

Name: Kathleen Reddington  
Title: Investigating the 1919 Steel Strike  
Subject: U. S. History / A.P.U.S. History  
State: New York State

Standard 1: History of the United States and New York

Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of major ideas, eras, themes, developments, and turning points in the history of the United States and New York.

Standard 5: Civics, Citizenship, and Government

Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of the necessity for establishing governments; the governmental systems of the United States and other nations; the United States Constitution; the basic civic values of American constitutional democracy; and the roles, rights, and responsibilities of citizenship, including avenues of participation.

The goal of this role play exercise is to examine the various participants in the 1919 Steel Strike in order to identify biases/viewpoints of those involved in labor/management disputes in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the role of the government in investigating labor unrest. In addition, to identify the scapegoating of certain groups during the strike, in particular Eastern European immigrants, at a time when nativism and the Red Scare were used to create a sense of fear. Finally, comparing the manipulation of business interests and government officials and the divisions created within society one hundred years ago with issues that the country faces today. Scaffolding questions have been included in the event they are needed.

The assignment will take 3 to 4 days. Two days for the groups to analyze the documents and prepare statements, a day to present their statements and face questions from the Senate Committee and a day for the Senate Committee to issue its findings and recommendations.

Additional materials would include political cartoons from the time including:

“The Protectors of Our Industries”

[https://www.gilderlehrman.org/sites/default/files/content-images/3g03108v\\_0\\_0.jpg](https://www.gilderlehrman.org/sites/default/files/content-images/3g03108v_0_0.jpg)

“The inevitable result to the American workingman of indiscriminate immigration”

<http://www.gompers.umd.edu/anti%20immigration%20judge.htm>

“And In the Meantime the Lady Drowns”

[chromeextension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/http://americainclass.org/sources/becoming-modern/divisions/tex\\_t6/politicalcartoonslc.pdf](chromeextension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/http://americainclass.org/sources/becoming-modern/divisions/tex_t6/politicalcartoonslc.pdf)

## Investigating the Great Steel Strike of 1919

### Historical context:

During WWI, the government created the War Labor Board to oversee relations and mediate disputes between workers and company owners. In order to ensure that there would not be disruptions at that time of critical need, the War Labor Board negotiated an agreement where companies promised to improve working conditions in exchange for labor unions agreeing not to strike. During that time period, union membership grew. However, when WWI ended the War Labor Board was disbanded. Companies, looking for ways to cut costs, saw the growing union presence as an impediment to their efforts. At the same time companies were looking to reduce expenses, inflation increased the cost of living making it difficult for low wage workers to make ends meet. In 1919, workers across the country went on strike to push for better wages and living conditions. The Great Steel Strike of 1919 was one of the largest strikes in the country's history, involving over 350,000 men and lasting several months. Although union organizing and the overall call to strike were led by larger, umbrella unions, decisions about supporting the strike and when to return to work were largely in the hands of individual plants. US Steel, as the leading voice in the steel industry and the largest employer in the country at that time, was seen as a pivotal player in industry-wide decisions and an example that set the tone for other industries. As such, US Steel's labor policies, both prior to and during the strike, were examined.

### Task:

Your group must examine the following documents to determine the point of view of your assigned role and prepare a statement to read to the Senate Investigating Committee. In addition, be prepared to answer questions the Committee asks and counter the statements of other groups if you believe them to be incorrect.

### Rolls and general function of each:

US Steel Chairman, E.H. Gary - to defend the actions of the company, while suggesting that workers are content.

Union Organizers, including John Fitzpatrick and Samuel Gompers - to argue that they have broad support among the workers and that their efforts to unionize are being unfairly denied.

Government Officials, including the Governor of PA, the Mayor and Police Chief of McKeesport, or unnamed officials from other communities and the federal government - to support the businessmen, monitor efforts to organize, and maintain order.

American, Skilled Workers - act as an example of positive relations between workers and the company and counter arguments that workers are being treated unfairly by pointing to "foreign" troublemakers

Immigrant, Unskilled Workers - give a voice to those who were not given the opportunity to speak by discussing low wages, long hours and your reasons for supporting for the unions, point out efforts to intimidate you and how immigrants have been scapegoated as radical

troublemakers

Senate Committee on Labor and Education - Listen to the testimony of each group, cross examine witnesses in order to address any unanswered questions you have or inconsistencies you find, issue a report stating the causes of the strike and suggestions to improve relations between labor and management going forward.

