

COMMEMORATING THE 1919 STEEL STRIKE:

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN CZELEN

Abstract: To mark the centennial of the Steel Strike of 1919, the authors present here an edited transcript of an interview with Monessen resident John Czelen, a local labor leader. In 1973 historian John Bodnar of the Pennsylvania Historical Museum Commission interviewed him about his memories of the strike. Only five years old at the time, Czelen recalls seeing Coal and Iron Police beat striking members. He also recounts his father's memories of the strike, informed by his own knowledge of labor history. Anthony Serrino, also a Monessen resident, offers his stories. Historian David Witwer presents an overview of the strike, placing the interview in context.

Keywords: Monessen; John Czelen; Steel Strike of 1919; Pittsburgh Steel Company; ethnic rivalry

Introduction: The Steel Strike of 1919

September 22nd marked the one-hundredth anniversary of a seismic event in Pennsylvania labor history, the Steel Strike of 1919. Over a quarter-million steel workers across the country took on the mass production industry that stood at the center of the twentieth-century American economy, challenging the power of corporate America in pursuit of a vision for a new industrial democracy. Their effort came amidst a wave of labor uprisings following the end of World War I. In 1919, some four million workers, making up 25% of all private sector employees, went out on strike, as a labor movement that had surged during World War I contested efforts by employers to return to the pre-war system of industrial relations. The Steel Strike was the largest of these conflicts, and the employers' victory in this contest signaled the broader defeat of labor's efforts across the rest of the economy. If steel was at the crux of the post-war struggle

between business and labor, then Pennsylvania was the key battleground in the 1919 Steel Strike. The state was the historic center of steel production in this country, and both employers and the unions viewed victory in Pennsylvania as the key determinant in who would win the strike.

Andrew Carnegie, the founder of the modern steel industry, focused his efforts on relentlessly reducing costs through increasing levels of mechanization and by establishing complete dominance over the workforce. In order to compete, the rest of the industry followed his lead. The industry's pursuit of these goals meant that during the latter part of the 1800s, a series of technological innovations reduced the role of the skilled workers who had dominated the preceding iron industry. At the same time, Carnegie Steel's victory in the lockout at Homestead in 1892 allowed this steel industry leader to evict one of the era's most powerful labor organizations from its factories. In the years that followed, the rest of the industry pursued a similar course, and the steel workers union, the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel, and Tin Workers, found itself increasingly shut out of the mass production steel factories. The corporate behemoth, US Steel, formed in 1901, completed this process of de-unionization in 1909, when it locked out the Amalgamated and declared that henceforth its factories would operate on a completely open shop basis: open shop meaning non-union.

The bosses of the steel industry utilized several tactics to keep the union at bay. They forced employees to sign so-called "yellow dog contracts" promising that they would never join a union. Networks of corporate spies were always on the lookout for any covert union organizing activities. Paternalistic corporate welfare measures, from employee stock options to subsidized company housing, further strengthened the employers' control. Managers used their hiring and job assignment powers to play on existing ethnic divisions within their workforce, pitting one set of immigrants against another and seeking to heighten the divisions between the skilled, largely

native-born workers, and their unskilled immigrant counterparts. In the pre-World War I era, many of those immigrant workers had little interest in joining a union and winning long-term changes in their workplace. They had short-term goals built around their ambitions of saving as much as possible in order to return to their country of origin and setting themselves up in a homestead there.

World War I changed the dynamics of the industry in ways that made union organization much more feasible. Military orders fueled a boom in steel production and industry profits, but the war also cut off immigration from Europe, eliminating a major source of the industry's supply of low-skilled labor. For immigrants already here, the dream of returning home faded, while at the same time they were being inundated with patriotic campaigns intended to Americanize them and win their support for the country's war effort. Bond drives, selective service campaigns, and wartime propaganda encouraged immigrants to believe that the war was being fought to ensure democracy, and for many of them it made sense that those same democratic ideals should reshape their workplaces. In this way, the employer-sponsored campaigns had the unintended effect of encouraging the ideal of industrial democracy. Also, for the first time the federal government adopted a pro-labor stance. In return for organized labor's support of the war effort, the administration of President Woodrow Wilson made important moves to support union organizing through new wartime agencies, such as the War Labor Board. In this new hopeful climate, during August 1918, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) formed a National Committee for Organizing Iron and Steel Workers. John Fitzpatrick of the Chicago Federation of Labor and William Z. Foster, who later played a leading role in the Communist Party USA, led this campaign. The committee pooled the efforts of twenty-four AFL

unions, who would all share a common membership form and maintain a standard initiation fee; each union pledged to contribute organizers to this campaign.

Steel workers responded with enthusiasm to this organizing effort. They were motivated by the idealistic vision of industrial democracy fostered by wartime propaganda, but also by grittier concerns such as the industry's standard twelve-hour workdays, and the all too common seven-day weeks. Wages had gone up during the war, but they still failed to keep up with rising prices. The employers' efforts to counter this organizing effort through a campaign of selective firings, blacklists, and local repression only encouraged worker militancy. From the ranks of these new members came a powerful push for the AFL's National Committee to stage a strike, even though only part of the workforce had yet been organized. That push was encouraged when the employers refused to meet with union representatives. As a result, the National Committee called for a strike to begin on September 22, 1919.

