers the four-month walkout as the apogee of the tremendous sense of “liberation” felt by rank-and-file steelworkers in the 1950s. But the kind of class struggle that steelworkers waged in 1959 remained bound up in tensions of its own and forecast what lay ahead for the industrial working class.⁵ Writing in the immediate aftermath of the strike, social critic Daniel Bell saw the strike as only a tragic expression of the “subversion of collective bargaining.” In effect, big business and big labor faced off in a “mimetic” conflict, one “painfully real in the sense that emotions are aroused, but unreal because no economic loss can occur” for either of the parties involved.⁶ Therefore, the union’s dogged defense of work rules “was primarily a symbolic test

1. Quoted in Paul Tiffany, *The Decline of American Steel: How Management, Labor, and Government Went Wrong* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 165.

2. On the eight-point plan, see David Stebenne, *Arthur J. Goldberg: New Deal Liberal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 202.

3. See James D. Rose, “The Struggle over Management Rights at US Steel, 1946–1960: A Reassessment of Section 2-B of the Collective Bargaining Contract,” *Business History Review* 72, no. 3 (Autumn 1998): 446–77.

4. Editors, “The Steel Strike in Perspective,” *Monthly Review* 11, no. 9 (February 1960), 360.

5. Jack Metzgar, *Striking Steel: Solidarity Remembered* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000).

6. Daniel Bell, “The Subversion of Collective Bargaining,” *Commentary*, March 1960, 697.

of authority” with “no vital economic issue at stake.”⁷ Only voiceless consumers and the unorganized suffered the consequences of this labor-management accord.

Although more skeptical about the durability of working-class institutions at the dawn of the 1960s, scholars have tended more toward Sweezy than Bell in their assessments of the 1959 strike. David Stebenne’s rich biography of USWA general counsel Arthur Goldberg frames the steel strike as a key episode in the 1950s managerial counteroffensive against organized labor, as well as in the struggle over the social democratic promise of what he calls the “postwar New Deal.”⁸ Faced with an impending profitability crisis, the historian Robert Brenner concludes that the steel-makers—like other industrial capitalists—were committed to drawing a hard line at the point of production. Thus, a strike over work rules “won the union virtually nothing” and simply set off “a long and precipitous process of decline” for organized labor.⁹ The steel strike—along with the 1958 auto and 1960 electrical workers’ strikes—further restricted the scope of collective bargaining to the firm level and foreclosed more ambitious visions of industrial codetermination.¹⁰ According to Judith Stein, a steel strike could do little to challenge a macroeconomic policy-making consensus that could no longer comprehend, much less maintain, “the marriage between modernization and working-class progress, the essence of New Deal liberalism.”¹¹ Thus, the “fragile juggernaut” of industrial unionism—to borrow historian Robert Zieger’s phrase—proved unable to fundamentally challenge business prerogatives at the bargaining table or in politics.¹²

The fight over 2-B did indeed expose the contradictions wracking the postwar order. In an era of supposedly routine collective bargaining, the strike resulted in the first presidential Taft-Hartley injunction, an unfavorable Supreme Court ruling upholding it, and, for many workers’ households, the depletion of their life savings. It also opened the door to a flood of foreign-produced steel, making 1959 the first year that steel imports exceeded exports. Thereafter, a chronic trade deficit

7. *Ibid.*, 709.

8. Stebenne, *Goldberg*. On the managerial counteroffensive, see Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 98–141; Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream* (London: Verso, 1986), 123; Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Free Enterprise* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 42–43; Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan* (New York: Norton, 2009), 87–114.

9. Robert Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence: The Advanced Capitalist Economies from Long Boom to Long Downturn, 1945–2005* (London: Verso, 2006), 62, 63.

10. See Michel Aglietta, *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation: The US Experience* (1976; repr., London: Verso, 2015), 194–96.

11. Judith Stein, *Running Steel, Running America: Race, Economic Policy, and the Decline of American Liberalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 4, 21–22.

12. Robert Zieger, *The CIO, 1935–1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 227.

haunted the industry, particularly those people whose labor made it tick.¹³ That the steelworkers won, and that they did so on the heels of a deep recession in 1957–58, was no small feat. Yet the best that David McDonald could plausibly claim was that the USWA had held their ground in the face of an assault and had maintained the status quo ante. Most scholarship on the strike affirms this conclusion and then moves on.

If labor-management relations were never stable, however, neither was the larger postwar political economy within which they took shape. A close examination of the largest strike to occur during that period, the consequences of which extended from the point of production to the corporate boardroom, from Congress and the White House back into the homes of steelworkers themselves, can then help to illuminate the dynamics at the center of a capitalist system in flux. This article seeks to trace those various consequences, and in so doing it makes three substantive points. First, the attack on work rules enshrined in 2-B arose out of the *political* weakness of industrial management relative to the strength of organized labor. In policy makers' imagination—Republicans and Democrats—steel in particular remained an industry too vital, too fundamental, to be left to the vicissitudes of private collective bargaining.¹⁴ Both the White House and Congress were unwilling to tolerate significant inflation, which given the centrality of the dollar of the international monetary system became an issue of imperial significance.

A second and related point is that the strike reveals the close relationship between workplace struggle and larger questions of *economic* policy, in particular those regarding inflation. Collective bargaining rested on the joint increase in wages and productivity—the basic condition of postwar growth. But with nascent social democratic market controls dismantled by congressional conservatives after the war, capital and labor fought a potentially endless battle at the bargaining table over wages and prices. “Depoliticized” collective bargaining threatened to redistribute wealth toward industrial labor and capital and away from the rest of society through the mechanism of inflation. As a result, collective bargaining could not remain outside of politics for long.¹⁵ But according to the vast literature on the New Deal order and other Western social democracies, the logic of postwar Keynesianism supposedly

13. William T. Hogan, *Economic History of the Iron and Steel Industry in the United States* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1971), 5:2035.

14. On steel “fundamentalism,” see Stein, *Running Steel*, 7–36.

15. See Lichtenstein, *State of the Union*, 122–25; Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 179–261. See also Charles Maier, “The Politics of Productivity: Foundations of American International Economic Policy,” in *In Search of Stability: Explorations in Historical Political Economy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 121–52.

restricted class conflict to questions of distribution and consumption.¹⁶ The advent of a “new inflation” during the 1950s, however, kept the politics of production at front and center. In a period marked by rising prices and high unemployment, policy makers and economists clashed over whether the new inflation was “pushed” by rising labor costs or “pulled” by an excess of demand stemming from dwindling output.¹⁷ Assigning blame for the new inflation anticipated the same debates over the “stagflation” of the 1970s.¹⁸ Therefore, by reexamining the 1959 steel strike, it becomes clear that struggles over the distribution of postwar wealth began at the point of production.

Finally, the strike revolved around conflicts in the mills that made their way inside the steelworker *households*. As many historians have argued, the 1940s and 1950s saw the recasting of working-class subjectivity: by gathering the largely white, unionized workers of major northern industries into racially segregated, economically secure neighborhoods organized into heterosexual, patriarchal nuclear families, the postwar political economy remade the expectations and identities of the millions of people whose livelihoods derived from industries like steel.¹⁹ The ratcheting up of industrial turbulence in the late 1950s thus threatened to violate what was, for workers, a deeply felt social contract. Periodic layoffs and production speed-ups were not only economically burdensome but profound humiliations. For the steelmakers, driving workers harder required constructing a network of middle managers who possessed the authority to discipline organized workers at the point of production. The petty tyranny men endured at the mills could often translate into its own tyranny at home, fueling antagonisms long endemic in steelworkers’ family life.

16. See Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, “The Crisis of Liberal Democratic Capitalism: The Case of the United States,” *Politics and Society* 11, no. 1 (March 1982): 67; Claus Offe, “Competitive Party Democracy and the Keynesian Welfare State,” in *Contradictions of the Welfare State*, ed. John Keane (London: Hutchinson, 1984); Jonas Pontusson, *The Limits of Social Democracy: Investment Politics in Sweden* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 7; Wolfgang Streeck, *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2014), 33–34.

17. Norikazu Takami, “The Baffling New Inflation: How Cost-Push Theories Influenced Policy Debate in the Late-1950s United States,” *History of Political Economy* 47, no. 4 (December 2015): 605–29. For contemporary examples, see Willard L. Thorp and Richard E. Quandt, *The New Inflation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959); G. L. Bach, *The New Inflation: Causes, Effects, Cures* (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 1958).

18. The literature on the 1970s stagflation is vast. See, e.g., Niall Ferguson et al., eds., *The Shock of the Global: The 1970s in Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); and Judith Stein, *Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance in the Seventies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

19. Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), and *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy since the 1960s* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2012).

But two decades of stable industrial unionism also left workers less willing to suffer the indignities without pushing back against someone or something. Not without contradictions of its own, that resistance—demonstrated at home and at work, at the union hall, the bar, and the polling place—erupted in 1959 in a strike of proportions never seen in the United States before or since.

What follows is an attempt to situate the strike within the trajectory of the New Deal order—that is the series of liberal reforms and electoral coalitions that made the regulatory state, in one form or another, the dominant organizing force in American politics from the 1930s to the 1970s. To do so, we provide a multiscale account of the steel strike. In their attempt to revitalize historical class analysis, Geoff Eley and Keith Nield write of a hypothetical factory: “The factory is self-evidently a unit of economic production. It exists in a chain of circulation of commodities and money from the local through the national to the global and back. At the same time, it provides a microworld of culture, a site where the particular cultural coordinates of local time and place obtain, operate, and intersect. The factory—or any other locus of production—provides both an economic and a cultural setting in these terms. Each of these faculties deserves a different register of analysis.”²⁰ The strike, although partly caused by maneuvers in Washington and certainly resolved there, cannot be understood through political history alone.²¹ Nor, despite its clear determinants in the structure of the postwar political economy, can a political economy method account for the scale and intensity of the contest.²² And social and cultural history, while necessary to grasp the world of the steelworkers whose grievances fed the conflict, do not suffice to understand the institutional and economic mechanisms forcing state intervention.²³ Therefore, we situate the 1959 steel strike as one of the most intense conflicts underpinning the supposed consensus of postwar capitalism.

STEEL AT MIDCENTURY

Despite management complaints over its hefty wage bill, profitability was strong in the American steel industry through the 1950s.²⁴ The major steel firms main-

20. While we would insert the state at the mesolevel of analysis, and add “political” to the “economic” and “cultural” setting, the following analysis is an effort to make good on this idea. Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, *The Future of Class in History: What’s Left of the Social?* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 199.

