At the outbreak of the strike, there were two
different groups of workers in Andrew Carne­
gie's steel mill in Homestead, Pennsylvania, in
1892.

The 800 skilled workers were in the minority
at the mill, which employed a total of 3,800
men. They were members of a craft union, the
Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel
Workers, which had helped them gain wages
ranging from $35 to $70 a week and an eight­
hour day. It had also helped them gain an
important role in making decisions about their
working conditions. Committees of workers in
each department decided who did what work
and regulated many details of running the plant.
Through their knowledge and organization, these
committees decided everything, from what ma­
terials to use to how to get work done. Most of
the skilled workers were native-born Ameri­
cans whose ancestors came from countries in
Northern Europe, especially Great Britain and
Germany.

But the great majority of workers at Home­
stead were unskilled. They did the dirty work at
the plant: lifting, shoveling, pushing. They
worked a twelve-hour day with only two vaca­
tion days a year and earned under $10 a week.
The union had little interest in organizing these
people. Their view was: why bother when we,
the skilled workers, are the most important part
of the process of making steel. They felt their
union was powerful enough without the un­
skilled. Furthermore, most of the unskilled work­
ers were recent immigrants—peasants from
Eastern Europe who could barely speak Eng­
lish. Some of the union members realized from
their experiences that all workers cooperating
together could run the country's industries with­
out the need for bosses. They called their vision
a "cooperative commonwealth." Most of the

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people who opposed management could be evicted without warning. Losing one's job automatically meant losing one's home.

The skilled workers had the union to defend them from the employer; the unskilled did not.

In 1892 the union contract was about to expire. Three years earlier, Carnegie had tried to eliminate the union and failed. To make the maximum profits, he needed to tighten control over the work process. Like other industrialists around the country, Carnegie had begun laying plans to reorganize his steel mill. Complex tasks, until then done by skilled workers, were to be broken down into single motions and divided among lower-paid, unskilled people. Machines were to be brought in. Those troublesome skilled workers would no longer be needed, the union would be eliminated, and productivity and profits would soar.

Carnegie imported a professional union-buster, Henry Clay Frick, to run the Homestead plant and gave him the following policy statement: "There has been forced upon this Firm the question whether its Works are to be run 'Union' or 'Non-Union.' As the vast majority of our employees are Non-Union, the Firm has decided that the minority must give place to the majority. These works, therefore, will be necessarily Non-Union after the expiration of the present agreement. . . . This action is not taken in any spirit of hostility to labor organizations, but every man will see that the Firm cannot run Union and Non-Union. It must be one or the other."

Frick built a twelve-foot-high fence, three miles long, around the entire plant, topped it with barbed wire, and bored holes for guns every twenty-five feet. Then he gave the workers an ultimatum: take a pay cut—even though business was still booming in the steel industry—or the union will be broken. Two days before the old contract was to end, he closed the mill and locked out the workers. In response, the union’s advisory committee voted to strike.

The Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers called a meeting of all the workers at the plant. Their goal: to win the support of the unskilled workers for their strike. If everyone would agree not to work at the mill during the strike, then Frick would have a hard time keeping it running. But, if the unskilled went to work as scabs, the strike would be lost.

The big question was: would the unskilled workers support the strike?

Questions

1. Why does Carnegie want to get rid of the union at Homestead?

2. What do the skilled and unskilled workers have in common?

3. What differences are there between these workers?

4. (a) What could the unskilled workers lose from supporting the strike? (b) What could they gain?

5. How can the skilled workers get the unskilled workers to support the strike?
SKILLED WORKER

You are proud to be a member of the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers. With 24,000 members, it is the most powerful craft union in the United States. Nobody pushes around a member of the Amalgamated!

You’ve worked here in Homestead for about fifteen years. You have a highly skilled job as a puddler in the steel-making process, a skill taught you by your uncle. You generally work an eight-hour day, six days a week. You earn from $35 to $70 a week, depending on the price of steel. (If steel prices go up, your wages go up—when prices go down, wages go down.) But even $35 a week is great compared to what those unskilled workers earn: they make less than $10 a week.

In some ways it’s really the skilled workers who run the Homestead works. We say, “Carnegie may know how to make money, but the skilled workers know how to make steel.” Even if you don’t own the mill, you’re proud of the control and independence that skilled workers have. It’s your skill and control that keep wages up.

For a lot of reasons you’re glad to be an American. For one thing, you speak English, like most people in the country. Sometimes you feel there are about a thousand different languages at Homestead. But mostly you’re glad because all the good jobs go to the Americans. If you were an unskilled Hungarian or Rumanian, not only would you have the heaviest, dirtiest job, but you’d live in the most crowded, unsanitary housing. If the unskilled were permitted to join the union, not only might they outnumber you, but they might make it easier for the bosses to lower the wage scale.

Even though you look down on the unskilled foreigners, you depend on them. As a skilled puddler you need unskilled helpers. Homestead is a dangerous place for everybody, so all the workers—skilled and unskilled—need to look out for each other. Hundreds of people are killed or injured in the steel industry every year.

You will soon be attending the mass meeting called by the Amalgamated. It will be your job to convince the unskilled workers to support the strike. At the conclusion of the mass meeting there will be a vote to determine if the unskilled workers will support the strike.

For the next period of time you will meet with other skilled workers so that you can come up with arguments as to why the unskilled should join the strike. In your discussion, consider the following questions:

(1) What do you have in common with the unskilled workers? What differences are there?

(2) Try to anticipate the doubts the unskilled may have about the strike. What might these feelings be?

(3) What arguments could you give to convince the unskilled to support you?