**Document 1**

The groundwork principle of America's labor movement has been to recognize that first things must come first,... Our mission has been the protection of the wage-worker, now, to increase his wages; to cut hours off the long workday, which was killing him; to improve the safety and the sanitary conditions of the workshop; to free him from the tyrannies, petty or otherwise...

**Samuel Gompers, American Fed. of Labor, 1911**

1. What is the purpose of a labor union according to Samuel Gompers?

## Document 2

Taken from: Statement of E.H.Gary, Chairman of Board U.S. Steel to **The Report of Committee of Stockholders United States Steel Corporation, 1911. Entered into the records of the Senate Investigation into the 1919 Steel Strike.**

<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008899486>

### **Excerpts from report of annual stockholders meeting US Steel Corporation, April 17, 1911 submitted by E.H.Gary.**

*The 12-hour day*--To ascertain the number of employees of the United States Steel Corporation working on a 12-hour schedule, we have examined the records of 175,715 men. Of this number we find that 45,248, or about 25  $\frac{3}{4}$  percent are at present working 12 hours per day... The explanation of such fact may be found, partly, at least, in the introduction of a large number of mechanical improvements which have steadily cut down the exhausting drudgery and the severe physical labor that was characteristic of many of the processes in the earlier years of the iron and steel industry. The actual physical labor in many of the positions is, today, much less than former years, this being especially true in the of the open hearth and blast furnaces, where the intermittent character of the work is such that there is less call for actual expenditure of physical energy than in many of the 8 and 10 hour positions.

Notwithstanding this fact, we are of the opinion that a 12-hour day of labor, followed continuously by any group of men for any considerable number of years means a decreasing of the efficiency and lessening of the vigor and virility of such men...

... With respect to the 12-hour day, the stockholders' committee says: "That steps should be taken now that shall have for their purpose and end a reasonable just arrangement to all concerned of the problems involved in this question—that of reducing the long hours of labor..."

...With respect to the alleged "speeding of the workmen," the stockholders' committee says; "Our observation of labor conditions in the mills of the Steel Corporation does not lead us to believe that there is either desire or tendency on the part of the foreman and superintendents to pursue these politics to a point that would mean harm or injury to the men under their charge."

...With respect to the so-called "repression of the men," the stockholders' committee finds "that the Steel Corporation, in view of the practices often used by labor organizations in steel mills in past years, is justified in the position it has taken." That position is an adherence to the principle of the open shop which permits any workman to labor whether he is a member of a union or not.

2. How did the company justify the 12-hour workday?

3. What decision was made regarding the 12-hour day in 1911 and why?

4. What assessment was made regarding allegations of speeding the workmen?

5. What did the shareholders mean by “repression of the men” and what was their decision regarding the tactic?

### Document 3

**Extract from remarks made by E.H. Gary at a luncheon given to the iron and steel manufacturers, May 20, 1911. <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008899486>**

... I call attention to the fact that when you made substantial reductions in your prices, ... and you make so small a profit that it does not yield you a fair return on your investment and your risk, you... place for consideration before everyone the... necessity of reducing the cost of production, including... the wages which you are paying... The laboring men... have more at risk, when these questions are considered of reducing prices below what is reasonable and fair, than the employer because it is just as natural as it is right... that if reasonable profits are prevented and your prices are put down... then, you are forced to consider the liquidation of the wages of your employees; ... You have no right to run the risk of being compelled to put their wages below what they ought to be unless you are driven to it...and I hope,...you will not reduce the wages of your employees until you feel it is an absolute necessity to do so.

6. According to Gary, when and why would it be acceptable to lower wages?

## Document 4

**Extracts from address by EH Gary at the second general meeting of the American Iron and Steel Institute... New York, May 17, 1912 <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008899486>**

“Already the seven-day week has been practically eliminated in all the larger plants of the iron and steel industry, even in the continuous operations where it had been regarded as unavoidable. Much thought has been given to the question of hours of labor and better conditions are being gradually worked out...

