

MEN AND STEEL

By ARNE SWABECK

STEEL—the most basic material for modern industry has played a role in changing the boundaries of empires. Made by human brawn and brain, by workers toiling endless hours before intense heat from roaring furnaces, constantly speeded by the growth of machine, driven on to turn out profits for others, leading a life of privation to be cast on the scrap heap at an early age when their vitality is burned out:—those are the steel makers.

The steel industry shows in a most glaring form the class distinctions of modern society, between those who own and those who toil. An industry upon which the imprints of history are those of the class struggle.

With Pittsburgh as the center but stretching throughout the country is a chain of giant steel mills with their towering massive hulks of blast furnaces, their huge cranes, their maze of pipe lines and railroad tracks, their rows of smoke stacks. Heavy clouds of smoke and gaseous fumes always hang over the mills, pierced only by the sparkling flames from the bessemer converter. From a distance one hears the heavy thud of machinery working inside when red-hot ingots or slabs, from 40 to fifty tons in weight, strike the water cooled rolling mills producing a sound like a thunder bolt, mixed with the deafening noise of the steam hammers and shrieking saws biting into cold steel. Men move about within working with heavy crowbars or tongs, feeding the hellish fires, bending, tugging and swaying in their heavy toil.

By day these monsters appear somber, prison like, yet enchanting in their might. By night the bessemers cast their glare upon the sky in a brilliant display of searing flame.

Carried to the mills of the country, iron ore comes mostly from the great open pits of the Mesaba Range, from whence it is loaded into large flat ore boats at Duluth. It is dumped into the maws of the blast furnace to be made into pig iron. Strenuous and exhaustive is the work at the mighty blast furnaces. The stoves heating the blast require cleaning after each process of the hardened cinders in the combustion chamber on top. Covered with extra clothing and wooden sandals, armed with pick and shovel, the men enter. The heat is intense. Three to ten minutes work between spells is the limit. It is made more dangerous by breathing the dust-saturated air.

By the modern process, molten iron from the blast furnaces is run into huge ladles, of 20 to 30 tons capacity, and taken directly to the open hearth furnace or bessemer converter to be made into steel. The bessemer converter is formed like a huge vessel with a hot blast blowing through from tweiers in the bottom; blowing out all impurities, sending its spark-

ling fireworks high into the air. Near this seething hell, the steel blower works attending to the blast and shoveling in manganese, dolomite and coke dust. Again the molten stream is run into the ladle to be poured into ingot moulds. Here the steel pourer does his stuff while his body glistens from the flare or boiling fluid.

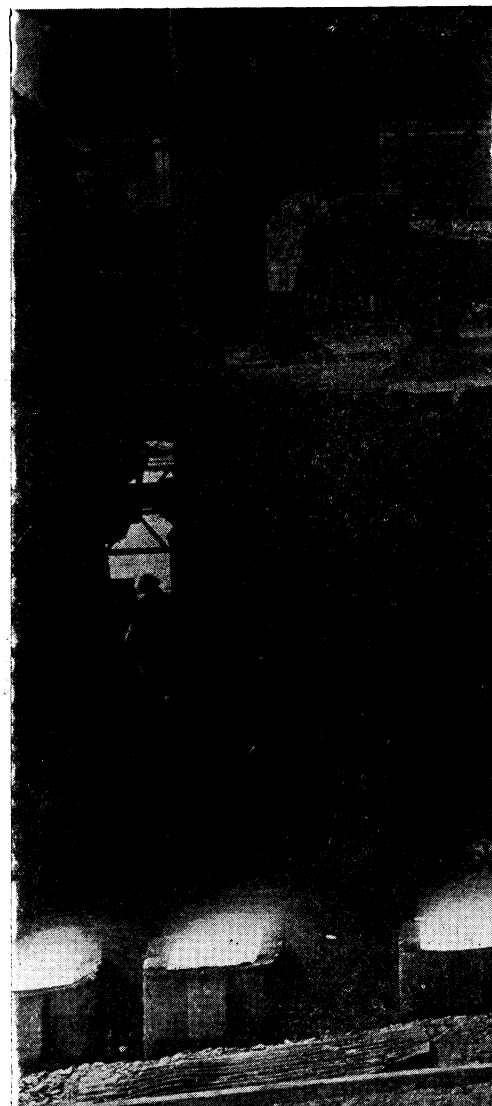
Inside the open hearth furnace the molten steel is bubbling and seething, its impurities forming a black crust on top to get finally burned out by the intense heat. The helpers at the open hearth make what they call "back walls" by shoveling dolomite across the blazing furnace. Only a few moments are possible facing this intense heat. Extra canvas covering on limbs, and eye goggles are necessary, the heat reaching as high as 180 degrees. "Get near enough not to get your face burned off," is the slogan. Yet minor burns and small fires in the clothing are almost inevitable.