The scale of the walkout exceeded everyone's expectations, including the unions. US Steel's President Elbert Gary had claimed that 85% of his company's workforce rejected the union, and other industry leaders had made similar assertions. They turned out to have been totally inaccurate. Between 250,000 and 300,000 workers went out on strike, a number that accounted for about half of the workforce in steel, and the industry's production fell by a third. This was a truly national strike against a key mass production industry. Seen in the light of the nationwide strike wave of that year and other prominent conflicts such as the Seattle General Strike, it seemed to confirm the worst fears of conservatives. A headline in the *New York Times* warned, "It Is Industrial War!"

The employers focused on Pennsylvania, the heart of the steel industry and where strike participation varied across the different regions of the state. Their goal was to continue steel

production, working steadily to return their factories back to normal production. To do that the employers harnessed the sympathetic forces of law and order to protect strike breakers and cow the union pickets and organizers. In Pittsburgh, the Sheriff of Allegheny County proved a reliable ally, declaring illegal all outside gatherings of three or more people. Indoor gatherings were allowed with permits, but in a swipe at the immigrant-based membership of the unions, those meetings had to be conducted in English. Elsewhere, the Pennsylvania State Police took the lead in repressing union activity. With their proclivity for charging crowds of strike sympathizers on horseback, the troopers were often referred to as “cossacks” by the unionists. Pickets and union sympathizers also encountered violence at the hands of the Coal and Iron Police, a force paid for and controlled by the employers. Also, the union leaders’ request that the federal government step in to protect their civil liberties fell on deaf ears. Most of the news media sided with the employers, focusing their coverage on allegations that the strike’s leadership was tied to a Bolshevik conspiracy and seeking to foster a spirit of defeatism by echoing the industry’s claim that the strike was already lost.

Those tactics enjoyed some success, but the strike was also undercut by divisions among the workers. The mostly native-born skilled workers were less likely to have joined the union effort, and those that did were often among the first to respond to the employers’ calls to return to work. Much of the labor movement in this era excluded African Americans, and the employers sometimes turned to them for replacement workers. At a key moment in the strike, the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel, and Tin Workers, which had a toehold of skilled worker membership in some corners of the industry, sent its members in across the picket lines, claiming that they had to adhere to their collective bargaining agreements.

By November, the industry had managed to restore production to what was a near normal level. The strike lingered on but the possibility of achieving victory had faded. On January 8, 1920, the unions called an end to the walkout. By that summer the National Committee for Organizing Iron and Steel Workers had disbanded. Employees viewed the unions' defeat as an indication that the steel industry could not be beaten and organizing efforts remained moribund in this and other mass production industries until the rebirth of the labor movement in the 1930s, a rebirth made possible by a new level of support from the state. But the 1919 Steel Strike offered important lessons to the labor movement, demonstrating the potential for organizing the immigrant workforce and the possibility of staging a nationwide strike against the mass production industries.

—David Witwer

For Further Reading:

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Notes on the John Czelen Interview

John Czelen (1913–2008), then subdirector of District 15, United Steelworkers of America, met with historian John Bodnar on February 26, 1973 in Donora, Pennsylvania, for an interview about the 1919 steel strike in western Pennsylvania. Two other individuals, Anthony Serrino (b. 1910), then an aide to United States Congressman Thomas Morgan, and Charles Kunish (sp?)¹ an officer in local 1229, United Steelworkers of America, were present at the interview and spoke occasionally. Bodnar conducted the interview, one of three in the 1919 Steel Strike Project, the auspices of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (PHMC) as part of the agency's Ethnic Studies Program during the 1970s to document the history of the state's ethnic groups. The original reel-to-reel tape, which focuses primarily on the strike in Monessen, Pennsylvania, is permanently housed at the Pennsylvania State Archives as part of Manuscript Group 409, the Oral History Collection.² The original uncut audio interview, lasting 37.23 minutes, will be available for free access on the Pennsylvania Historical Association website between September 2019 and January 2020.

John Czelen grew up in Monessen and worked at the Page Woven Wire Company mill in Monessen his entire career. His parents, Kazimir and Thecla Czelen emigrated from southeastern Poland (then part of Austria-Hungary) in the early 1900s. He was a World War II veteran and is buried in St. Hyacinth Cemetery in Westmoreland County. A few years after his 1973 oral history interview with John Bodnar, he was interviewed by another PHMC historian, Matthew Magda, about his life and work. Portions of that interview appear in Magda's *Monessen: Industrial Boomtown and Steel Community 1898–1980*. In it, Czelen expands on his family's settlement in the Monongahela Valley around Elizabeth, the 1919 Steel Strike, the Great Depression, his job, and working with the union. The original tape of that interview is also

housed at the Pennsylvania State Archives as part of the Monessen Community Oral History Project.³

A transcript of the Czelen interview follows, lightly edited for clarity and flow by Linda Ries, editor of *Pennsylvania History*, and Linda Shopes, a member of the journal's editorial board. The editors have omitted some of Bodnar's questions and a few of Czelen's false starts and repeated words, inserted punctuation to approximate the rhythm of Czelen's speech, and footnoted references that may be unfamiliar to readers. The original order of the interview has been retained, as have Czelen's word choice, word order, and sentence structure; phonetic spelling of his pronunciation, however, has not been attempted. In cases where they have been unable to verify the spelling of proper names and other words, a question mark (?) has been inserted; inaudible sections of the interview have similarly been noted. Readers are reminded that a transcript is only a reasonable approximation of the spoken word.