21. For the foundational New Deal order text, see the essays collected in Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930–1980* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

22. For the political economy approach, see Stein, *Pivotal Decade*.

23. For culturalism, see Jefferson Cowie, *The Long Exception: The New Deal and the Limits of American Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

24. Hogan, *Economic History of the Iron and Steel Industry*, 5:2092.

tained these margins through an annual ritual of granting their workers substantial wage increases only to raise prices by at least as much soon thereafter.²⁵ This pattern, which sociologist Daniel Bell had decried as the subversion of collective bargaining, continued through the end of the decade. Notwithstanding the four nationwide strikes that occurred during those 10 years, it was the kernel of truth behind the idea of a labor-management accord that so captivated the postwar academic industrial relations community. During that decade, steelworker earnings did increase dramatically, even in real terms, but so too did industry profits, and on balance the distribution of the total income remained basically unchanged.²⁶ The durability of even this lopsided stalemate, however, was always tenuous. It depended, above all, on continued gains in productivity and the absence of inflation. Neither of these conditions was likely to hold for long.

A handsome rate of profit, however, was only one marker of business success. Power mattered too. And in the middle of the twentieth century, steelmakers correctly understood that the extent of their power was tied directly to the support they did or did not receive from elected officials and bureaucrats in Washington, DC. Congressional conservatives in the late 1940s might have dismantled the tripartite bargaining institutions of World War II and passed the Taft-Hartley Act precisely to curb the social democratic character of the New Deal, but steel negotiations remained a highly public affair throughout the 1950s. Indeed, with the United States at war in Korea, the Truman administration—desperate to ensure maximum production with price stability, especially in steel—established a new wage-price control program that, much to the chagrin of corporate executives, resembled its remarkably successful 1940s predecessor, the Office of Price Administration.²⁷ What was more, when steel industry officials expressed their displeasure at the revival of such corporatism by disregarding the wage board's recommendations for a pay raise and union shop agreement with no change in price, the president ignored Taft-Hartley's emergency disputes provisions and took the unprecedented step of nationalizing the industry in April 1952.²⁸ Although swiftly struck down by the Supreme Court, Truman's abortive seizure crystallized long-standing business hostility to politicized bargaining.

25. Tiffany, *Decline of American Steel*, 137–53.

26. Stebenne, *Goldberg*, 132–40.

27. Tiffany, *Decline of American Steel*, 94–102. On business hostility to the Office of Price Administration, see Meg Jacobs, "How about Some Meat? The Office of Price Administration, Consumption Politics, and State Building from the Bottom Up, 1941–1946," *Journal of American History* 84, no. 3 (December 1997): 910–41.

28. Maeva Marcus, *Truman and the Steel Seizure Case: The Limits of Presidential Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

For a moment, the steelmakers had reason to hope that, having survived the Roosevelt and Truman years, the worst might be behind them. While stumping for the presidency that summer, Dwight Eisenhower strongly hinted that he would readily use the Taft-Hartley Act's injunctive powers to keep the steel mills running.²⁹ The former general appealed to the "business realists" who tolerated collective bargaining as a solution to industrial strife but continued to search for ways to throttle union power.³⁰ "Labor can hardly count on General Eisenhower," *Fortune* magazine predicted shortly after his sweeping November victory, "to make any such effort in support of a union, and in opposition to management, as Truman made during the [1952] steel strike."³¹ In his first State of the Union address Eisenhower went further and envisioned an economy free of "bureaucratic despotism" and "government paternalism in labor relations."³² Furthermore, his anti-union appointees to the National Labor Relations Board rapidly overturned many of the board's pro-union rulings issued during the previous two administrations.³³ The "Eisenhower transition" therefore did much to weaken the institutional capacity of the New Deal's labor policy regime.³⁴

Despite the new president's economic conservatism, however, he could hardly launch a frontal assault against the organized working class. Eisenhower detested what he saw as the naked class interests of unions. But with organized labor at the zenith of its twentieth-century power, he idealized a "corporate commonwealth" that included a real, if subordinate, place for working people in the management of the economy.³⁵ Shifting ideological coordinates within the USWA did much to encourage the Eisenhower administration to accommodate steel unionism. Only

29. Albert Clark, "Charm Sessions: Taft, Ike Meet New Jersey Republican Delegates," *Wall Street Journal*, June 13, 1952, 1.

30. Stebenne, *Goldberg*, 95. See also Howell John Harris, *The Right to Manage: Industrial Relations Policies of American Business in the 1940s* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 26–32.

31. "Picking Up the Pieces," *Fortune*, December 1952, 84.

32. Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union," February 2, 1953, in *The American Presidency Project*, ed. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=9829>.

33. James A. Gross, *Broken Promise: The Subversion of U.S. Labor Relations, 1947–1994* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 92–121.

34. M. Stephen Weatherford, "The Eisenhower Transition: Labor Policy in the New Political Economy," *Studies in American Political Development* 28, no. 2 (October 2014): 202.

35. Robert Griffith, "Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Corporate Commonwealth," *American Historical Review* 87, no. 1 (February 1982): 108. On the midcentury relationship between organized labor and Republicans, see Kristoffer Smemo, "The Little People's Century: Industrial Pluralism, Economic Development, and the Emergence of Liberal Republicanism in California, 1942–1946," *Journal of American History* 101, no. 4 (March 2015): 1166–89.

weeks after the 1952 election, the death of longtime steelworkers president and committed social democrat Phillip Murray elevated the much more conservative David McDonald to the USWA presidency. McDonald pushed for conciliatory relations with steel management, threatened to march the steelworkers out of the CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations; now led by Walter Reuther of the auto-workers), and pointedly rejected “Reutherite social democracy” in favor of a “centrist non-partisanship” easily compatible with Eisenhower Republicanism.³⁶ And Eisenhower heartily approved of the new USWA chief, noting in his diary “my own opinion of Mr. McDonald is very high.”³⁷ Even business conservatives such as Treasury Secretary George Humphrey could muster a begrudging admiration for McDonald. The new steelworkers chief, Humphrey noted, occupied a “very difficult position as a conservative union leader” pressured by militants within his own union and by his nemesis Walter Reuther to bargain aggressively for more expansive demands such as a guaranteed annual wage.³⁸

Although Eisenhower formally committed his administration to “free collective bargaining”—that is, to ending White House involvement in labor disputes—McDonald frequently visited the Oval Office during the 1954 contract negotiations, the first to occur under the new president’s watch. Although eager to use the recession after the end of the Korean War to wring concessions from labor, the Eisenhower administration privately urged the major steel firms to cut a deal with the union. Anxious about a prolonged strike, the president argued that drawing a hard line would only isolate the pacific McDonald and embolden more radical elements in the USWA and the labor movement as a whole.³⁹ The tactic worked, leading one executive to concede that above all the industry simply “wants a reasonable conservative man running the union, not some socialist element.”⁴⁰ Although faced with 200,000 unemployed steelworkers, high inventories, and low demand from automobile manufacturers, McDonald managed to secure wage increases and bring benefits into line with those won by the United Automobile Workers in their his-

36. Robert H. Zieger, “Leadership and Bureaucracy in the Late CIO,” *Labor History* 31, no. 3 (Summer 1990): 258. On the internal politics of the USWA after the Murray era, see John Herling, *Right to Challenge: People and Power in the Steelworkers Union* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

37. Notes on David McDonald, typescript, April 8, 1954, Diary series, box 4, folder DDE Personal Diary Jan.–Nov. 1954 (2), Dwight D. Eisenhower Papers as President (hereafter EPP), Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, Kansas.

38. “Labor,” *Fortune*, January 1954, 65–66; Cabinet meeting minutes, typescript, June 24, 1954, pp. 1–2, Cabinet series, box 3, folder Cabinet meeting of June 24, 1954, EPP.

39. Phone call notes, Thursday, typescript, April 8, 1954, Diary series, box 5, folder Phone Calls—Jan.–May 1954 (2), EPP; “Labor,” *Fortune*, August 1954, 47–48; Cabinet meeting minutes, June 24, 1954.

40. Quoted in “Labor,” *Fortune*, August 1954, 47–48.

toric 1950 “Treaty of Detroit.” Two years later, amid a month-long walkout in the summer of 1956, Eisenhower again threatened to intervene on terms unfavorable to steel management, this time by appointing a fact-finding board likely to be sympathetic to the USWA rather than issuing a Taft-Hartley injunction ordering the steelworkers back into the mills.⁴¹ The administration’s stance provided the union with the political leverage needed to secure its first three-year contract, complete with 7 percent annual wage increases, supplemental unemployment benefits, cost-of-living adjustments (COLAs), and an industry-wide union shop—all this with the help of a Republican president formally committed to remaining aloof from shop floor conflicts.⁴²

THE “NO. 1 DOMESTIC ECONOMIC PROBLEM”

The 1956 bargaining round that the Eisenhower administration helped to broker proved a turning point. Over the course of the three-year contract, the two conditions on which the steel industry’s postwar wage-price profit strategy rested, economic growth and price stability, both gave way. By the middle of 1957, unemployment and inflation were rising in tandem—a peculiar new inflation whose sources neither conventional theory nor recent experience was of much help in explaining—and industry officials began to understand just how costly their earlier concessions could be. The union estimated the COLA alone to be worth \$250 million over the life of the contract.⁴³ What was more, the steelmakers soon found themselves the targets of those seeking to assign blame for what contemporaries at the time referred to as “new inflation.” When, days after the late July settlement, US Steel led the industry in what in years past would have been a routine, if undesirable, price increase, President Eisenhower publicly cautioned that their action might be a “danger sign” of inflation to come and promised to “watch it closely every day.”⁴⁴ Lest that remark be interpreted as last-minute electioneer-

41. George Strong to Joseph F. Finnegan, July 12, 1956, series 3, 1956—Steel Strike (1), box 91, James P. Mitchell Papers, Eisenhower Presidential Library.

42. Dictated phone call from M. S. Pitzele to Edward T. Cheyfitz, typescript, July 27, 1956, series 3, box 91, folder 1956—Steel Strike (2), Mitchell Papers; James P. Mitchell to Clifford F. Hood, July 28, 1956, Mitchell Papers; “How Steel Settlement Came—and Where It Leads,” *Business Week*, July 28, 1956, 26–27.

43. Otis Brubaker and Marvin Miller to David McDonald, et al., Research Department, Marvin Miller Papers, box 50, Cost of Living, 1956–68, United Steelworkers of America, Research Department Records (1965), Historical Collections and Labor Archives, Special Collections Library, Pennsylvania State University. To put that figure in perspective, the industry averaged \$1.1 billion in after-tax profits between 1955 and 1957. Hogan, *Economic History of the Iron and Steel Industry*, 5:2092.

