Crash Course Questions

1. What did the US have that allowed for industrialization?
2. What does the American constitution protect?
3. By 1913 how much of the world’s industrial output did the US produce?
4. What did the railroad rely on to get big?
5. How much of the US oil industry did standard oil control?
6. What was vertical integration?
7. What was horizontal integration?
8. What was the 1st national union?
9. What was Social Darwinism?

Central Question: Why did so many strikes occur in the early 1890’s and was the result of them?

One of the most difficult episodes of Andrew Carnegie's life -- and one that revealed the steel magnate's conflicting beliefs regarding the rights of labor -- was the bitter conflict in 1892 at his steel plant in Homestead, Pennsylvania. Carnegie's involvement in the union-breaking action forever tarnished his reputation as a benevolent employer and a champion of labor.

The conflict at Homestead arose at a time when the fast-changing American economy had stumbled and conflicts between labor and management had flared up all over the country. In 1892, labor declared a general strike in New Orleans. Coal miners struck in Tennessee, as did railroad switchmen in Buffalo, New York and copper miners in Idaho.

Carnegie's mighty steel industry was not immune to the downturn. In 1890, the price of rolled-steel products started to decline, dropping from $35 a gross ton to $22 early in 1892. In the face of depressed steel prices, Henry c. Frick, general manager of the Homestead plant that Carnegie largely owned, was determined to cut wages and break the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers, the nation’s largest steelmaker and its largest craft union.

Despite Carnegie's public pro-labor stance, Carnegie supported Frick's plans behind the scenes. In the spring of 1892, Carnegie had Frick produce as much armor plate as possible before the union's contract expired at the end of June. If the union failed to accept Frick's terms, Carnegie instructed him to shut down the plant and wait until the workers buckled. "We... approve of anything you do," Carnegie wrote from England in words he would later come to regret. "We are with you to the end."

In May 1892, Carnegie traveled to Scotland, leaving Homestead in Frick's hands. Although Carnegie would later try to distance himself from the events at Homestead, his cables to Frick were clear: Do whatever it takes. Frick dug in for war.

With Carnegie's carte blanche support, Frick moved to slash wages. Plant workers responded by hanging Frick in effigy. The union fought not just for better wages, but also for a say in America's new industrial order. Though Carnegie and Frick had brought unions to heel at their other mills, Homestead remained untamed.

"Workers believed because they had worked in the mill, they had mixed their labor with the property in the mill," explains historian Paul Krause. "They believed that in some way the property had become theirs. Not that it wasn't Andrew Carnegie's, not that they were the sole proprietors of the mill, but that they had an entitlement in the mill. And I think in a fundamental way the conflict at Homestead in 1892 was about these two conflicting views of property."

On June 25th, Frick announced he would no longer negotiate with the union; now he would only deal with workers individually. Leaders of Amalgamated were willing to concede on almost every level -- except on the dissolution of their union. On June 29, despite the union's willingness to negotiate, Frick closed down his open hearth and armor-plate mills, locking out 3,800 men. Two days later, workers seized the mill and sealed off the town from strike-breakers.

Frick sent for three hundred Pinkerton guards, but when they arrived by barge on July 6 they were met by ten thousand strikers, many of them armed. After an all-day battle, the Pinkertons surrendered and were forced to run a gauntlet through the crowd. In all, nine strikers and seven Pinkertons were killed; many strikers and most of the remaining Pinkertons were injured, some seriously.

The sheriff, unable to recruit local residents against the strikers, appealed to Governor William Stone for support; eight thousand militia arrived on July 12. Gradually, under militia protection, strikebreakers got the plant running again. Frick’s intransigence had won sympathy for the strikers, but an attempt on his life by anarchist Alexander Berkman on July 23 caused most of it to evaporate. Meanwhile, the corporation had more than a hundred strikers arrested, some of them for murder; though most were finally released, each case consumed much of the union’s time, money, and energy. The strike lost momentum and ended on November 20, 1892. With the Amalgamated Association virtually destroyed, Carnegie Steel moved quickly to institute longer hours and lower wages. The Homestead strike inspired many workers, but it also underscored how difficult it was for any union to prevail against the combined power of the corporation and the government.

On May 11, 1894, several thousand train workers started an unannounced strike at the Pullman Company in Illinois.  Over the next few months, dozens of workers would die in strike-related violence, and the President and Supreme Court would finally become involved in the strike’s outcome.

The Pullman Company built and leased passenger trains cars, and thousands were in operation around the United States by 1893. George Pullman also built a planned community for his workers in Illinois, where workers enjoyed many amenities but they also were financially dependent on the Pullman Company for their homes and utilities.

After a severe depression in 1893, wages fell about 25 percent for the Pullman workers while living costs remained the same. The workers then sought out union representation; former railroad worker Eugene V. Debs and his American Railway Union has won a strike earlier in 1894 and they became involved in the Pullman situation. The May 11 “wildcat” strike wasn’t directly organized by the ARU,  but Debs and the union quickly became involved in the strike as it escalated.

In June 1894, the ARU called for a national boycott of Pullman cars for its union members, who managed the flow of railway traffic west of Chicago. The Pullman Company called Debs’ bluff, and by late June, at least 125,000 ARU members had walked off the job in support of the Pullman workers.

Violence related to the strikes became an issue, as well as the inability of the U.S. mail delivery system to operate in strike-effected regions. When Illinois governor John P. Altgeld refused to ask for federal troops to intercede in the strike, U.S. Attorney General Richard Olney, who had a close relationship with the railway industry, asked for the first-ever federal injunction to block a strike. However, the strikers mostly ignored the injunction. President Grover Cleveland then sent about 2,000 troops to Illinois to enforce the injunction, and more violence ensued.

Debs and other union leaders were arrested after the injunction was ignored, and Debs eventually spent six months in jail on related charges and the ARU was broken up. Debs had hired a former railroad attorney, Clarence Darrow, to represent him at trial.

Debs and Darrow challenged the contempt of court and the injunction’s legality, and had the appeals heard at the Supreme Court. In 1895, a unanimous Court decided in the case of In re Debsthat the federal government could issue a strike injunction as part of its role in regulating interstate commerce and in order to protect the general welfare of the people.

“In the exercise of those powers, the United States may remove everything put upon highways, natural or artificial, to obstruct the passage of interstate commerce, or the carrying of the mails,” said Justice David Brewer.

However, Brewer acknowledged the importance of the issue nationally and the effectiveness of Darrow’s arguments.

“A most earnest and eloquent appeal was made to us in eulogy of the heroic spirit of those who threw up their employment, and gave up their means of earning a livelihood, not in defense of their own rights, but in sympathy or and to assist others whom they believed to be wronged,” Brewer wrote.

But he added that the court and electoral systems were the best venues to settle such disputes.

“We yield to none in our admiration of any act of heroism or self-sacrifice, but we may be permitted to add that it is a lesson which cannot be learn too soon or too thoroughly that, under this government of and by the people, the means of redress of all wrongs are through the courts and at the ballot box, and that no wrong, real or fancied, carries with it legal warrant to invite as a means of redress the cooperation of a mob, with its accompanying acts of violence.”

After the Pullman strike and the Supreme Court decision, Debs and Darrow would remain as prominent figures in the labor and legal fields into the 20th century.