Readers might also note that an interview is an act of memory, reflecting what a narrator can—or cannot—recall, what he chooses to say or not say, and his own subjective understanding of both the events under discussion and the interviewer's questions. Czelen was recalling events that took place more than a half-century before the interview, when he was five and six years old. In a few places he describes firsthand experience; primarily, however, he is recounting secondhand information, told to him by his father, his father's friends, and Polish immigrants who participated in the strike. As he says in the interview: "We learned that [about the strike] from the discussions. Because of my entry into the union, I wanted to know about it." Given his background and occupation, it is not surprising that Czelen adopts a pro-labor stance, one that is deeply sympathetic to the striking workers and a position Bodnar obviously shared. That said,

Czelen's account substantially reflects existing historiography on the 1919 strike; minor errors of fact have been addressed in endnotes.

—Linda Ries and Linda Shopes

John Czelen (hereafter JC): I'm John Czelen. I'm the sub director of District 15 [United Steelworkers of America], and this is Mr. Anthony Serrino on my left. He's an aide to Congressman [Thomas] Morgan.⁴ And on my right is Charlie Kunish (?) a new addition to the staff, formerly with Pittsburgh Steel Company and an officer in Local 1229.

John Bodnar (hereafter JB): One of the questions I'd like to throw out right now concerning the 1919 steel strikes, as that's primarily what we're here for and what we're here to talk about. One of the things we've been wondering about is to what extent was there a division in the ranks of labor, if any, during the 1919 steel strike. Was there a division between native born and foreign born?

JC: Well, I can't give you, let's say, the conditions that prevailed exactly because I was too young, but from reading and conversing with my father and his associates, it is a fact that there was some, somewhat of a division between those who were natives and those who were foreign born. Because those who were natives, they usually occupied the jobs that paid more money. And they were, I would say management was more selective in assigning people who were native born to these jobs. So naturally those who were from overseas, they were given jobs that were in the lower grades and usually the more hazardous, as well as the more tiresome jobs than those who were native born, in fact.

JB: Can I ask you where your father was from, by the way?

JC: My dad was from what was formerly Austria-Hungary, presently Poland.

JB: All right. Do you want to recollect a bit or did you have anything in mind you wanted to say, first of all, about the 1919 steel strike?

JC: Well, I remember I was just a lad, I suppose four or five years old, this I remember vividly. We had in Monessen a main street called Ninth, and it was the only, as we say, brick street that took workers into the working areas on top of the hill in Monessen. And naturally to travel to work and return from work, you had to go by this Ninth Street, it was the main, as I stated the main street and involving the working man's families. Well, I do remember the cossacks. I remember the strikebreakers wearing guns. I remember the grouping of strikebreakers with their arms traversing these streets. One, one matter I remember quite vividly is the brutality on the part of the Coal and Iron Policeman. It must have been in either the latter part of September of 1919 or the first part of October, the kids would congregate under a streetlight and play. And we had this Coal and Iron Police descend on us, and he'd rear up with a horse and terrorize the children. This is the extent they went to not only terrorizing the groups of people but terrorize children.⁵

They [The Coal and Iron Police] were people who were retained by the companies, and the record shows that their wages and the upkeep of these Coal and Iron Police was carried by the companies but approved by city council [shows Bodnar and others documents of some sort]. And records show that at one point their, their tenure was extended by one year, and council voted, I believe it was seven to one, to continue their usage, and that the payments would be made by the company, as to their wage and other incidentals. Now, the record shows that the company made the appeal [to the city council] and agreed to pay for the, for this kind of a service. It was a service that was intended to discourage unionization and to deny rights that people may have wanted to undertake during these organizing drives.

Now this is in November of 1919 [appears to read, perhaps from a local newspaper]: The Monessen Council has decided to continue its mounted police force for another year. At a meeting of the borough council held last week, a proposition made by the mills that they would pay all bills of the mounted force up until December 1, and that for a consideration of one dollar they would turn over the twelve horses, provided the borough would continue the mounted force for another year. After some discussion council voted seven to one to accept the proposition and will take over the horses and equipment on the first of the coming month. So this was definitely a collusion, you might call it, handled legally because the council had the action, and the companies and the officials collaborated to destroy the union.

JB: What company are we talking about here?

JC: We're talking about, in the main we're talking about Pittsburgh Steel Company. They were supported by Page Woven Wire Fence Company. They were supported by Pittsburgh Products Company, Monessen Foundry [and Machine Company], and the American Steel and Plate, Steel and Tin Plate [American Sheet and Tin Plate Company].

JB: Can I jump back a little bit back to the labor side of it now? Where does the impetus for the 1919 strike come from in Monessen? I mean, do you have any idea, do you know of any knowledge of who the organizers were, where they were coming from? Is the AFL [American Federation of Labor] responsible, or was it [William Z.] Foster and a few other people sending in organizers independently of the AFL?

JC: No Foster, Foster came in as a national figure. He was, I believe, the secretary, and I think [John] Fitzpatrick was the president [of the National Committee for Organizing the Iron and Steel Workers].⁶ Well, in this area you had a number of miners who were very much interested in seeing steelworkers organized because they felt that their lot was tied to the steelworkers, and

in turn the steelworkers to the miners. So naturally the miners encouraged, and you had some small miner leaders who encouraged that kind of activity. Then you had a man by the name of, by the name of [William P.] Feeney,⁷ who came into the [Monongahela] valley or lived in the valley, let me put it that way. And he was instrumental in forming committees throughout the valley. And then he had entry of people—I think Mother [Ella Reeve] Bloor was here.⁸

JB: Is this the AFL then, or this is a miner's group that's in on this?