44. “Eisenhower Notes a ‘Danger Sign’ of Inflation,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 9, 1956, 2.

ing, he repeated the sentiment in his 1957 State of the Union address.⁴⁵ The Republican's uncharacteristically critical words were a harbinger.⁴⁶

Eisenhower's concerns, to be sure, were about more than US Steel. During the 1950s, the US economy ran a balance-of-payments deficit in every year but one, and that trend would not reverse in the decades to come. Initially assumed under the objective of rescuing war-devastated and politically unstable Western European states thirsting for safe dollars with which to rebuild their economies, by the end of the decade the payment deficits had accumulated into a global dollar glut. The emergence in the late 1950s of the European Economic Community, which attracted large sums of American foreign direct investment, along with the growth of a vast and unregulated Eurodollar market, intensified matters. With Europe awash in greenbacks, which under the Bretton Woods system could be converted to gold at a fixed rate, the imperative of maintaining confidence in the soundness of the dollar took on new proportions.⁴⁷ Indeed, that the US gold stock fell in six of Eisenhower's eight years in office—as foreign holders of dollars increasingly opted for ancient metallic certainty over the postwar American state's word—surely alerted the administration to the stakes of the situation.⁴⁸ Modest, or as contemporaries described it, “creeping,” inflation was dangerous not only because, under the fixed-exchange-rate regime, it could harm the US trade balance but also because it signaled further erosion in the value of the dollar, the very foundation of the American financial empire; weakness in this foundation might lead to Soviet gains in the Cold War.⁴⁹

These global forces reshaped the American steel industry. Between 1950 and 1960, as production recovered across Europe and in Japan, the US share of world

45. Dwight D. Eisenhower, “Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union,” January 10, 1957, in Peters and Woolley, *American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=11029>. Eisenhower had hardly uttered the word “inflation” in public during his first term, but after his reelection, inflation became one of the administration's chief domestic concerns. In the 1957 State of the Union, he chastised both labor and management for negotiating “wage increases that outrun productivity” and thus contributed to inflation.

46. The 1957 *Economic Report of the President* devoted more attention to inflation than it had in years past, focusing in particular on its relationship to steel prices. See H. Scott Gordon, “The Eisenhower Administration: Doctrine of Shared Responsibility,” in *Exhortations and Controls: The Search for a Wage-Price Policy, 1945–1971*, ed. Craufurd Goodwin (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1975), 99, 118.

47. See Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire* (London: Verso, 2012), 111–32.

48. Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, “The U.S. Balance of Payments, 1947–1960,” *Monthly Review*, March 1961.

49. On “creeping” inflation, see Takami, “Baffling New Inflation”; and Robert Leeson, “The Eclipse of the Goal of Zero Inflation,” *History of Political Economy* 29, no. 3 (June 1997): 444–96.

steel output fell from almost half to 26 percent.⁵⁰ In the years leading up to the strike, however, the effects of the international scene were more incidental than direct. Rising steel prices might, through a causal relationship with inflation, place downward pressure on the value of the dollar, but they did not necessarily portend the industry's decline. Steel exports continued to exceed imports until the 1959 strike, and the domestic market share claimed by foreign producers in 1958 was as yet below 3 percent.⁵¹ The competitive position of American steel firms did deteriorate appreciably in the decade after the strike—by 1968 foreign steel manufacturers would control 17 percent of the US market, and between 1962 and 1974 steel imports grew by more than 300 percent, or more than six times as much as the US gross national product.⁵² But in the mid-1950s, this rapid downfall still lay ahead.

Of greater concern to economic policy makers than the specter of competition from abroad was the apparent absence of any competition in the market for steel at home. It was over this issue that the industry's pricing policy broke down during the life of the 1956 collective bargaining agreement, a political crisis that led US Steel chief executive Roger Blough and his labor relations lieutenant R. Conrad Cooper to issue the eight-point plan that precipitated the largest strike in US history. The episode began in July 1957, when, with a new round of wage and COLA increases scheduled to come due, US Steel announced yet another sizable tonnage rate increase. The 11 other producers that, along with the industry leader, controlled 80 percent of the domestic market followed suit.⁵³ Such undeniable collusion was hardly new to those atop the nation's most "fundamental" industry. At least since the 1901 emergence of US Steel—out of the deflationary wreckage of the late nineteenth century—steelmakers had come to understand the virtues of solidarity well, at least when it came to pricing.⁵⁴

But just as the steelmakers raised prices, the first tremors in what would become the sharpest economic contraction since 1937 were beginning to register. Equally alarming, in spite of this increasing slack, the national price indexes con-

50. Hogan, *Economic History of the Iron and Steel Industry*, 5:2034.

51. Hans van der Ven and Thomas Grunert, "The Politics of Transatlantic Steel," in *The Politics of Steel: Western Europe and the Steel Industry in the Crisis Years, 1974–1984*, ed. Yves Meny et al. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1986), 138–39.

52. Hogan, *Economic History of the Iron and Steel Industry*, 5:2086; Stein, *Running Steel*, 202.

53. Tiffany, *Decline of American Steel*, 137–53; Carroll Kilpatrick, "Steel Price Increase Denounced," *New York Times*, June 29, 1957; "Another Round?," *Wall Street Journal*, July 1, 1957; "Kefauver Calls for a 'Thorough' Study to Determine the Reason for Inflation," *New York Times*, July 8, 1957; "Kefauver Plans Quiz of Industry Prices," *Washington Post*, July 8, 1957.

54. See Thomas McCraw and Forrest Reinhardt, "Losing to Win: U.S. Steel's Pricing, Investment Decisions, and Market Share, 1901–1938," *Journal of Economic History* 49, no. 3 (September 1989): 593–619.

tinued to climb during the months to come. This was, indeed, the first expression of the phenomenon that in the 1970s would earn the name stagflation. By the standards of that later iteration, when annual inflation and unemployment rates of around 10 percent shocked the global economy, the severity of this late-1950s “new inflation” was no doubt modest—over the 18 months ending in June 1958, at which point a recovery was in progress, wholesale prices had climbed at a per annum rate of just below 4 percent while unemployment rose from around 4 percent to more than 7 percent.⁵⁵ Historian Judith Stein has noted that, given the relatively small absolute magnitude of inflation in the late 1950s, those concerned with the future of American steel production might have done well to worry less about the industry’s short-term pricing practices than its long-term structural soundness, that is, by pursuing a more comprehensive industrial policy.⁵⁶ This may be so. But it was the novelty and not the scale of the “new inflation” that drew the attention of increasing numbers of policy makers and commentators.

Senator Estes Kefauver, a populist-inclined New Deal Democrat from Tennessee, who had run with Adlai Stevenson on the 1956 presidential ticket, made sure people took notice. Immediately after the 1957 price hike, Kefauver used his chairmanship of the Senate Subcommittee on Antitrust and Monopoly to initiate an investigation into “administered prices” in American industry, with steel as the first target.⁵⁷ Inspired by the Depression Era work of the institutional economist Gardiner Means, who served as a key witness in the opening hearing, Kefauver sought to get to the bottom of what he called the “No. 1 domestic economic problem—the problem of inflation.”⁵⁸ In the past, when the economy operated according to classical principles, Kefauver—following Means—held, prices fluctuated with demand. With the rise of the modern corporation and the tremendous concentration of the

55. Inflation and employment data are from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (<https://www.bls.gov/>).

56. Stein, *Running Steel*, 20–21.

57. The investigation into “administered prices” lasted from 1957 to 1961, leaving behind 29 volumes of hearings and five official reports on a range of industries. Most famous was the subcommittee’s 1960 probe into the pharmaceutical industry, one that resulted in the 1962 Kefauver-Harris amendment to the Food and Drug Act. See Robert Bud, “Antibiotics, Big Business, and Consumers: The Context of Government Investigations into the Postwar American Drug Industry,” *Technology and Culture* 46, no. 2 (April 2005): 329–49; Daniel Scroop, “A Faded Passion? Estes Kefauver and the Senate Subcommittee on Antitrust and Monopoly,” *Business and Economic History On-Line: Papers Presented at the BHC Annual Meeting* 5 (2007). See also Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics*, 256–61. On the subcommittee’s investigation into steel and related public policies, see *Administered Prices: Hearing before the Senate Subcommittee on Antitrust and Monopoly of the Judiciary Committee, 85th Cong., 1st sess.* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1957), pts. 1–4 and 8–10; *Administered Prices, Steel: Report of the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate Made by Its Subcommittee on Antitrust and Monopoly, 85th Cong., 2d. sess.* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1958); *Compendium on Public Policies* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1963).

58. *Administered Prices*, pt. 1:1.

US economy, however, firms with substantial market power were able to administer prices with only a target profit in mind. Rather than responding to lower demand with lower prices, these industrial giants cut production (and jobs) while maintaining or even increasing prices. Monopoly—or more precisely, oligopoly—power, that is, was the only explanation for the simultaneous incidence of inflation and recession.⁵⁹

After extensive hearings in the summer and fall of 1957, the subcommittee's final report issued a blistering indictment of the industry, and especially of its leader US Steel. "No matter what the change in cost or demand," it concluded, "steel prices since 1947 have moved steadily and regularly in only one direction, upward." Indeed, they actually continued to "climb even when unit labor costs declined."⁶⁰ The USWA, for one, immediately understood the implications of the Kefauver Subcommittee's analysis. Upon its release, USWA Research Director Otis Brubaker circulated a memo to all union officers across the country, informing them that the steel report presented "a serious indictment of the Steel Industry, and particularly of its pricing system and practices," which "substantiates the major conclusions which were presented by the Steelworkers Union in its testimony."⁶¹ It should, therefore, prove "extremely useful to our Union in the current public controversy over whether wage increases are responsible for inflation or whether it is the greed of the Industry for exorbitant Profits and profit margins that is the culprit. The findings of the Sub-committee place the entire responsibility for this inflation on the Steel Industry and its pricing policies."⁶² The industry, of course, felt differently.

Over the course of the next year, steel executives responded by stepping up their public relations campaign on the wage-price issue. In a widely covered address before the Economic Club of Detroit in the fall of 1958, Blough blasted the Kefauver's investigation as "a campaign of calumny peddled from high places" that drew on "wonderland arithmetic" in its mission of establishing a "profitless profit system."⁶³ US Steel next published and widely circulated *Steel and Inflation: Fact vs. Fiction*, a 300-page volume that combined contributions from senior executives with a few essays from go-to industry economist Jules Backman of New York University, all

59. For Means's testimony, see *ibid.*, pt. 1:74–125. See also Gardiner Means, *Pricing Power and the Public Interest: A Study Based on Steel* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962).

60. *Administered Prices, Steel*, 129.