...At times, by reason of misrepresentation made to some of the other newspapers, or as a result of public addresses by men who are careless of their statements or by those who are not inclined to be accurate, and whose efforts seem to have been to excite a prejudice on the part of employees, some of the leading employers in the steel industry have been accused of ill treatment to their workmen. But I make the assertion, gentlemen, that in no line of industry, at any period in the history of the world in any country, was labor on the whole better treated in every respect than it is at the present time by the employers of labor in this great line of industrial activity...

7. Why does Mr. Gary believe that the steel industry employers are being misrepresented?

8. What opinion does Mr. Gary have of the relationship between workers and company owners?



## Document 5

**Taken from Statement of E.H. Gary – Investigation of the Strike In Steel Industries, Hearings Before the Committee on Education and Labor, United States Senate Sixty-Sixth Congress, 1919. <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008899486>**

I want to refer to wages, first, that we are paying. I consider this important. The lowest wage rates pertain to unskilled labor, working 10 hours per day, at 42 cents per hour, on our basic eight-hour-day plan. 42 cents per hour for eight hours and for the hours over eight, time and a half, at the rate of 63 cents per hour, making \$4.62 for the 10-hour day.

Senator Keller: That is your cheapest labor?

Mr.Gary: That is the cheapest labor for men. There are some boys opening doors and things like that- I believe I found some getting \$3 a day, not very many...  
The general average of all manufacturing companies, all employees [ of US Steel] not including executive, administrative, and selling, \$6.27 per day...The average for unskilled labor is \$5 per day...  
With reference to the 12-hour turn employees, 26 ½ percent of all employees work the 12-hour turn and the number is 69,284. ... The number working 8 and 10 hours is 191,896; approximately 8 hours, 88,994, and 10 hours, 102,902...

Chairman: Mr.Fitzpatrick and Mr. Gompers have both said the strike was caused by your refusal to meet a committee of the men... Do you agree that that was the cause of the strike?

Gary: I will agree to the statement that there was no cause. The men were not complaining; the workmen had found no fault. We are on the best terms with our men and have always been, with some very slight exceptions, very inconsequential exceptions.

Chairman: Do I correctly understand your position to be this: First, you will admit that you declined to see these men? Second, that you did not decline because of their official capacity, but because from your investigations, and inquiries, and your sources of information, you believed your workmen were contented and satisfied?

Gary: You have given part of the reason, but not all... They did not represent our employees, that they were not authorized to speak for them, and we were absolutely certain they did not represent the sentiment of the large majority of our people, if any of them...

Senator Walsh: Was there any other reason for your refusal to hear these men...?

Gary: I want to be frank enough to say that it has been my policy, and the policy of our corporation, not to deal with union leaders.

Senator Walsh: Any way, at any time?

Gary: At any time. And for the reason we do not believe in contracting with unions. When an employer contracts with the union labor leaders he immediately drives all of his employees into the unions. Otherwise, they cannot get employment... I'm not antagonizing unions, I am not saying that they do not have a perfect right to form unions, of course they have; but we are not obliged to contract with them if we do not choose to do so; and we think, because of the many things that have happened— and some of them are happening today— that unionism is not a good thing for the employer or employee...

Senator Walsh: Is it not practically setting up an opposition to unions to refuse to meet and talk over labor conditions with their representatives?

Gary: Well, I don't think so, Senator...

Senator Jones: ...It has been intimated that these men, if they come with grievances, or attempt to organize, that they are in a sense blacklisted, and that sooner or later some excuse is trumped up for their discharge.

Gary: There is no foundation in fact for that assertion...  
...In connection I wish to emphasize one point. There are three classes of workmen as applied to the present strike and strike conditions: first, the Americans; secondly, a large number of foreigners, foreign born, some naturalized and some not naturalized; and thirdly, a minority of foreigners who are the ones, as I view it, engaged in the actual strike, and [are] members of the labor union.

9. How many US Steel employees were working the 12-hour shift in 1919 and in what way does that fact seem to contradict statements made at the stockholders' meeting eight years earlier?