JC: I think it was a combination. It was a makeup of various organizations. But inspired by the national AF of L, see. But there was some difference internally over the question of industrial unionization, and there was a question was raised by members of the trades and crafts whether this was desirable, see.

JB: Now if this is inspired eventually by the AF of L, does this lead to a division in the ranks of labor, and that's what I've been getting at in Monessen. Because the AFL is not a—you can't say, I don't think at this time the AFL is a friend of the immigrant. The AFL, isn't the AFL in the past concerned solely about the skilled worker? The AFL does not want—it has rejected the one big union idea of all workers skilled and unskilled.

JC: That is true, [but] —[Inaudible.] I think it was more noticeable in other areas. It wasn't so noticeable in Monessen, because you didn't have any previous history of any recorded agreement between the corporations and the old, so-called old Amalgamated Association [of Iron, Steel, and Tin Workers].⁹

JB: It was a company town though, right?¹⁰

JC: It was a company town, so you had no pre-exister [pre-existing union], where in towns like Homestead and some of the other sections of the county did.

JB: The Amalgamated was beaten pretty bad in the Homestead.

JC: It was. But it was, at least it was there once so it has some tradition, it had some roots. But Monessen did not have that, so it strictly had to rely on whatever it was able to get in the form of help from the miners and from some national groups. But there was nothing in Monessen's history that ever was tied to what may be considered a legitimate union, see. Where other towns had a little, at least a little sprinkling of that from time to time.

JB: So then who goes out on strike?

JC: Well, those who were miserable. Those who had occupied the jobs that paid the least, with the most oppressive conditions, the most dangerous conditions. They were the ones in my opinion who were in the vanguard, and they were mainly what, the immigrants from Eastern Europe. Somewhat supported, somewhat supported by some—a few were from the Welsh and from the Irish, but mainly the vanguard was made up of East European immigrants.

JB: Was there, however, a division among the immigrants themselves? I mean—

JC: No.

JB: Did they support the strike unanimously?

JC: Nothing. Nothing, nothing that would signify that there was a serious difference, because their lot was, I think in common it was a miserable kind of a—

JB: I can see that they may all sympathize, but maybe some were more fearful. They don't want to take the economic risks.

JC: Naturally, there was some fear, but I'm talking about as far as, let's say, the hope of achieving [some gains], I think was one of common desire. Sure, there might be some care expressed by some, some fear expressed by others. But all of them were hoping to see that goal realized that the conditions in the mill were changed. One of the big desires was to see an eight-

hour day, or even reducing the hours to ten hours. Because many of them had to work—what?—eleven, twelve, or thirteen hours.

JB: So even though it's AFL inspired and the AFL had traditionally identified itself with maybe with the skilled craftsmen, the strike itself is not a strike of a native-born skilled craftsman?

JC: That is true. That is true. But like I said, those who were in the vanguard were mainly the—I'm talking about those who went out first, those who left the mills first, left their place of work—were the Eastern European immigrants.

JB: Would you care to add anything to this [inviting others present to speak]?

Anthony Serrino (hereafter AS): I sort of concur as to what he had said. As far as the people on strike, they all had one goal, and they were all a group of misery. In other words, they're working for little or nothing, and they did the bulk of the work and got nothing in return. And when you asked John if you thought they were divided, no they had—I would say that group was more united than anything else. They had one goal, and they had to fight toward that. There was nothing to divide them because they were one group that nothing was given to. In other words they were trying to improve their conditions. That was it.

JC: Let me support that. I have a copy here of the release, not a release but an article that was in the *Charleroi Mail* on November 05, 1920. And the article talks about the miners meeting in spite of protests of [union] district officials. So when I was saying to you before that the miners felt that their lot was tied in with the steelworkers, I'm talking about the rank and file, those who occupied the most dangerous jobs and the most underpaid jobs, the rank-and-file miner and the rank-and-file steelworker. You will note that they were agitating about that time. They had—

JB: Right after the steel strike, the miners were—

JC: Well, there were some strikes going on during the steel strike. There were walkouts here and there. But the officialdom wasn't too favored—it did not favor that kind of activity, they kind of opposed it. But the membership board or whatever it was in the United Mineworkers was very much interested in what the steelworkers were attempting to do. So there was a common endeavor. It was mostly made up as I have stated of the poor immigrants. Actually you had some [striking] Irish miners, and you had some Welsh miners, but these were the poor in both, in the steelworkers and in the coal digging, see.

JB: Do you want to add anything to this Charlie?

Charles Kunish: [Inaudible] No, not really. When I become involved in this movement, it was all laid down. It was only twenty short years ago.

AS: I'd like to say my father had the first grocery store there in Monessen. He was an immigrant from Italy. We opened up a store—first he peddled fruit on the streets, and then we opened up a store. And he was very instrumental in bringing some of these people over from Europe. He'd signed up for them at the immigration department.¹¹ Other Italians, mostly Italians that couldn't speak [English]. They dealt at his store. And the wages they would get from these plants would be barely enough to keep them alive, and they'd have to pinch and save, and work in eleven and thirteen hours shifts, see.

JB: Was there a company store in Monessen?

AS: No. No, at that time no, there was no company store. [Inaudible.] Well, the coal miners had it, yeah, but not in Monessen though. [Inaudible.] We had a store right there by the gate, say, maybe four or five hundred feet from the gate.