61. Brubaker to Officers on Kefauver Committee Report, May 6, 1958, box 40, Prices (General), 1956–63, Marvin Miller Papers, Research Department, USWA.

62. *Ibid.*

63. "Steel Chief Assails Profit System Foes," *New York Times*, September 16, 1956; "Blough Assails Critics of Pricing Practices in American Industry," *Wall Street Journal*, September 16, 1958.

intended to provide “the *facts* about our costs, our prices, and our profits.”⁶⁴ And in early 1959, as the collective bargaining process was getting back underway, the American Iron and Steel Institute rolled out a massive campaign, “Inflation Robs Us All,” which included spots in more than 400 newspapers around the country, all seeking to place the blame for the new economic instability on union wages.⁶⁵ However well organized, their effort was a rearguard struggle. In 1957 and 1958, the politics surrounding the “new inflation” had rendered their old pricing strategy untenable.⁶⁶

The question of the extent to which steel pricing actually contributed to the latter 1950s new inflation may be best left to more quantitative studies. That said, at the time four out of the five professional economists who spoke before the Kefauver Subcommittee believed that it did, although they were split on the fundamental question whether the higher prices resulted from labor cost increases over and above productivity improvements, as the industry maintained, or simply from corporate pricing power, as the union maintained.⁶⁷ The Kefauver Subcommittee’s economists sided with the latter, while Otto Eckstein, Harvard economist and future Council of Economic Advisers (CEA) member in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, supported the former view in a report prepared for the Joint Economic Committee in late 1959.⁶⁸ The steel industry’s outright refusal to make its costs publicly available—“our costs,” Blough tersely replied to Kefauver’s request for such data, “are confidential” and “are not important to the consideration of your committee”—no doubt made definitive conclusions challenging.⁶⁹ But that the issue provoked such a debate, and had revived and validated such heterodox perspectives as those of Gardiner Means, illuminated to steel executives the new stakes of their pricing decisions. By early 1959, even Raymond Saulnier, Eisenhower’s conservative CEA chair,

64. US Steel, *Steel and Inflation: Fact vs. Fiction* (Pittsburgh: US Steel, 1958).

65. “Inflation Robs Us All,” January–April 1959, box 49, Economics—Inflation (2 of 2), Hagley Museum and Library, American Iron and Steel Institute (hereafter AISI), Accession 1631, Vertical File, 1936–74.

66. The Subcommittee on Antitrust and Monopoly investigation into administered prices was but the most politically charged of a series of inquiries into the “new inflation” in the late 1950s that advanced structuralist interpretations. The Senate Finance Committee and the Joint Economic Committee also conducted studies on the issue, the latter resulting in two important publications. Joint Economic Committee, *The Relationship of Prices to Economic Stability and Growth* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1958), and *Employment, Growth, and the Price Level* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1959). See also Takami, “Baffling New Inflation.”

67. Industry leaders maintained that steel prices had little to no effect on the aggregate inflation rate, a view expressed before the Kefauver Subcommittee by Yale economist Richard Ruggles. The other four economists, Means, John Kenneth Galbraith, John Moore, and Edwin Nourse, all concluded that there was a causal relationship. For the economists’ views, see *Administered Prices*, pt. 1. For US Steel executives’ views, see *Administered Prices*, pt. 2:201–416.

68. Otto Eckstein and Gary Fromm, *Steel and the Postwar Inflation* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1959).

69. See *Administered Prices*, pt. 2:379–86. Blough is quoted on 381.

publicly admitted that administered prices in heavy industry, namely steel, were in large part responsible for the country's recent economic woes.⁷⁰ Soon after, two prominent Federal Reserve economists, Ralph Young and Woodlief Thomas, added their names to the chorus, signaling a recognition from the central bank that its conventional tight money approach for dealing with price instability was unlikely to be of much use against the new inflation; Edwin Dale of the *New York Times* concluded that "the sharp change of thinking about the problem is the sort that would necessarily precede a decision that [price] controls are necessary."⁷¹ Rumors even began to circulate that Eisenhower's Secretary of Treasury, Robert Anderson, had been convinced.⁷²

It was under these conditions that the industry's leaders resorted to the only remaining strategy for boosting profitability, one with which they had long been acquainted: increasing the productivity of their workers. For the steelmakers, improving productivity required eliminating Section 2-B. As interpreted by arbitrators in the early 1950s, when more than half of all USWA grievances drew on it, 2-B stipulated that firms could not change local work rules—meaning they could not unilaterally implement a speedup of the pace of labor—unless investment in new technology qualitatively changed the conditions of work.⁷³ But the American steel industry failed to make such investments in the 1950s. First, since the Depression, managers had been reluctant to increase productive capacity, unconvinced that ample demand for their goods would be there after the fact. They only did so when induced by generous incentives from the federal government, and even the "age of affluence" did not mitigate their anxiety over the specter of another crisis.⁷⁴ Second, steel executives felt that these incentives—specifically their depreciation allowance, the tax break on the cost of replacing old plant and equipment—were inadequate, and through the 1950s they put new investment on hold while waging a largely unsuccessful fight for a legislative remedy.⁷⁵ Finally, well into the postwar period industry officials continued the historic practice of financing new investment out of retained earnings rather than by borrowing, an approach

70. "Price Rises Blamed for Output Lag," *Washington Post*, March 10, 1959.

71. Edwin Dale Jr., "U.S. Aides Uneasy on Price Policies," *New York Times*, March 15, 1959; Harold B. Dorsey, "Administered Prices, Wages Kill Markets, Jobs," *Washington Post*, March 23, 1959. Woodlief Thomas announced his position in an op-ed entitled "Those Administered Prices," *Washington Post*, March 12, 1959.

72. Bernard Nossiter, "Inflation Laid to Steel Firms," *Washington Post*, March 14, 1959.

73. Rose, "Struggle over Management Rights."

74. Tiffany, *Decline of American Steel*, 21–42.

75. Benjamin Fairless, "Steel's Depreciation Problem," May 24, 1956, box 50, Economics—Inflation (Pamphlets) (1 of 2), AISI. See also Sarah Auman Reed, "A Historical Analysis of Depreciation Accounting: The United States Steel Experience," *Accounting Historians Journal* 16, no. 2 (December 1989): 119–53.

that long had a conservatizing effect on capital outlays.⁷⁶ As a result, most of the industry's expansion during the 1950s came through "rounding out" existing facilities rather than from building new "greenfield" sites.⁷⁷ At such facilities, 2-B made implementing speedup that much more difficult. Steel employers wanted that constraint removed.

THE SPEEDUP

Even before Kefauver denounced the industry's pricing policy, the steel managers' drive for greater productivity met escalating tensions in the mills. "Here then is the most basic element of the problem," wrote a US Steel industrial relations executive in 1956. "It is to narrow or close the gap between an 8% rate of employment cost increase and a 2% rate of productivity gain."⁷⁸ Addressing this challenge meant tightening what management saw as slack in the system. "Our industrial engineering work tells us that as an overall condition our production and maintenance workers are used at a rate equaling about two-thirds of their normal capacity. This means there is room for tremendous improvement."⁷⁹

This "tremendous improvement" was what workers called speedup, which floor-level foremen would have to grind out, day by day. For this, plant leadership had to firm up its control of the entire managerial apparatus. For one thing, corporate leadership lacked good data on productivity, which was not a straightforward thing to calculate in steel production. As late as 1956, there was still no standard measurement. Steel is created out of multiple widely diverse technical processes—much more so than is true on, say, an auto assembly line. The only universally measurable common denominator is labor time, but output per man-hour was, managers agreed, too simple—discounting a wide range of other factors: "1. Volume and customer requirements. 2. Capital improvements of facilities. 3. Product variations as to grade of steel, size, shape, etc. 4. Improved methods and practices. 5. Quality of raw materials. 6. Quality of purchased goods and services. 7. Employee performance rates."⁸⁰ Management thus suffered an information problem without a technical solution; only a bureaucratic answer was available.

76. Stebenne, *Goldberg*, 200.

77. Tiffany, *Decline of American Steel*, 128–37.

78. Memorandum, p. 5, October 16, 1956, box 3, Series IV, R. Conrad Cooper Papers (hereafter RCCP), Archives Service Center, University of Pittsburgh.

79. *Ibid.*, 6.

80. Progress Report Regarding Development of a Measure and Index of Productivity, p. 4, May 8, 1956, box 3, folder 3, RCCP.

What was more, in the lower reaches of the management apparatus, the foremen had long been, and would long be, socially very close to the workers.⁸¹ Foremen and workers were relations, or neighbors, or simply shared tastes and values. Anna Mae Lindberg, of Homestead, Pennsylvania, had a common enough story: “My brother Bill was active in the union. My other brother was a foreman.”⁸² Not unexpectedly, both often saw the higher-ups as antagonists. The workers under Foreman John Huey, for example, noted that he became extremely cold to them whenever production broke down, although the same men had saved his life in workplace accidents before. One finally asked why he acted that way. Huey replied, “When that mill goes down, Joe [when production is stopped for some reason] who blows that whistle? I do. When I blow that whistle, my boss up the general office hears that. Then my phone rings [and] he says, ‘What’s goin’ on down there, and how long will it take to fix it?’ I have a quarter mile to walk to see what’s wrong. But I don’t even know what’s wrong yet. So when I walk through that mill, I don’t see those men. I see that devil up there. My boss.”⁸³

For Ed Stankowski, who worked at Jones & Laughlin Steel, there was nothing unusual about the memory of sitting around in the locker room as his father—another wage worker—and his foreman, Moe, mocked his manhood: “‘Are you gettin’ any mud for your turtle?’ Moe asked me, winking and poking me in the ribs with his elbow. ‘Gettin’ any mud, huh?’ My father chuckled while I turned red.” It was the same foreman who would “pat me on the back after a tough shift in the furnace . . . and say, ‘You put in a good day, hunky.’” Just as middle-class masculinity was an organizing component of company leadership through the golf club and the executives’ lunch, proletarian masculinity—enacted here—was an organizing principle of working-class culture and solidarity in the mill.⁸⁴ The class barrier was not culturally impermeable: here we see a member of lower management engaging in just the kind of homosocial practice that often characterized working-class masculinity. That the shared culture of working-class men might override the culture

81. The brief burst of foreman unionism in the auto industry (swiftly made illegal by the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act) vividly illustrated to upper management that first-line supervisors were the weakest link in the industrial chain of command. See Nelson Lichtenstein, “The Man in the Middle: A Social History of Automobile Industry Foremen,” in *A Contest of Ideas: Capital, Politics, and Ideas* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 56–78.