(4) What changes could you make in your behavior or in your strike plans that might convince skeptical unskilled workers? Think about what you could reasonably offer to persuade them to join you on strike.
UNSKILLED WORKER

You are an unskilled worker at Andrew Carnegie’s Homestead steel works. You have only been in the United States for about four years. In your native village, when times were rough, it was common for different families and different workers to help each other out. As the rough times became more frequent, you and your family left Hungary and came to America, hoping for a better life.

Hearing there was work in the steel mills, you left New York City and headed for Pennsylvania. You had never seen a factory like the one you saw at Homestead: huge and loud, with smoke belching everywhere. And, sure enough, you were hired right away.

For four years you've put up with this life. A work week is six, sometimes seven, days. Most days you work twelve hours, averaging about $.14 an hour. This comes out to a little less than $10 a week!

Though you work for Andrew Carnegie, your immediate boss is really one of the skilled workers at the mill. You are considered his unskilled helper. He is paid a certain amount for every ton of steel he makes—the more steel he makes the more he gets paid. And the more he gets paid, the more you get. But when his wages go down, yours go down too.

The skilled workers act superior because they were born in America, speak English, and know more about the technical aspects of the work. They also think of themselves as superior because they're organized into a union. However, they don’t want you to belong. “The union is for us skilled workers” is their attitude. Mostly, you socialize with other Hungarians, rather than with Americans.

But although the skilled workers hold themselves above the unskilled, the work is dangerous for everyone. Hundreds of people are killed or injured in the steel industry each year, so you need to help and watch out for one another while you work.

Your living conditions are bad: two rooms, poor sanitation, not enough money for good food, for nice clothes and furniture or to take vacations or to educate your children. What would you do if you made any less money?

Soon you will be attending the mass meeting called by the union. The skilled workers will try to convince you to support the strike. At the conclusion of the mass meeting there will be a vote to determine if the unskilled workers will support the strike.

For the next period of time you will meet with other unskilled workers. Talk about your feelings toward the union and the strike. In your discussion, consider the following questions:

(1) What do you have in common with the skilled workers? What differences are there between you?

(2) How could you benefit from supporting the strike? How could you lose? What other pros or cons can you think of?

(3) What questions could you ask of the skilled workers? What demands could you make?
HOMESTEAD STRIKE
The Outcome

At the mass meeting on June 30, 1892, more than 3,000 of the plant's workers jammed into the Homestead Opera House. After discussion, they overwhelmingly voted to support each other and to strike.

A woman who interviewed some of the participants wrote: "The strike began June 30. The Association, which had been so recently indifferent to the conditions of the day men [unskilled workers], now realized, since many of the latter could be put into the skilled positions, that the strike could not be won without their assistance. A call was thereupon issued for them to strike, and the day men, with everything to lose and almost nothing to gain, went out too, and remained faithful supporters to the end."*

Frick hired a private army of hundreds of armed mercenaries to force the strikers back to work. Local sheriffs' deputies had been unwilling to oppose the strikers. When that army was beaten by the workers, with people killed on both sides, the governor of Pennsylvania sent in the state militia. Upon seeing that the troops were friendly to the workers, the general in charge forbade them to talk with strikers or even to walk in the town unless supervised by an officer. The general wrote, "[The workers] believe the works are theirs quite as much as Carnegie's."

Strikebreakers were brought in from different parts of the country, and gradually production resumed. Often they weren't told of their destination until they arrived; many times they were brought in sealed railroad cars after having signed up to go to other Carnegie plants. A number of these men escaped along the way. Afraid for their own safety or unwilling to take other workers' jobs, forced to live inside the plant and work in poor conditions, some managed to get away after arriving.

Still, the workers stayed out on strike. Legal charges were brought against almost two hundred of them for crimes that included treason against the state of Pennsylvania. Found innocent by juries on one set of charges, they were immediately rearrested and tried for other supposed crimes. Ultimately, no striker was ever found guilty of any charge, but the constant prosecutions took the money they had saved for the strike, demoralized them, and kept their leadership locked up during crucial times.

Carnegie owned other mills and was able to continue to produce and sell steel while the strike went on. Workers in other mills also struck, briefly, in solidarity with the Homestead workers. Nevertheless, after four and a half months the strike was lost. With winter approaching, the strikers were forced to return to work on Frick's terms.

Having beaten the union, it was relatively easy for Carnegie and the rest of the steel corporations to introduce changes in work practices and to bring in new machinery. At Homestead, wages were cut, hours were increased, and the number of workers employed was drastically reduced.

Carnegie and Frick decided to change more than work relations at Homestead. They thought that if they could influence the private lives of the workers in their mills, they would have a more obedient workforce. They did this by encouraging the workers to marry and take on

family responsibilities. Instead of renting houses and thus controlling workers through the threat of eviction, they now would \textit{sell} the houses. Owning a home, workers would be tied to their jobs and would have to keep up house payments.

This was a time when a few corporations came to own many of the steel mills. There were attempts in other mills to strike; however, the union still excluded the unskilled, so the workers seldom agreed to follow the leadership of the skilled. Even when there was solidarity between skilled and unskilled workers in one mill, the corporations were able to shift production to other mills and wait out a strike. Within ten years, Carnegie Steel merged with other corporations to become United States Steel, a company that controlled 60 percent of the entire industry.

\textbf{Questions}

1. Based on the outcome of your role play, does the actual decision of the unskilled workers at Homestead to support the strike surprise you? Why or why not?

2. What are the reasons the strike was not successful? Think of the actions taken by both Frick and the government.

3. (a) As a result of their victory, what changes were Carnegie and Frick able to introduce in the workplace (feel free to use what you know from earlier lessons) and in the community? (b) Why did they want these changes?