

McKees Rocks Strike (1909)

In 1903, when English-speaking workers struck the Pressed Steel Car Company in Stowe Township, Allegheny County, the company promptly retaliated by ignoring the strikers' demands and replacing them with Slavic immigrants.

These new employees were part of the millions of people pouring into the United States from eastern and central Europe. Many had found work in the anthracite coal fields of eastern Pennsylvania, where the work was grueling and dangerous, and the wages notoriously poor.

Migrating westward and seeking better opportunities, these Slavic families, whose roots were Belarusian, Russian, Ukrainian, Czech, Polish, Slovak, Serbian, Bulgarian, Macedonian, Serbo-Croatian, and Slovenian, arrived in the Pittsburgh factories and mills eager for work, and more importantly to the company owners, willing to work for less than their "native" American counterparts.

Though labeled as "unskilled" workers, the Slavs who worked for the Pressed Steel Car Company filled demanding positions, serving as pressmen, punchers, riveters, and shearsmen. Many also worked in "semi-skilled" positions as blacksmiths, carpenters, fitters, and painters. All of these jobs were strenuous, some were quite dangerous, and no man, even the most highly skilled, earned more than \$2.50 for a ten-hour day.



Steel hopper built by Schoen Pressed Steel Car Co., McKees Rocks, PA, 1898....

Business had been booming at the plant since Pennsylvania railroads had belatedly switched from wooden cars to pressed steel cars. After two experimental steel coal-carrying hopper cars that Andrew Carnegie's Pittsburgh, Bessemer and Lake Erie Railroad (P B and LE) had obtained proved to be far stronger and more durable than wooden cars, P B and LE in 1897 had placed an order with the Schoen Pressed Steel Company for two hundred all-steel hopper cars, the first mass order for steel railroad cars in American railroad history.

The resulting flood of orders for steel cars from railroads all over the nation had created unprecedented demand. For a brief period, Schoen's company held a monopoly on building all-steel railroad cars. By mid-1899, he had orders for fifteen thousand steel cars on the books.

That same year, a merger created the Pressed Steel Car Company. Capitalized at \$25 million, the new firm constructed a 180-acre plant in Stowe Township (adjacent to McKees Rocks, Pa.), Allegheny County, added four thousand new employees to the workforce, and hastily constructed the company town of Presston to house the flood of new workers and their families.

In 1903, the workers staged their first strike against low wages, dangerous work conditions, and what they felt were the abusive attitudes of the company's owners and managers.



Wall surrounding the Pressed Steel Car plant, McKees Rocks, PA, 1909.

Pressed Steel responded by bringing in new Slavic workers as strikebreakers, who worked for even lower wages than their predecessors.

The company hoped that these foreign-born laborers, many of whom spoke little or no English, would be a docile and uncomplaining labor force. They were also counting on the fact that the new workers, who came from diverse nations and ethnic groups, would be unable to unite. But management's estimation of their new workers' ambitions was soon proven to be false.

After a few years of harsh labor, 5,000 Slavic workers, representing nearly twenty nationalities, became frustrated with working conditions that were so dangerous that the plant was nicknamed "the slaughterhouse." Banding together, they welcomed the assistance of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a radical labor union that had been organized in 1905.

On the morning of July 13, 1909, 600 Pressed Steel Car employees again went out on strike, supported and encouraged by the IWW. Company President Frank N. Hoffstot immediately fired those who had walked out, and hired replacement workers. The next day, IWW representatives led thousands of immigrant workers out in support of the strike, initiating a two-month-long work action that was punctuated by numerous violent clashes.

When the mounted State Constabulary arrived on the scene, called by the company to break the strike, workers derisively jeered at them, calling them "Cossacks," in memory of the despised henchmen of the landowners and czars from their homelands. Demonstrations raged around the plant, then turned violent when more than 100 guards from the mounted State Constabulary, Allegheny County sheriff's deputies, private coal and iron police, and Stowe Township police clashed with, and fired into, strikers.



Bread line outside the Pressed Steel Car plant, McKees Rocks, PA, 1909.

A tense standoff ensued, and for five weeks, strikers, replacement workers, company officials, and police met, argued, and occasionally skirmished. When a State Constable shot and killed a striker on August 22, the standoff turned to riot. Chanting, "Strike! A life for a life!" strikers vowed revenge.

That night, a streetcar approached the plant with Allegheny County Deputy Sheriff Harry Exler among its passengers. When strikers and sympathizers ordered him off the car, Exler refused, and in the gunfight that followed, he was shot and killed.

When a streetcar carrying state troopers arrived soon afterward, the bullets flew again. According to the Pittsburgh Post, "More than 500 shots were fired and for two hours the dead and dying lay in the streets while ambulance crews and assisting physicians risked their lives in penetrating the town."

In all, eight men died that night, including Exler, two state troopers, and three strikers. By the time was rioting was over, a dozen men were dead and more than fifty were wounded. With workers' anger spent, their representatives returned to meetings with management, and eventually won some small concessions.

The success of the McKees Rocks Strike of 1909 helped enhance the public image of the IWW as a major force, although it never again exercised the influence that it did in McKees Rocks. After the strike was over, the Pressed Steel Car Company produced tens of thousands more freight cars, passenger cars, and subway cars. During World War II, it converted to the production of military tanks. It resumed railroad-car production after the war, but was merged and closed in 1956.