JB: Pittsburgh Steel?

AS: Yeah. Yeah. I'm originally from Monessen. I was born and raised there. And my father would give them credit, and a lot of those people in order to get cash, a lot of times they would sign a power of attorney¹² and buy merchandise and turn and sell it to other people at a lower price. And that's how hard hit the people were. That is why they was striking, and they actually got nothing for their work. And of course it was better than Europe, but when you was over here and you needed this and needed that, you couldn't get it. And I know in many, many cases the colored people would go like in Ragowitz's store—it was on the corner—and the clothing store. And he had a big stack of power of attorneys. And buy anything in there, and he would in turn, Mrs. Ragowitz would take it over to Murphy or Russell at that time who was a paymaster, and they'd take it out of his pay. And they took all his power of attorney business, he had very little left. I knew this as a fact. As far as what John told you about the Coal and Iron Police and the police in the streets, I definitely saw a lot of that. . . . If you walked with another person they'd club you. They wouldn't tell you break up; they'd hit you, just swing that billy and hit you.

JB: How about during the strike? Do you remember anything about your father giving extended credit, for example, to the--?

AS: We gave, we gave credit. We had something like \$40,000 in the books.

JB: What was the name of that store?

AS: Serrino's, Serrino's was the store. We had a meat market and a grocery store. And we had a big mortgage on our building also. It was the only one in that area, and we gave credit. We signed for that, for people to come over from Italy . . . [audio problem] If a fellow was a customer or something like that, he had a cousin or a brother or a nephew or something, you'd have to have somebody with a little bit of property or something like that. In other words you'd

vouch \$500 or whatever it was, so he wouldn't be a burden on the community. And my dad signed for lots of them people.¹³

JB: Do either of you remember during the strike itself many of the immigrants, the newcomers leaving after a week or two of the strike, leaving, looking for jobs somewhere else? Did the strike uproot a lot of these people?

JC: It did. It did two things. First, some left because of economic pressures when seeking work elsewhere, and others who were blackballed either went back to Europe, some went to the state of New York, some went to Ohio. They scattered. I would say at least 15, 20 percent of the people on completion of the strike [had left the area].

JB: They're all in five different languages telling them to go back to work I've seen them [referring to posters, fliers, newspaper notices, and the like]. Is that the ones you mean?

JC: [Audio problem] . . . this may help us get some better jobs. See, this was one of the things that was used by the conservatives within the groups, and the church supported that. . . .Here's Lithuanian, here's Russian, here's Italian, here's Magyar [Hungarian], and Slovak, and each one—And let me give you a good picture of the situation. My father was involved in this. My dad was, you may call him a small leader because he was involved in the Polish organizations. His sympathies were for the birth of the unions. He was a worker. He felt that that way—he was hoping that the workers would have a union, see. So his group was part of the blackballed group.

JB: What was the name of his group?

JC: Well, there was the Polish Falcons, and there was the Polish National Alliance.

JB: But they were involved in labor activities too, huh?¹⁴

JC: Partially. I'd say some of them. Many of them didn't understand the trade union movement, but those that did understand knew that it was right for them to organize, and they felt that an

organization would bring on some relief. Anyhow, there was a group that after the strike was broken, they could not get back into the mills. Fortunately, you may say, I use that kind of a word with some reserve, Mogan, superintendent of the Pittsburgh Steel Company,¹⁵ which was the largest structure, was a strong Catholic, strong Roman Catholic. In our church, which was Roman Catholic, we had a priest who was a close friend of Mogan from their early days in Glassport [Pennsylvania]. So the group that my dad was involved in had to make certain commitments to the priest. In turn he took them to Mogan, and they had to render an apology for their activity in order to get their jobs back. This was only way they'd get back, through the influence of religion. So there was several dozen. This was an example of some of the workings that occurred in the period after the strikes.

JB: You said that some of these Polish workers, you know, started to have strong feelings in favor of a trade union movement. But the original organizers or the people that created the impetus really were outsiders, weren't they?

JC: I would say most of the, what you may call leadership that was out in the front were either Irish or Welsh.

JB: But why? Why didn't leadership come from the immigrants ranks itself or did it—

JC: Very simple. They couldn't speak the language.

JB: —did it emerge during the strike, do you know? Did they have, did they make contacts? Was there a leader in the Polish community, for example maybe—

JC: No, no, there was no leader that was outstanding. There were a number of small leaders that believed in the idea, but they were unable to converse [to the entire workforce] because they were limited strictly to the Slavic languages. And so it's true that once the strike was over, whatever remained [of pro-union sentiment] then began to grow because it [ethnic leadership]

picked up the [English] language, and this in turn, I would say, helped the strikes of 1927 with the miners and also when the unions once more were given a chance under the National [Industrial] Recovery Act, under the NRA [National Recovery Administration].¹⁶ So at that point in 1932–33 we had the entry of a number of Slavic leaders.

JB: So not till the '30s.

JC: That's quite evident throughout the United Mine Workers. They had a number of them [Slavic leaders] who were part of the growth of the Steelworkers Union like Grasoulla (?), Demiko (?), see, Grujitski (?), and then a number of others. But this all was given birth in the 1919 strike. But actually you had no Slavic leadership that were in the front.

JB: Getting back to your father again since it's a personal thing, and you can perhaps give me some direct information. First of all, when did he come to this country?