While red hot, as soon as stripped of its moulds, the ingot is placed by electric cranes on conveyors moving it through the rolling mills to get drawn down to the gauge required by the market. The more it gets drawn out the faster it moves, turning into a lightning speed to reach its shape before it gets cooled off. Rollers, helpers, tongsmen and hock-out boys work here under the strain of the speed-up, manipulating the hot steel, manoeuvring in between heavy death-dealing machinery in an atmosphere filled with a terrific noise.

A misstep may mean instant death. A tong slipping when red hot ingots are taken from the seething pit may be fatal. Men sometimes fall into the cobbling bozes between the train of rolls or get limbs torn from their body. But each big mill has its hospital and accidents are hushed up, else the supply of slaves might give out or the "public" become disturbed. While modern production has in many respects replaced tongs and crowbars with cranes and repeaters, yet the increasing speed-up, more machinery and failure to build guards or shields around nevertheless makes work more dangerous.

But life is cheap in the steel mills. Accident or death does not matter much. Many of the workers are mere "hunkies" without relatives here to claim insurance. Also steel towns are full of stores trading in artificial limbs and corporation officials are ever ready to show that accidents are the fault of the workers and sandwich in a "safety talk." When workers drop from sheer exhaustion medicine is on hand in the office.

Development of machinery, technique and speed-up has immensely increased the output per man in the steel mills. For example, the blast furnaces of the country in the year 1850 employed a total of 20,298 workers producing



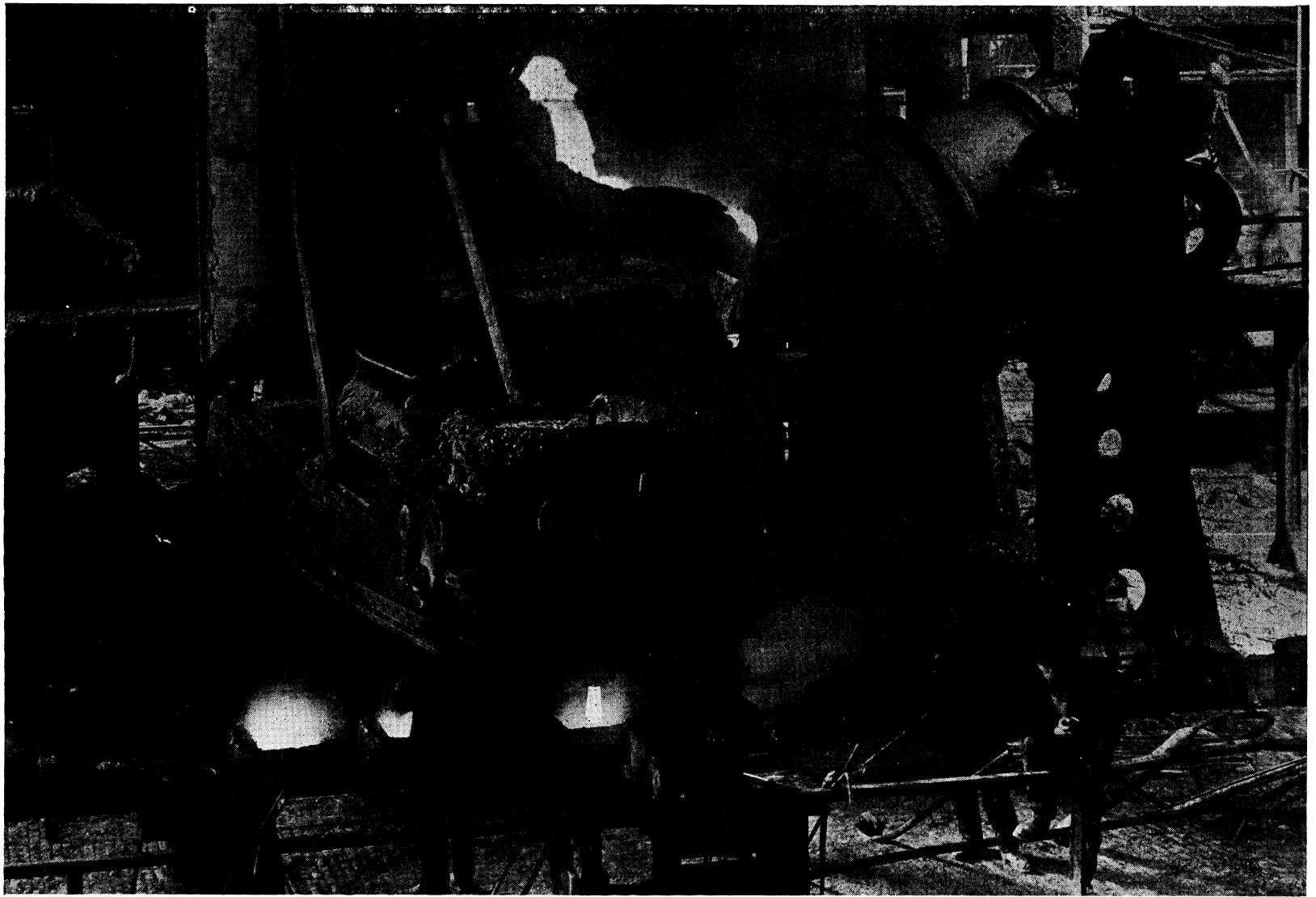
Phot Iron Age.