82. Anna Mae Lindberg, oral history interview with Nora Faires, May 5, 1976, Homestead Album Oral History Project Records, Archives Service Center, University of Pittsburgh.

83. Ellie Wymard, *Talking Steel Towns: The Men and Women of America’s Steel Valley* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2007), 24–25. See also Robert Bruno, *Steelworker Alley: How Class Works in Youngstown* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 116–22; Metzgar, *Striking Steel*, 50, 199–201.

84. Edward Stankowski Jr., *Memory of Steel* (Lima, OH: Wyndham Hall, 2004), 13. This incident is from after 1959, although it could easily have come at almost any moment in the twentieth century.

of management when the two collided was precisely middle and upper management's fear. This very potentiality mobilized management to work to ensure that the class frontier remained formidable.

In the middle and late 1950s, US Steel launched a series of initiatives to firm up the line of distinction separating workers from supervisors and to consolidate managerial control. Some of these were economic. In 1954, US Steel implemented a managerial incentive plan at the level of entire plants, holding line supervisors collectively accountable for their workers' output.⁸⁵ The company also began enforcing a range of symbolic distinctions: managers had to have their own parking lots, their own cafeterias, their own showers and locker rooms, and their own offices, with desks and air conditioning.⁸⁶ These enactments communicated something clear in the boiling hot, filthy mills: hourly workers often had no place even to sit, much less a chance to do so; the union had to agitate constantly for clean water in the bathrooms, rat poison application, and regular garbage removal. Rather than use the bathroom, workers in the Duquesne Open Hearth Department at one point took to urinating in the corners of their shop floor. Desks and air conditioning meant something in this world.⁸⁷ Where management and the law drew the line between the classes, they thus opened a wide divide between people otherwise quite similar to each other.⁸⁸ The fact that the rank and file often could recognize their immediate supervisors as men essentially like themselves made the conflict between steelworker and foreman especially humiliating, as the speedup escalated in the late 1950s, and imbued it with particular bitterness.

What, then, was the speedup like? On May 8, 1956, at 8:45 PM, a craneman at Duquesne Works named Pete Dohanic stormed up to a mill gate and asked to borrow a gun from a company security guard. Dohanic "stated that he would like to shoot [gang leader] John Stawicki for mental torture." An hour later, Dohanic reported off work, apparently drunk. On his way out, he "said that he would like to

85. Works Management Incentive Plan, May 1954, box 261, United States Steel Corporation National-Duquesne Works Records (hereafter NDWR), Archives Service Center, University of Pittsburgh.

86. Task Force Questionnaires, September 20, 1957, box 30, folder 8, United States Steel Corporation Duquesne Works Industrial Relations Department Records (hereafter DWIR), Archives Service Center, University of Pittsburgh.

87. Minutes of Meeting with Grievance Committee, May 19, 1953, box 4, folder 6, DWIR; Minutes of Meeting with Grievance Committee, January 19, 1954, box 4, folder 6, DWIR; Minutes of Meeting with Grievance Committee, September 21, 1954, box 4, folder 6, DWIR; Minutes of Meeting with Grievance Committee, September 19, 1956, box 4, folder 7, DWIR; Employee Suggestion Plan Investigation Form, July 11, 1957, box 26, folder 2, DWIR; Cost Reduction Project Report, November 1957, box 32, folder 2, DWIR; Employee Request, June 18, 1957, box 29, DWIR.

88. On the legal separation of foremen and workers, see Jean-Christian Vinel, *The Employee: A Political History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

kill someone by the name of John Stawicki.” After another hour, Dohanic appeared again at the plant gate, still drunk. Sent away once more, he went and sat in his pickup truck, across the street from the mill, visibly brandishing a rifle. Someone called the police, who came and arrested Dohanic, whom they held for three days. The police found that the gun was loaded.⁸⁹

What brought a craneman to the edge of a drunken rampage? Unsurprisingly, the incidents on May 8 were not the beginning of conflict between Dohanic and Stawicki. Called to testify about the case, a number of Dohanic’s peers backed him up, describing how the supervisor, Stawicki, “feels that any problems arising concerning the work in the area reflect on him. They stated that he consequently drives to get the work done as quickly as possible without giving consideration to the cranemen or hookers. They stated that he continually complains about the slowness of the men and will assign them to two and three jobs at one time and yet he knows that they can only do one job at a time.”⁹⁰

Work in a steel mill was dangerous, hot, exhausting, and in many respects humiliating. Steel, however, also involved more autonomous and skilled work than many other mass production industries, making a speedup even more miserable. Personal humiliation, directly inflicted by workers’ kinsmen, the foremen, lay at the heart of conflicts over productivity. All this had, of course, always been true of the steel industry, although its details changed with the periodic transformations in the organization of production. Indeed, in the most explosive labor conflicts in steel—Homestead in 1892, the great 1919 strike, and Little Steel in 1937—working conditions had always played an unusually prominent role, compared to the economism that tended to predominate in American labor conflict.⁹¹

Accordingly, the managerial offensive of the late 1950s took what was omnipresent in steelworker life and made it worse. In so doing, it aggravated all the daily dissatisfactions of the postwar order—the accumulating small moments of promises not kept. As management’s productivity offensive combined with the economic downturn in 1957, for example, steelworkers found themselves straining for a measure of predictability in their routines. “Pick a schedule and live by it,” demanded

89. Memorandum of Special Third-Step Meeting Concerning Unanswered Grievance—Discharge of Pete Dohanic, Jr., May 25, 1956, box 9, folder 2, DWIR.

90. *Ibid.*

91. David Brody, *Labor in Crisis: The Steel Strike of 1919* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Paul Krause, *The Battle for Homestead, 1880–1892: Politics, Culture, and Steel* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992); Ahmed White, *The Last Great Strike: Little Steel, the CIO, and the Struggle for Labor Rights in New Deal America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).

the Duquesne bricklayers on one occasion. "Management is wrong in posting a 4 day schedule with men laid off and then having men work overtime."⁹² Workers might find, like the open hearth workers at Duquesne in February 1958, that they were on new and bizarre hours: one week, Monday to Thursday 7–3; the next, Tuesday to Friday, 3–11; the week after, Monday to Wednesday, 11–7, then 7–3 on Friday; then in the fourth week, 3–11 on Monday, then 11–7 Thursday through Saturday.⁹³

In the late 1950s, US Steel drove its speedup forward, and industrial relations bureaucracies in the mills began to choke with Section 2-B grievances filed over workload and manpower issues. In March 1957, the management of Duquesne Works held a special meeting with the Grievance Committee of USWA Local 1256 to resolve the grievance backlog. In the open hearth, the repair crews had been working an unpleasant new schedule for six months, and the ingot shippers claimed that their workload was too great. In the blooming mills, workers asked to be relieved of new duties that had been piled onto their jobs. Workers in the bar mill wanted bigger work crews "due to increased work load" and a revised incentive plan. The list of workers' grievances proceeded this way at great length, each triggered by management's tinkering.⁹⁴

As always, some workers fought back individually, trading barbs or even blows with their bosses or drinking or sleeping on the job. Black workers, especially, tended to have to resort to individual forms of resistance, given their small numbers, concentration in a few shops, and lack of support from the union bureaucracy. Like all workers in hostile environments, black workers in the coke ovens and blast furnaces tried to find ways to make their work life tolerable. They were caught in a double bind: generally stuck in the lowest-paying and least secure positions in the mills, which were the physically harshest to boot, they had a good deal discouraging them from becoming too invested in their steel jobs. As a result, white managers were constantly accusing black workers of one variety or another of shirking or lack of commitment or second-guessing their word about why work conditions were intolerable. Underlying this persistent pattern of conflict was the material truth that

92. Grievance form, HD-65-166, September 19, 1965, box 10, folder 5, DWIR; Pipefitters' Strike, 7-3 Turn, May 22, 1959, box 17, folder 3, DWIR; Vernon Sidberry to John W. Price, June 4, 1959, box 17, folder 3, DWIR.

93. Memorandum of Understanding Regarding Temporary Work Schedules for Open Hearth Department and Open Hearth Assigned and Operating Maintenance, February 9, 1958, box 15, folder 10, DWIR.

94. Minutes of Special Third-Step Meeting between Local #1256 Grievance Committee Chairman and Management of Duquesne Works, March 14, 1957, box 22, folder 2, DWIR.

black workers were far likelier to get killed, burned, poisoned, or maimed on the job. They acted accordingly.⁹⁵

A good example is Edward Harris, who got into a scuffle with his foreman in the locker room after refusing to “get back down in the hole,” as he was warned: in other words, to reenter the soaking pits, which he had left on account of intolerable heat. As management attempted to ratchet up the pace of production, the worst effects were bound to fall on black workers. What appeared as inefficiency in production to management eyes was, for black workers, often a question of survival in the parts of the mill where they worked.⁹⁶

In 1958, for example, a group of black workers in the Jones & Laughlin Pittsburgh Works coke ovens sought the reinstatement of a “spellman”—an extra man available on hand so workers could take regular breaks from the “heat, gas, smoke and other extreme working conditions.” With a spellman, coke oven workers could take 16 minutes out of every 96 to catch their breath. The company responded that, because the economic recession had decreased required throughput, the work could just go slower and no breaks were required. The workers’ grievance was denied.⁹⁷ This came several months after the same group of workers had complained that they were being made to do multiple jobs in a single shift; this grievance also had been quashed.⁹⁸

A smaller number attempted to defy the entire bureaucratic regime of industrial relations that seemed to be allowing the slow erosion of their standards. Steelworkers had staged wildcat strikes periodically throughout the 1950s; just one month before the official 1959 strike, there was a 400-worker wildcat to protest speedups at Duquesne. The wildcat strikers were all from the maintenance shops—the most skilled, best-paid, all-white workforce, for whom the work rules were at once sacrosanct and actually enforceable through informal solidarity.⁹⁹

95. On the black experience of steelwork, see Dennis C. Dickerson, *Out of the Crucible: Black Steelworkers in Western Pennsylvania, 1875–1980* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1986); John Hinshaw, *Steel and Steelworkers: Race and Class Struggle in Twentieth-Century Pittsburgh* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002); Ruth Needleman, *Black Freedom Fighters in Steel: The Struggle for Democratic Unionism* (Ithaca, NY: ILR, 2003).

96. Minutes of Special Third-Step Meeting between Local #1256 Grievance Committee Chairman and Management of Duquesne Works, June 17, 1955, box 22, folder 1, DWIR.

97. Board of Arbitration, Docket no. 259-C-60, November 28, 1958, box 59, folder 2, United Steelworkers of America Local 1843 Records (hereafter USWA 1843), Archives Service Center, University of Pittsburgh.