JC: My dad, let's see, he came to this country, I would say, about 1908.

JB: Did he experience as many immigrants have seen and did experience, a great deal of transiency? Was he able to come and settle right away, or was he kind of buffeted around, went from job to job?

JC: No, he was pretty fortunate. He had associates who were—who came to this country before him.

JB: Relatives?

JC: Yes, it was relatives, and he had some on my mother's side who were in this area. And fortunately they were, you may say, established. At least they had their ghettos here on what we call Third Street and Morgan Avenue [in Monessen], the one where my dad was involved. There was what may be considered a Slavic ghetto because you had maybe eight, nine, ten people crowded into three or four rooms. These were mostly single men. You might have had a married

couple, and they would take on so many boarders, and that's how they lived. So he was one of those fortunate ones. At least he had a place, and he was fortunate to get a job when he got here in the old Carnegie hoop mill. And when that looked kind of bleak, he was fortunate once more to get a job at Pittsburgh Steel. So he's ninety years old, still alive, but he never had to [leave] Monessen. His brother was very fortunate, too. They both remained in the area. My father's brother had to get out, see, he had to remain outside the mill for a while, and he started a little business of his own. And that was successful. So after the hatred of the strike kind of lessened, through a little bribery he got back into the mill. He had to bribe a superintendent, give him so much money for a place in the wire mill. In those days you had to pay. So, he was fortunate, he wanted to be safe. He was at least able to buy a job.

JB: Did he [your father] experience what social scientists would term upward mobility? Or was he—would you say that as many immigrants, at least I've seen, are fairly stable throughout his occupation to where he didn't experience any rapid advancement?

JC: No, my dad was mostly confined to wire drawing. That's a process of reducing rods into wire. That was his occupation, and fortunately it paid a little more than labor, and he was somewhere between the top job and the lower job. And wire drawing for a number of years was quite steady.

JB: But you wouldn't say that most of the Polish immigrants were—would you say that other groups perhaps tended to hold better skilled jobs, there was a division nationality wise?

JC: Yes, I would say that people from Germany, the German people, always had a better crack at jobs. The Welsh, the Irish, those of the Anglican heritage, they had a better chance. I would say their entry was easier into some of the better paying jobs, and the immigrants from Eastern Europe were confined usually to, in this area were confined to the wire mills, the cleaning

houses, the galvanizer, the patent furnaces, the nail mills. And the Italians were mostly confined to the labor gangs, to work that involved lower forms of maintenance. This was the lot of the Italians. But as years went by naturally the Italians got into some of the other jobs that were once occupied by the Slavic workers. [Inaudible]. So you see with the outcropping of the tin mills, many sections they had a union. Like Canonsburg, they had a union. Monessen did not. Scottdale had a union for a short while. Now there were several other tin mills that had unions so where that exposure existed previously, you found some development of leaders.¹⁷ So naturally with that development of leaders there was also a [?] on the part of certain of the leadership, a kind of a position of protecting the trades, the crafts, and they kind of resented an association of their organization with those who were in the lower labor brackets. They wanted to maintain their position in the industry by having an organization but confined to certain jobs, certain higher paying jobs. Well, the appeal was made in 1919 to the workers in this valley was that we take you for what you are, because there was absence of that early history. So they said we will take you for what you are whether you are black, white, Catholic, or what.

JB: Do you know of any documents—that's an important point—that's saying this, that you could document this? I mean, I don't think the *American Federationist*¹⁸ would do that. How about something else we could say that look, that this is a radical departure now, that they're crossing ethnic and racial lines to create, you know, a more unified union.

JC: There was—see this was written by Foster, who later would turn into, he became a communist.¹⁹

JB: He's not a reliable source, though; you can't do [use] that.

JC: Yes, but this was before. First he was a Syndicalist see,²⁰ and he became more of a lefty after he broke completely with the trade union movement, and he went the Communist path. But

if you read a couple of his early writings, see, he does declare for that kind of a position. He does declare for that kind of position, but that's when he had the early kind of characteristics of being a Syndicalist, see.

JB: But what about here in the valley? Is there any source that says this? Is there anything that's been left in a written record? Maybe it was published in Polish or Croatian or something that says, "Look, steelworkers, we don't care if you're unskilled, or we don't care if you're Slovak or what you are, you know, this is for all workers."

JC: Well, this was said to them, because my dad and others who were part of the strike, in our discussions, some of the leaders that did come in the valley preached that kind of a gospel. This was said to them. This is why some of them became more interested, because it talked about equality and participation, see. It talked about equality and distribution [of wealth]. So this was the gospel.

JB: This is definitely beyond the AFL.

JC: This [view] came, this came into the valley, see, and we had many discussions, because I'm way, a lot younger than they were. We learned that from the discussions. Because of my entry into the union, I wanted to know about it.

JB: But you're telling me these old timers told you that they were impressed by the fact that they were—

JC: Yes. They were going to be considered on the same level as others, that you will be a member, not for other reason but being a worker. And this was one of the things that sold them, see, being that they were miserable, and telling them that, look, you're going to be treated with some equality. This was bought because up to that point they were looked upon as Hunkies, as Polacks, as Dagos, see, as foreigners. The boss would say something to you, "Hey, Pollack" or

“Hey, Dago come here.” And naturally they resented that, you know. They may not have shown any open resentment, but inwardly they felt hurt that they were treated as secondary citizens. And incidentally some of them already had their first papers [application for citizenship], you know, because I think you had to get first papers and then had to get second papers. Some of them had that, see.