View of Bessemer Department

a total of 504,245 tons, which is 25 tons per man. In the year 1914 the number employed were 29,356 producing 23,332,244 tons which is 795 tons per man. In the year 1925 the number employed were 29,188 producing 36,700,566 tons which is 1,257 tons per man.

Wage reductions are the inevitable result of the constantly increasing output. Steel workers are mostly paid by tonnage rate. Without any organization they are entirely at the mercy of the powerful corporations. Highly skilled workers, such as the rollers and others, draw a high pay, common laborers are held down to about \$4.00 a day. While the ten hour day, and even the twelve hour day, still obtains, the machines have put many workers on part time and under the intense speed-up many old hands are now losing their jobs.

Dreary is the life of the workers in the steel towns, over which hangs the heavy pall of smoke. Living in miserable dumps, the words freedom and civil rights are unknown. The corporations own and control the towns, banks, churches, schools and all. Their former superintendents, managers or gang bosses hold down the offices of government and are loyal only to them. Mayor Lyle of McKeesport, Pa., who has held his office for a number of years, boasts a record of never allowing a labor



At right a Bessemer converter. Here as in all steps of making steel, the life of the worker is sacrificed for ever greater profits.

organization to get a foothold in the city. The workers live in terror of the effective corporation blacklist and their spies swarming the mills and the streets. The private coal and iron police, the town constables and the state cossacks all take their orders from the kings of steel.

Four steel workers, among them Pete Muse-lin and Milan Resetar, are now struggling before the Pennsylvania supreme court for their right to belong to the Workers (Communist) Party. They were convicted by the lower court for holding such membership after being arrested in a raid upon their homes in the steel town of Woodlawn, Pa., controlled by the Jones & Laughlin corporation.

These mighty corporations own vast coal fields and metal mines, endless railroad tracks and rolling stocks, steamship lines and ship building yards. The mill products go into a dozen basic industries and the corporations are closely tied into the country's financial resources in a directing capacity. Their direction over the workers is on a militarized basis with the general staff; with lieutenants and non-commissioned officers from managers and superintendents down to the gang bosses.

They know how to keep the workers divided; first by creating antagonism between the various nationalities and to foreigners in gen-

eral, as well as to the Negro race, which is heavily discriminated against; secondly by a cunning system of corporation stocks, insurance benefits and pensions available for higher paid workers. Those become the "loyal" ones opposing conflicts for better conditions for the large mass of semi-skilled and unskilled workers.

Clustering both banks of the Monongahela River lie the steel towns. Among them is Homestead carrying the tradition of one of the greatest historic labor battles. On July 1, 1892, the strike was declared. On July 6 two covered barges filled with 300 Pinkertons who had embarked at Ashtabula, Ohio, attempted to land just below the Homestead mill. The workers pleaded with them; the answer was a volley from the Pinkerton Winchesters. Taking their dead and wounded with them the workers barricaded themselves in the mill and answered the fire. The battle lasted from daybreak to 6 P. M. when the few Pinkertons still alive hoisted the white flag. Many of them, to escape death from the workers, had jumped in the river and drowned.

One Negro worker, Sam Burgett led a raid on the home of the river captain and captured his metal cannon. Dragging it over the bridge across the river he also opened fire on the

barges loading the cannon with scraps. It exploded, killing one of the workers. Sam Burgett was subsequently exiled from Homestead for three years.

The Carnegie steel corporation had the workers indicted. One of them, Silvester Critchlow, was brought to trial as a test case. He was defended by attorney Erwin from St. Paul, who declared in the court: "Yes, these workers had a right to shoot, and to shoot to kill even on the very precipice of hell, for they were defending themselves against an army of invaders." Indictments were meanwhile secured against the corporations for the murder of the workers and thus the case against the workers was quickly dropped.

The great steel strike of 1919, led by William Z. Foster, embracing over 300,000 workers, shook the whole country and made the steel kings tremble. The violence, the spying, blacklisting terror and murder by police, private and governmental, under the direction of the corporations during that strike are almost unequalled even in America. But the splendid fighting spirit shown by the steel workers in their many battles of the past is the harbinger of rebirth of this great tradition in future struggles. To organize these workers for the future struggles is the task of the left wing.