98. Grievance Report, August 25, 1958, box 59, folder 1, USWA 1843.

99. Events Leading to Walk-Out—Thursday, May 21, 1959, box 17, folder 3, DWIR; Pipefitter Strike Log, June 5, 1959, box 17, folder 3, DWIR. On the dynamics of wildcat strikes and their relationship to routinization, see Rick Fantasia, *Cultures of Solidarity: Consciousness, Action, and Contemporary American Workers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 75–120. On whiteness in the steel industry, see Bruce

The pressure that erupted in the forms of individual confrontations, absenteeism, alcoholism, indiscipline, contractual complaint, and illegal work stoppage all had the same source. They expressed a single conflict whose explosive quality came from how it interfered with the ability of steelworkers to satisfy the demands of the role of sole breadwinner in the postwar nuclear family. This source was continuous throughout working-class life in the postwar years—a fact aggravated by the disruptions of the 1957–58 recession and the resulting speedup in the mills. It was, for example, a common challenge for workers to bring their home lives into sync with their work schedules. They developed strange and sometimes unhealthy rituals. “Ted worked 12–8—sleeping till 4,” recorded his wife Ruth in her diary.¹⁰⁰ They ate at strange times. “A man needing to be at the mill by 4 would eat a big dinner at 2 or 3 in the afternoon. . . . Husbands getting home at midnight sat down to another home-cooked meal, or at least warmed leftovers.” Martin Connors, who worked at Clairton Works, described how the coke oven governed what he and his peers ingested: “Spicy foods like strong coffee, kielbasa or whiskey are all you can taste because the dirt and gas from the oven cause you to lose your sense of taste and smell. But guys also drank whiskey going into work at 7 in the morning, just to make it through the day.”¹⁰¹ These were ordinary struggles in working-class life. They became harder if schedules were changing constantly, paychecks were inconsistent, or work was simply harder and hotter.

Workers’ wives, and the children to whom the wives had to act as emissaries and guardians, experienced this disjuncture between home and work on its other end. Steelworker Martin Connors sketched the line of affective force directly from the demands of the factory through himself to his wife and children. “I had a rotten boss who didn’t like you to take days off. I used to work Sundays all the time and that’s when first communions were. I have pictures but I didn’t get to see it.” In the end, he thought, it destroyed his marriage. “Mostly it was because of working 4 to midnight for a long stint. I couldn’t be home to help my kids with their homework, or do much of anything with them. After a while my wife figured out, ‘What do I need you for?’”¹⁰² Jack Metzgar describes his steelworker father’s dull tyranny: “As powerless and embattled as he often felt at work, he was in absolute control at home. . . . There wasn’t anything dramatic—no hitting, not even much shouting, just the kind of daily insensitivity and petty dominance for the

Nelson, *Divided We Stand: American Workers and the Struggle for Black Equality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

100. Ruth Haas, diary, November 24, 1958. Diary in author’s possession.

101. Wymard, *Talking Steel Towns*, 57–61.

102. *Ibid.*, 63.

joy of it that is both degrading and frightening if you have to live with it day after day.”¹⁰³

Faced with husbands who could not quite provide the stable good life on which their shared lives were premised, women in steelmaking communities had to develop their own repertoire of strategies to produce security for themselves and their families. If their husbands drank, some would stake out favorite taverns, or send their children to do so, to keep the men from drinking paychecks away. Martha Sloan learned how to say “give me your money” in Slovak, so that she could speak in her mother’s voice to her father. She did this “week after week because that’s what we had to live on. Otherwise . . . we couldn’t pay the tick at the grocer’s.” While violence was fairly common in such tense domestic scenes, there are abundant accounts of women defending themselves forcibly, often with the implements of household labor. Sloan’s mother once clanged her drunken husband in the face with a skillet, breaking his nose; according to Sloan, her parents agreed to pretend that he had fallen down.¹⁰⁴

It was not only in the moments of outright conflict that steel town women managed this tension. The respectability and stability of their families required immense daily labor. Howard Wickerham recalled that his grandmother in Homestead, Pennsylvania, knew which whistles and sirens from the mills portended different emissions of dust and smoke—something that a woman who hung laundry wanted to keep track of. Porches had to be swept of coal dust periodically through the day or the week.¹⁰⁵ It was common for wives to get in the habit of doing the washing and ironing—exclusively their province—late at night. “I used to sleep most of the day because I’d stay up all night washing the kids’ clothes,” recalled Rose Boland. . . . “I always cooked a meal when he came in.”¹⁰⁶ “My father worked shifts; different shifts, so, it was hard to have a set time when we sat down together. We were, more or less, in and out of the kitchen all day long,” a steelworker’s daughter remembered.¹⁰⁷ What was overcrowding and chaos to a daughter was drudgery to a wife. Helen Havrilla recalled, “I had to make all the foods he had had at home. And I had to make the same kind of noodles! All them noodles!” When her husband came home from the mill, Havrilla would scrub down his overalls with lard to remove the coating of industrial grease.¹⁰⁸

103. Metzgar, *Striking Steel*, 188.

104. Wymard, *Talking Steel Towns*, 58–59.

105. Howard Wickerham, oral history interview, June 5, 2013. Transcript in author’s possession.

106. Wymard, *Talking Steel Towns*, 60–61.

107. Interview I-4-C, box 1, Women, Ethnicity, and Mental Health Oral History Project Records (hereafter WEMH), Archives Service Center, University of Pittsburgh.

108. Wymard, *Talking Steel Towns*, 62–67.

Also falling to the wives was the obligation to discipline children into the rules of the industrial routine when necessary and to shield them from it when possible. This meant keeping the children quiet and the house dark so their fathers could sleep during the day.¹⁰⁹ It meant doling out the punishment that would be less traumatic coming from the ever-present mother than the distant and mysterious father. Asked who “took care of discipline” by an interviewer, one steelworker’s wife explained, “I would. Yes. He would never touch them.”¹¹⁰ In this way, the operations of the household’s internal political economy continued to sustain the ideology of a heroic breadwinner, even as the shortcomings of the male provider and the compensations of his wife determined the daily routine. Jan McSorley remembered how her mother Hazel would make a grilled cheese sandwich with fried onions for her father Frank when he returned at midnight from the mill. “When I smelled the onions and cheese, I knew Dad was home and everything was all right.”¹¹¹ Mary Ann Eckels, another steelworker’s daughter, liked to lie awake at night and imagine her father’s fingerprints on the steel beams of New York skyscrapers: in her mind, he had literally built the country.¹¹²

Any layoff or short-hours assignment, any new schedule, any frightening injury or death at the plant might put a dent in the ideology of the heroic breadwinner. In other words, every increment of speedup further destabilized the ability of men to live up to this image. Consequently, they did what they could, using the contract, interpersonal threats, conflict, violence, sleep, drink, and absenteeism to jam up the works. The effectiveness of their resistance drove management toward a direct attack on Section 2-B of the contract—the work rules protection. In 1958, US Steel began collecting from its plant-level leadership data on inefficiencies caused by 2-B. “Obtain an estimate of increase of production and/or the reduction in annual cost that would be realized at normal operations . . . if the local working condition or practice were to be eliminated” instructed headquarters.¹¹³ The results were predictable. “Eliminate Scrapman. Add duties of Scrapman to Bar Shearman Helper.” “Loss of operating time during lunch period could be utilized by providing one half hour unpaid lunch period.”¹¹⁴

As the economic situation of the steel industry deteriorated over the second half of the 1950s, management became increasingly preoccupied with increasing the

109. *Ibid.*, 63.

110. Interview S-10-A, WEMH.

111. Wymard, *Talking Steel Towns*, 64.

112. Metzgar, *Striking Steel*, 187.

113. E. J. Woll to Superintendents of Industrial Relations, November 11, 1958, box 8, folder 1, DWIR.

114. Review of Local Working Conditions, December 2, 1958, box 8, folder 1, DWIR; Local Working Conditions, December 19, 1958, box 8, folder 1, DWIR.

productivity of labor. Caught in the bind of obsolescent overbuilt plants, escalating labor costs, and creeping international competition, industry chiefs saw only one avenue of exit. In productivity, there was room to move, although such a hastening of production would require conflict with the workers and their organization. The rising speed of production thus pressed with increasing force on the daily experience of the working class, eventually striking its raw nerve, the question of stability and security in working-class routines and sense of self.¹¹⁵

THE STRIKE

Although faced with an angry and restive workforce, going into the 1959 contract cycle management negotiators felt they had the upper hand. Crucially, the industry initially avoided the issue of 2-B and union work rules, choosing instead to take aim at workers' pay packets.¹¹⁶ Much as they had during the Kefauver hearings, the industry funded a nationwide public relations campaign blaming union wage demands for spiraling inflation.¹¹⁷ The tactic seemed to work among the rank and file. A *New York Times* survey of eight steel towns found most workers eager to stay on the job rather than risk sinking deeper in debt fighting a prolonged strike for wage gains that might well be wiped out by a sudden spike in the cost of living.¹¹⁸ Jack Metzgar, reflecting on both his memory of 1959 in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, and news coverage from the time, echoes the point, arguing that the rank and file had little stomach for a fight: "Younger workers had experienced long layoffs in the 1957–58 recession, and they were just getting back on their feet."¹¹⁹

Moreover, morale was low. Union membership itself had slipped below the symbolic 1 million mark, eroding confidence.¹²⁰ Further, in 1957, USWA President McDonald had only won reelection (likely aided by fraud and intimidation) against an unknown local committeeman by a humiliatingly small margin. The challenger, Donald Rarick, worked at Irvin Works outside Pittsburgh and ran to protest an increase in union dues. Rarick's insurgency was unsophisticated and in some ways incoherent. It gave voice to rank-and-file militancy and dissatisfaction, especially

115. On the construction of sense of self out of routine, see Pierre Bourdieu on "habitus" in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

116. Rose, "Struggle over Management Rights," 471.

117. Anthony F. Libertella, "The Steel Strike of 1959: Labor, Management, and Government Relations" (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 1972), 91–93.

118. A. H. Raskin, "Steel Workers Found Resigned to a Strike Few of Them Want," *New York Times*, June 14, 1959, 1, 70.

119. Metzgar, *Striking Steel*, 65.

120. Stebenne, *Goldberg*, 198.

among the skilled trades; a vice presidential challenger for the Dues Protest Committee would go on to help lead the May 1959 wildcat strike at Duquesne. Yet the committee was programmatically bankrupt. Its central demand—lower dues—sought to weaken, not strengthen, the union’s capacity for conflict, and Rarick himself seems to have been a political cipher at best.¹²¹ McDonald, seeking to recapture the imagination of the rank and file, ran on a demand for three-month vacations every five years, a four-day week, and a six-hour day. This strategy, more than the program of the union dissidents, gives a clue to the dissatisfaction in the ranks in the late 1950s, fed by working conditions and boiling up inchoately through the workers’ organization.¹²² McDonald’s victory hardly settled things, and when negotiations began, the union did not seem on firm footing.