JB: How did the priest try to [Inaudible]

JC: Whether you were doing right? Are you sure that this is needed? They would always try to create some doubt in the minds of the workers. And as the strike progressed, they became a little more persuasive, suggesting that maybe this got to be evaluated again. Maybe you fellows ought to watch who you were having as leaders. Maybe they are the Bolsheviks. Maybe they are at you. You get rid of the Bolsheviks, and maybe you’ll be able to—

JB: Is this what your father told you?

JC: Well, sure, many Poles, many people who worked in the mills here said to me that there was an effort made by public—did you see some of the ads that was published in the papers?

JB: Yeah, and they’re all in five different languages telling them to go back to work. I’ve seen them all. Is that the ones you mean?

JC: [Inaudible] This may help us get some better jobs. You see, this was one of the things that was used by the conservatives within the different groups, and the church supported that. Here’s Lithuanian, here’s Russian, here’s Italian, here’s Magyar [Hungarian], and Slovak, and each one, well everyone, is identical.

JB: Let’s just read a few lines. This is from the *Monessen News*, Monessen, Pennsylvania. Do we have a date on this?

JC: This is late November.

JB: This is—let's read the Polish part. This is under the—

JC: Do you want me to read it in Polish?

JB: Just the beginning, yes.

JC: All right. I'll read it to you. [reads in Polish], means that America's called to battle. [Polish] means this is not the ordinary strike. We've got to look at it as a, as a diabolical, it says [Polish]. That means it's a diabolical attempt on the part of the radicals, see. And it goes on, it goes on as it's explained here that the IWW [International Workers of the World]²¹ was, is moving in on the structure and now to beware of them, see. That possibly this is going to hurt the AF of L. Then it goes on and says [foreign language]. Now they're saying to you that remember what Germany did to the traffic, to the trade that existed in France and Belgium and Serbia and Russia and other European countries, and if you will continue on this route that your trade, your jobs will also disappear in the same manner that the Germans brought on.²² In other words, alluding how that if you continue this course in striking, if you follow the leadership, that there will be the elimination and possibly loss of trade and jobs or what have you, and here's your future. It says and you'll be no longer competitive in the world market. . . . So they're appealing to, look you miserable guy, it's your job right now that's at stake, see. So from a mass resistance, now it becomes an individual appeal.

JB: What affect did this conservative propaganda, so to speak, have on the--so your father, was he swayed by—for example, did he start to say, well, gee, maybe I'm not being patriotic like they're claiming. Was he swayed by this?

JC: No, no, my dad wasn't swayed, and I know a number of other Poles I talked to, Slavs and Russians that I talked to that were not swayed. But the economics of the situation had brought them to their knees. They just could not go on. It was a question of leaving this part of the

country, give up whatever little equity you have in your house. Some of them had a couple of hundred dollars in their home, they had mortgages. It was a question of continuing under the conditions that existed or going elsewhere and losing whatever equity you may have had here in Monessen. So the decision by a vast majority of them was to remain, and others left. Like I said, I'd say at least twenty [percent] of them—that's my rough guess. From looking over, over some of the old rosters, those names disappeared around 1919, 1920, those names disappeared. And talking with other associates, well, this one left immediately after the strike, this one left during the strike, this one left six months after the strike, and some of them left as late as 1921. They might have picked up some odd jobs, but economics forced them to leave this part of the country because they were blackballed.

JB: Did the company buy informers or pay informers to find out who was agitating and organizing the strikers?

JC: Well you can't, you can't say with any degree of sureness, but the reports that have been collected by various organizations and reports that are today in the government's archives definitely establish that the companies had then paid two hundred agents.

JB: In Monessen?

JC: In Monessen. It's in the Monongahela Valley that would be Monessen, Charleroi, and up the valley or down the valley and up the valley, there were two hundred paid agents. And this is a matter of public record, if somebody wants to take the time out and get the archives.

JB: What archives are you talking about?

JC: I'm talking about the—these are the files that were gotten from the industrial leaders, see, some of whom we knew. And we know that there was existence of blacklists because we know that certain people that were our associates. So it does jive even if you speculate a little bit that

people were in the pay, that certain names that were on the blacklist definitely were people who were involved in some of the early agitation, see. This is a matter of record. . . .

JB: A lot of Mexicans were brought in during the strike in Monessen as strike breakers in 1919.

JC: There were a number of blacks and a number of Mexicans were brought into Monessen during 1919 and they were quartered—they had a barracks down in what was called Wireton in the western part of Monessen, and they remained—most of the Mexicans left Monessen, just a very few of them remained. Those were the ones that married. And I would say 95% of them left Monessen after the strike. But most of the blacks remained, I would say.

JB: However, there were blacks here before that time.

JC: Oh yes, there were blacks, but I said it was an importation of blacks and Mexicans.

Mexicans left. And most of the blacks remained. [Noise] after that because those barracks were torn down, and they wrecked a number of homes that were occupied by Poles, Croatians, and other Slavic groups. So those homes remained there until Pittsburgh Steel needing room tore them down and built some of their facilities. The barracks were located in that area called Wireton.

JB: Generally speaking, that's one of the things I'm always complaining about is that we've been too preoccupied with the Civil War and not enough with things like that, and not enough with really what I think is the heart of [US history].

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¹ Mr. Czelen's pronunciation of the name "Kunish" is hard to discern on the audio and the editors could not locate information about this individual.