McDonald and the USWA leadership held a firm line in the early months of contract talks. Reportedly, McDonald responded to industry officials’ first proposal in April 1959 by charging that they seemed to “desire to create another 1892 Homestead situation” and warning that “if there is blood to run in the streets of mill towns . . . the sin is theirs and not the United Steelworkers of America [*sic*].”¹²³ Indeed, if a bit hyperbolic, the allusion to the infamous Homestead strike was apt. In both cases the distribution of the industry’s income was in question, and in both cases the industry titan—Carnegie Steel in the first place, its successor US Steel in the second—sought to increase its share by rolling back previous union gains, especially those regulating the pace of work. As bargaining dragged on into the summer of 1959, the steelmakers’ finally revealed their long-held intention to eliminate Section 2-B from the union contract.¹²⁴ Led by US Steel’s labor relations manager R. Conrad Cooper, the industry’s bargaining team announced in early June that management would not consider any increase in pay or benefits without a significant overhaul of union work rules.¹²⁵ But Cooper’s aggressive effort to remove the most glaring obstacle to management’s speedup in the mills piqued the resolve of a once hesitant rank and file.

The attack on 2-B changed the entire situation because it touched what was most tender in the lives of steelworkers and their families. The steel strike, auto-

121. See Hugh Cleland, “The Hard Road to Union Democracy,” *Dissent*, September 1, 1959; Herling, *Right to Challenge*; John P. Hoerr, *And the Wolf Finally Came: The Decline of the American Steel Industry* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1988), 252–53; Metzgar, *Striking Steel*, 161–75.

122. “McDonald Sees High Pay, More Leisure in Future,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, January 16, 1957; “McDonald Pushes 3-Months Vacation Plan,” *Pittsburgh Press*, January 20, 1957.

123. David McDonald, International Executive Board Meeting Minutes, April 13–14, 1958, box 46, file 10, United Steelworkers of America (USWA), President’s Office Records (1961), Historical Collections and Labor Archives, Special Collections Library, Pennsylvania State University.

124. Rose, “Struggle over Management Rights,” 472.

125. Stebenne, *Goldberg*, 202.

workers president Walter Reuther declared to the annual AFL-CIO convention, “is not an ordinary strike” but a fight to ensure that workers, too, “share in the fruits of our developing technology.”¹²⁶ It was for this reason that one company strategy for beating the strike was to try to turn wives against it. “What does Mrs. Steelworker think about this?” asked company propaganda. “Does she yearn for the new kitchen? The new clothes? The money to educate her children?” This approach clearly struck some kind of a nerve. On August 28, 1959, a group of roughly 100 women and 50 men gathered in Renziehausen Park in McKeesport, Pennsylvania, to call for an immediate and transparent resumption of negotiations. Management at US Steel’s National Tube Works sent a spy to write up a report for the company. The meeting was opened by the mayor of McKeesport, who lectured the gathered women, “Don’t do anything to spoil the nice things we now have. . . . Don’t rock the boat.” Then, speaking over male hecklers, apparently from the union, a woman identified as Mrs. James Hanratty, said, “Let’s get our men back to work. Our husbands hands are tied. . . . You men have read your papers and played your cards, and now it’s time to get things settled. . . . We need clothes for our children to start to school. . . . There are families with five and six children who need to be fed.”¹²⁷

Still, although wives might resent steelworker husbands, their class loyalties outweighed their gender antagonisms. A week later, the group gathered again, this time numbering 125 women and 225 men. Hanratty wanted to clarify “the misquotes by the newspapers stating that we women wish to see our husbands back to work without a contract. I said no such thing. We women wish to see our husbands back to work with a contract that is fair to all concerned.” She made an appeal for shoes and clothes for children of strikers. “There was a well organized and abusive protest by both men and some women at this point,” reported the US Steel spy watching the event. Hanratty then introduced Father Charles Owen Rice, Pittsburgh’s famous “labor priest”:

These women are sincere and honorable. . . . It is your fault that they are holding these meetings. . . . You have not told them the truth about the facts concerning this strike. . . . The men have neglected to tell their wives what is right and what is wrong in this strike. . . . The old man has worked a hard eight hours, stopped in for a beer on his way home and is too tired and wants to sleep when he gets home. He hasn’t taken time to tell his wife

126. Walter Reuther speech transcript, AFL-CIO convention, typescript [September 18, 1959], series 3, box 93, folder: 1959—Steel Strike (September 15–30), Mitchell Papers.

127. “Ask the Steelworker’s Wife,” October 19, 1959, box 54, NDWR.

about the coming strike. Now she is asking what it is all about. She wants to help and she should help. I will tell you that you should hold out and not go back to work without winning this strike. . . . They (management) want as few men as they can get away with to run the mill . . . and they want those few as cheap as they can get them. You hold out now or you will have a strike every year for the next ten years until they have destroyed the union completely. The company wants profits and they don't care about anything else. The fewer men they employ, the easier their job becomes to run the mill and they want it as easy and as profitable as possible. . . . If your men don't win this strike they won't be able to talk to you wives. . . . They'll be too tired from overwork.

If the women wanted to help their husbands, Rice instructed, "Support them in this strike. Make them happy at home."¹²⁸

In the face of a determined rank and file, the industry soon found support flagging in the White House. Initially, both the CEA and the Labor Department confidently predicted that existing stockpiles of steel would sustain the economy through "the most advertised and the best-prepared-for steel strike in history."¹²⁹ The administration continued to wave away pleas from the union for a Truman-style fact-finding board.¹³⁰ It also dismissed management's calls for intervention. When US Steel's Roger Blough urged the president to forcibly end the strike before a state visit by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, Eisenhower brusquely retorted, "don't we want Mr. Khrushchev to see this country as a . . . freedom-loving place?"¹³¹ The Eisenhower administration still clung to the conviction that any direct intervention in the negotiations would simply open the door for state-sponsored economic tyranny.¹³² Eisenhower, desperate "to avoid charges of favoritism," joined Labor Secretary James P. Mitchell in publicly calling for a voluntary wage and price freeze.¹³³ Winning such a truce strictly through private bargaining seemed most unlikely, especially after the administration's interventions in the past two steel

128. F. J. Schaeffer to W. T. Lowe, Jr., September 1, 1959, box 54, NDWR.

129. Steel Strike, Progress Report no. 1, typescript, July 24, 1959, series 3, box 91, folder 1959—Steel Strike (June–July) (1), Mitchell Papers; Raymond J. Sauliner to Dwight D. Eisenhower, July 15, 1959, Diary series, box 42, folder Staff Notes July 1959 (2), EPP.

130. Gerald D. Morgan to David McDonald, September 18, 1959, series 3, box 93, folder 1959—Steel Strike (September 15–30), Mitchell Papers; and "Administration Will Continue to Try to Mediate Steel Talks after Getting Strike Delayed until July 15," *Wall Street Journal*, June 29, 1959, 25.

131. Quoted in Libertella, "Steel Strike of 1959," 153.

132. W. Allen Wallis, memo, August 7, 1959, box 1, folder Controversies. . . , W. Allen Wallis Records, Eisenhower Presidential Library.

133. Cabinet meeting minutes, typescript, August 7, 1959, p. 4, Cabinet series, box 14, EPP.

contracts. CEA Chair Raymond Saulnier remained adamant that the White House's political bona fides on fighting inflation would be destroyed by any settlement followed by a price increase.¹³⁴ In effect, Saulnier's analysis conceded that leaving collective bargaining to private actors alone would ensure an inflationary wage-price spiral. The government needed to intervene.

Thus, when the USWA rejected the industry's latest offer on October 4, the administration's patience had been worn thin by new reports of steel shortages and fears that a massive dockworkers' strike along the eastern seaboard would block imported steel.¹³⁵ Three days later, Eisenhower called upon the executive powers enumerated in Taft-Hartley and appointed three industrial relations academics to sit on a board of inquiry to investigate the issues preventing a settlement. But without the authority to even recommend a standard formula to determine the costs of wages and benefits or productivity costs of work rules, the board could do little more than catalog the stalemate.¹³⁶ For the administration, the board's failure to resolve the impasse signaled the apparent collapse of free collective bargaining in steel. Nevertheless, the board's stated intention to "preserve" collective bargaining through a period of "unusual strain" also signaled the administration's unwillingness to fully endorse management's intransigence at the bargaining table.¹³⁷ The result left Eisenhower to glumly announce, "America's hopes for a voluntary responsible settlement have not been fulfilled."¹³⁸

Citing dwindling steel stocks as a danger to national security and the root cause of growing industrial unemployment across the country, Eisenhower on October 20 declared the strike a national emergency. He instructed the Department of Justice to petition the federal district court in Pittsburgh for an 80-day Taft-Hartley injunction.¹³⁹ But even in defending the decision to invoke the injunction, Eisenhower

134. Raymond J. Saulnier to Dwight D. Eisenhower, memo, August 6, 1959, series 2, box 5, folder Eisenhower, Dwight D. (C.E.A. Correspondence), 1956–61, Raymond J. Saulnier Papers, Eisenhower Presidential Library.

135. Report on the Steel Strike no. 12, typescript, October 6, 1959, series 3, box 93, folder 1959—Steel Strike (October 1–14), Mitchell Papers; Arynness Joy Wickens, memo, October 5, 1959, Mitchell Papers.

136. Report to the President by the Board of Inquiry: The 1959 Labor Dispute in the Steel Industry, typescript, October 19, 1959, pp. 5–8, box 7, folder 1959 Steel Strike—The President's Board of Inquiry in the Steel Dispute (1), David W. Kendall Papers, Eisenhower Presidential Library.

137. *Ibid.*, 6.

138. *Ibid.*, 37; Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Statement by the President following Receipt of the Report of the Board of Inquiry in the Steel Strike," October 19, 1959, in Peters and Woolley, *American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=11561>.

139. Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Letter to the Attorney General Directing Him To Petition for an Injunction in the Steel Strike," October 19, 1959, in Peters and Woolley, *American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=11562>; Report on the Steel Strike no. 13, typescript, October 13, 1959, series 3, box 93, folder 1959—Steel Strike (October 1–14), Mitchell Papers; Arynness Joy Wickens, memo,

and his administration appeared ambivalent about its effectiveness. "I don't think Taft-Hartley is necessarily presenting any cure for this thing," he admitted in a press conference two days later.¹⁴⁰

Signs that the strike would simply resume after the 80-day "cooling off period" ended only compounded the administration's doubts about Taft-Hartley.¹⁴¹ The evening before the Supreme Court upheld the injunction, McDonald secretly visited the president and Secretary of Labor James Mitchell in the Oval Office to reassure both men of the union's commitment to securing a "fair and just and non-inflationary settlement." But McDonald also firmly reminded Eisenhower that the union would not stand by as the "very rigid and stupid" steelmakers held firm to their campaign of "trust-busting" on work practices. The meeting prompted a no doubt nervous Eisenhower to write in his diary, "Secretary Mitchell and I believe that management does not comprehend how seriously the union membership takes this matter."¹⁴² The bitter struggle over "work habits," Secretary Mitchell explained to the cabinet days later, meant the administration could no longer wait for the "natural pressures of the situation" to resolve the strike.¹⁴³

As hundreds of thousands of steelworkers angrily marched back into the mills (often under banners reading "Ike's slaves"), the president turned his attention to the industry.¹⁴⁴ By December, a discouraged Eisenhower admitted that "the Government just cannot sit idly on its hands" and in an address to the nation declared in no uncertain terms, "America needs a settlement now."¹⁴⁵ Ever more ominous reports of steel shortages compounded administration fears that Democrats in Congress would attempt to resolve the strike in order to embarrass the administration before the election.¹⁴⁶ Secretary Mitchell then enlisted the aid of

October 15, 1959, series 3, box 93 folder 1959—Steel Strike (October 15–31), Mitchell Papers; Report on the Steel Strike no. 14, typescript, October 22, 1959, box 7, folder: 1959 Steel Strike, Kendall Papers.

140. Dwight D. Eisenhower, "The President's News Conference at Augusta, Georgia," October 22, 1959, in Peters and Woolley, *American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=11564>.

141. See, e.g., A. H. Raskin, "Workers Expect to Strike Again," *New York Times*, October 29, 1959, 31.

142. Dwight D. Eisenhower, memo, Diary series, November 9, 1959, box 45, folder Staff Notes—Nov. 1959 (3), EPP.

143. Cabinet meeting minutes, typescript, November 11, 1959, p. 3, Cabinet series, box 14, folder Cabinet Meeting of November 11, 1959, EPP.

144. Stebenne, *Goldberg*, 211.

145. Dwight D. Eisenhower, "The President's News Conference," December 2, 1959, in Peters and Woolley, *American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=11587>, and "Radio and Television Address to the American People before Leaving on Good Will Trip to Europe, Asia, and Africa," December 3, 1959, in Peters and Woolley, *American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=11590>.

146. US Department of Commerce Business and Defense Services Administration, memo, November 9, 1959, box 7, folder 1959 Steel Strike, Kendall Papers.

Vice President Richard Nixon—by then eyeing a run for the presidency—to bring the weight of the White House to bear on both the union and industry. Publicly, Mitchell and Nixon urged the two sides to accept voluntary arbitration.¹⁴⁷ Behind closed doors, the secretary of labor and the vice president now saw management's unrelenting focus on work practices as its chief weakness. As Nixon later admitted, the rank-and-file militancy in the mills over 2-B proved that "Mr. McDonald came into the negotiations in a stronger position than the companies."¹⁴⁸ As in 1954 and 1956, the USWA had once again maneuvered the Eisenhower administration into staring down the steel industry.

Thus, the final agreement reached on January 4, arranged under the imprimatur of the White House, left 2-B intact and secured a 30-month contract with a 40-cent pay increase.¹⁴⁹ As *Business Week* wryly observed, the contract's final terms "were not negotiated agreements."¹⁵⁰ The contract came with a higher wage raise than Eisenhower anticipated, leading the president to grumble about being "blackmailed by the Unions" while grouching that management showed a real lack of "statesmanship."¹⁵¹ But the strike settlement seemed to bode well for Nixon's presidential ambitions.¹⁵² Indeed, the Labor Department's extensive 1960 report on collective bargaining in steel touted the decisive role of "high level mediation" needed to resolve disputes.¹⁵³ In the end, the report actually celebrated the kind of politicized bargaining long (and begrudgingly) practiced by the Eisenhower administration. The political moderation of the era—the celebrated bipartisan consensus around the New Deal political economy—thus asserted itself through the executive branch, as if involuntarily, in order to resolve the increasingly disastrous strike. In this sense, the era's fleeting ideological homogeneity can be seen as structurally determined, in part, not by an underlying social consensus but by underlying social conflict.

147. "Mitchell Urges Voluntary Arbitration in Steel Dispute," *Wall Street Journal*, December 9, 1959, 2.

148. Richard M. Nixon to Alexander F. Jones, January 21, 1960, box 2, folder Steel Industry Labor Dispute—1959, Wallis Papers.

149. Phone call notes, typescript, January 2, 1960, p. 1, Diary series, box 47, folder Telephone Calls January 1960, EPP; Nixon to Jones, Wallis Papers; Roscoe Born, "Steel Mills, Union Settle on 30-Month Pact, 40-Cent Package," *Wall Street Journal*, January 5, 1960, 2.

150. "White House Team Breaks Steel Impasse," *Business Week*, January 9, 1960, 29.

151. Phone call notes, January 2, 1960, p. 2, EPP.

152. See, e.g., Alan Lotten, "Nixon's Role in Steel Accord Boosts His Presidential Hopes," *Wall Street Journal*, January 5, 1960, 3.

153. E. R. Livernash, "Collective Bargaining in the Basic Steel Industry: A Study of the Public Interest and the Role of Government," typescript, November 1, 1960, chaps. 11 and 12, series 3, box 98, folder 1960—Steel Strike (November) (2), Mitchell Papers. This official report would later be published in 1961.

CONCLUSION

Decades after the strike, former steelworker Ed Stankowski wrote a memoir reflecting on the anguished, obsessive relationship of the men in his community to the mill. “I studied the mill every day of my life, wondering why the old men cursed and worshiped her.”¹⁵⁴ For steelworkers, the strike was remembered as a final moment of CIO heroism. Although its motivation had in fact lain in the contradictory and unsatisfying experience of mill work, its participants remembered it as a moment of profound clarity, never again equaled. Every argument between workers at Jones & Laughlin’s Pittsburgh Works in the 1970s, Stankowski recalled, climaxed in the question: “‘Where were you during the strike of ‘59?’ As if having been there was sufficient license for distance, superiority, respect.”¹⁵⁵ Workers in 1959 fought and won respect, but they did not win it from their employers. They won it from the state, which they forced to intervene on their side despite all its efforts to abstain. If workers in later years remembered the strike nostalgically as a moment of clarity, what they recalled was the time when they wielded political power.

Historians and social scientists have debated for decades whether the postwar social compact between labor and capital was real or illusory. We suggest posing the question differently: in what sense was it both consensual and antagonistic? Attempts to understand the New Deal through either political culture or political economy alone risk a view of the postwar order as either uniformly one or the other. But a multiscalar view of a strike of such scale can illustrate that dual character: relentless antagonism at one level of social action—the hidden abodes of production and reproduction—forced a consensus at another, the state. And the entire postwar New Deal order, indeed, might be understood in this sense as a machine for transmuting ground-level social conflict into the form of top-level political agreement. As the Eisenhower administration ultimately came to behave like its New Deal Democratic predecessors, the White House seemed to illustrate the consensus. Yet the consensus itself expressed fundamental political-economic contradictions. The smooth surface of things, in other words, was not simply false; it was a product of the upheaval below.

The postwar political regime was thus particularly vulnerable to the sequence of social and economic shocks that struck it in the 1960s and 1970s. It first came under political pressure from the upheaval of the 1960s and subsequently faced worsening economic problems. The first left consensus liberalism too politically

154. Stankowski, *Memory of Steel*, 3.

155. *Ibid.*, 65.

weak to address the second. Any account that attempts to attribute the collapse of the New Deal order solely to the macroeconomic problems of the 1970s thus fails to explain why the liberal consensus had lost the political capacity to handle stagflation. Any explanation that attributes the entirety of the political regime change to the unraveling of the consensual political culture misses what the consensus was for in the first place.

Steel capital and steel labor could not bid up wages and prices without triggering an inflationary redistribution from the rest of society, an outcome every postwar administration would seek to block in the name of mass purchasing power and the stability of the dollar. Organized workers, seeking their own part of this same goal, attempted to call in the promise made to them by the New Deal state. Management could not hold down wages or drive up productivity without violating the norm of working-class security and imperiling the economic security and emotional stability of steel families. The integrity and value of these families formed a moral economy around which the workers would fight to maintain and improve the quality of their work lives.

Many of the forces that would wreck the entire political-economic arrangement of the postwar order were thus already present by 1959 and were beginning to register through industrial conflict. Organized (and largely white) men, drawing their workplace class militancy from the defense of their postwar identity, came into conflict with management unable to increase productivity and under growing international competitive pressure.¹⁵⁶ These were the fundamental dynamics of stagflation. In 1959, a political regime held power that was able to bottle them back up. By the 1970s, that regime could no longer bear the cost of such an unstable compromise. Policy makers rejected industrial economic planning and encouraged the deregulation of financial markets as a solution to worsening stagflation. Thus, the “financialization” of the economy emerged from policy makers’ refusal to intercede any longer in the crises generated by the old manufacturing order—an order typified by midcentury steel.¹⁵⁷ The next nationwide steel strike was in 1986, when some 20,000 steelworkers walked off the job. By then it was all too clear that the United States had finally “traded factories for finance.”¹⁵⁸ Only 25 years earlier, the

156. Scholars tend to locate the explosion of this social conflict in the tumult of the late 1960s and 1970s. See Stein, *Pivotal Decade*; Thomas J. Sugrue and John Skrentny, “The White Ethnic Strategy,” in *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s*, ed. Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 171–92; Jefferson R. Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 2010); Self, *All in the Family*.

157. For the politics of financialization, see Greta R. Krippner, *Capitalizing on Crisis: The Political Origins of the Rise of Finance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

158. Stein, *Pivotal Decade*.

towering mills of Baltimore, Bethlehem, Pittsburgh, Buffalo, Cleveland, Gary, and Chicago stood at the center of both the national and the global economy. But in the 1980s, one columnist at the time noted, "There was no statement of concern from the president; no worries among steel customers in Detroit. The steel industry isn't what it used to be. And neither are steel strikes."¹⁵⁹

159. James Risen, "Biggest Steel Company Shut Down by Walkout and Few Seem to Care," *Los Angeles Times*, August 2, 1986, OC27.