² <https://archon.klnpa.org/psa/?p=collections/controlcard&id=12619> .

³ Matthew S. Magda, *Monessen: Industrial Boomtown and Steel Community 1898–1980* (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1985). Pages 22–27, 51–55, 84–85, 99–115. For the Monessen Community Oral History Project: <http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/dam/mg/mg409.htm>

⁴ Thomas Morgan (1906–1995) represented Pennsylvania's 24th Congressional district as a Democrat from 1945 to 1952; the 26th Congressional district as a Democrat from 1953 to 1972; and the 22nd Congressional district as a Democrat from 1973 to 1976.

⁵ Pennsylvania coal miners and steel workers, their families, and communities frequently referred to the Coal and Iron Police, private police forces hired by mine and mill operators to protect their property and maintain order, as "cossacks," referencing their exceptionally brutal response towards striking workers. John Guyer's 1924 work, *Pennsylvania's Cossacks and the State's Police* (Reading: Printer unknown), also used the term to indict the State Police of similarly brutal behavior, and Czelen may have been collapsing the actions of the Coal and Iron Police and the State Police by using this term. The term itself probably reflects the Eastern European origins of many of these workers, as the original Cossacks, used by the Tsarist regime as a police force, were also known for their brutality. Strike breakers were often armed by employers, and the distinction between a replacement worker/striker breaker and hired thug with a gun was often indistinct.

⁶ William Z. Foster (1881–1961) and John Fitzpatrick (1871–1946), both of the Chicago Federation of Labor at the time, were the lead organizers of the National Committee for Organizing the Iron and Steel Workers. Foster had a long career as a radical labor organizer and leftist politician, Fitzpatrick as a progressive labor leader and politician.

⁷ William P. Feeney (1876–1939) was an organizer/official with the United Mine Workers during this era; he served in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives from 1910–1912.

⁸ Ella Reeve (Mother) Bloor (1862–1951) was a labor organizer and activist in the socialist and communist movements. However, the editors can find no evidence that she visited Pennsylvania during the 1919 steel strike. Mary Harris (Mother) Jones (1837?–1930), an equally militant labor organizer, did

visit the Monongahela Valley during the strike, giving speeches and holding rallies in support of the strikers. She was arrested during a speech in Homestead, quickly tried, heavily fined, and released.

⁹ The Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel, and Tin Workers, an affiliate of the American Federation of Labor, played a major role in organizing the 1919 steel strike. As a union of skilled, often native-born craft workers, it had little experience organizing unskilled, foreign-born labor.

¹⁰ The term “company town” can be used narrowly to refer to a town or city where the all the land is owned by the company and all of the buildings/businesses there are controlled by the company. Many coal towns were organized in this way. But it is often used more loosely to refer to towns where the company was so dominant that its interests prevailed over all other considerations. Monessen would fit into the latter category, and it is in that sense that Czelen uses the term.

¹¹ Serrino likely means that his father would allow certain individuals to use his name as a reference upon emigrating.

¹² The editors are uncertain of Serrino’s use of the term “power of attorney,” but based on the context, he appears to be referring to a credit voucher or something similar.

¹³ While some of the specifics in Mr. Serrino’s account are inaccurate, it is likely that his father did help local people bring relatives from Europe to the US. Immigrants had to pay a head tax—by 1917, \$8—for entry to the US, and had to declare how much money they had with them upon entry, as immigration officials had the authority to reject entry of anyone deemed in danger of becoming a public charge.

¹⁴ The Polish Falcons and the Polish National Alliance are fraternal groups. It is not clear if they were involved officially in the union movement or the 1919 strike, although individual members certainly were. There is a bit of cognitive dissonance here as Bodnar assumes Czelen is speaking of specific, politically affiliated groups, whereas Czelen seems to be referring more generally to “groups” of fellow Poles.

¹⁵ Czelen is most likely referring to Christopher J. Mogan, who in 1915 was appointed superintendent of Pittsburgh Steel’s three steel making plants. “Personal” *Industrial World* 47 (November 24, 1913): 1409.

¹⁶ Passed by the US Congress in 1933, the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) regulated wages and prices in order to stimulate economic recovery during the Great Depression. It created the National Recovery Administration (NRA), a New Deal agency that brought industry, labor, and government together to set prices and create codes of fair practice, in an effort to ameliorate cut-throat competition. The US Supreme Court declared the NRA unconstitutional in 1935. However, the National Labor Relations Act (Wagner Act) passed in that same year codified many of the NRA’s labor provisions. Cumulatively these acts energized the labor movement and resulted in an upsurge in the growth and power of unions.

¹⁷ Czelen is referring to locals of the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel, and Tin Workers.

¹⁸ Official paper of the American Federation of Labor.

¹⁹ Foster joined the Communist Party USA in the early 1920s and served as General Secretary from 1945 to 1957.

²⁰ A believer in syndicalism, an economic program that promotes worker ownership and management of industry. Its principle of organizing all workers into “one big union” conflicted with the more exclusionary principles of AFL craft unions.

²¹ The International Workers of the World (IWW), whose members are generally referred to as Wobblies, is a radical international labor union with socialist and anarchist tendencies.

²² Czelen likely is referring to attempts by the company to associate the strike with disloyalty, in this case asserting that just as German militarism that led to World War I destroyed European economies, so will the militant labor movement cause economic devastation in the post-World War I US.