10. What does Mr. Gary, Chairman of the US Steel Company, say when asked about the cause of the strike?

11. Does Mr. Gary's suggestion that there were no complaints, seem plausible given that over 300,000 men were on strike at the time he made the statement?

12. Was there anything in Mr. Gary's testimony that pointed to a cause or causes of the strike?

## Document 6

Taken From: **Investigation of the Strike In Steel Industries, Hearings Before the Committee on Education and Labor, United States Senate Sixty-Sixth Congress, 1919.**

<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008899486>

### **From: testimony of John Fitzpatrick, organizer for the American Federation of Labor...**

In Clairton on Sunday our men were meeting in session. They had a meeting there. One speaker had already gotten up and talked to the crowd and told them that the strike was going into effect; that they had to see that law and order were maintained; every man should go his own way, but not congregate in crowds, and so on. When he completed his speech, a second speaker got on to the platform and started to address the men in the same way... Without warning, a crowd of about seven of these horsemen dashed around a corner and into that lot, through the crowd of women and children and everybody else; trampled them over and pulled these men down from the platform. They put those men under arrest, and then they started their horses running through the crowd, riding down men, women, and children...

Chairman: Is there a large plant in McKeesport?

Mr. Fitzpatrick: Yes. There are several large plants there. They have gotten so now, that two men are not allowed to talk on the street. They ride right into our meetings, trample over the men, club them and beat them down in the most brutal fashion.

Now, I want to show you that this is on the part of the authorities, and I think that thing ought to be well set up. In Clairton, and Homestead, Duquesne, and McKeesport the authorities there interfere with the legal rights of the men. They won't allow them to meet; they won't allow them to do anything. They just club them and beat them and drive them into the street, and ride into their houses...

13. What is Mr. Fitzpatrick saying about the authorities' attitude and actions regarding union organizing?

## Document 7

Taken from: *Machinists' Monthly Journal 1919, Volume 9* digitalcollections.library.GSU.edu

...In McKeesport we arranged meetings and met with the same kind of opposition. We were denied the right to meet in the street, in halls, or anywhere else...Secretary Morrison wrote the Governor of Pennsylvania of the situation that existed in McKeesport and the Governor replied that he would use his best efforts to see that the rights of the organization (AF of L) were respected in McKeesport: since that time the same opposition has continued and no relief has been secured.

We continued to go into McKeesport, however, to distribute literature and call meetings. A large number of men responded to our call. Thousands of men in McKeesport wanted to be part of the labor movement, they wanted the right to stand up as citizens of this country and do the things which the Constitution of the United States says they have a right to do. I want now to read a letter written by the Chief of Police of McKeesport.

McKeesport, June 14, 1919

Mr. William Murphy, City,

“Sir: Hon. George H. Lysle, Mayor of the City of McKeesport, has this day notified me to notify you, as the organizer of the American Federation of Labor, that there will be no more street meetings held in this city. This means that the meeting called for Monday, June 15, 1919, at Fifth and Market Streets at 3 p.m., will not be held. Any attempt made to disobey this notice will be met with the arrest of any person attempting to speak.

James Reddington Chief of Police

...We have taken the matter up with the Secretary of Labor; that Department is thoroughly aware of the situation: representatives of the Department have been in those places and have seen the difficulty with which we are carrying on our work. The matter has been brought to the attention of the Department of Justice, with no result. Now we are asking this convention, in this resolution, to cause a Congressional investigation or such other investigation as will bring about the right which the citizenship of this country cannot permit to be denied them. This right of free speech and free assemblage must be fought for, regardless of the consequences...

14. Why might the mayor have banned meetings in McKeesport?

15. What were the union organizers asking for and why?

## Document 8

Taken from: *The Great Steel Strike and Its Lessons*, William Z Foster. New York, 1920

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/foster/1920/great-steel-strike-its-lessons/ch05.htm>

Mr. Reddington  
Chief of Police,  
Police Department  
McKeesport, Pa.

July 7, 1919.

Dear Sir:

This is to certify that the McKeesport Council of Labor has permission to hold a mass meeting in Slavish Hall on White Street on July 8, 1919.

Permission is granted subject to the following conditions, and also subject to police regulation.

(1st) That no speaker shall talk in any other languages, except the English language.

(2nd) That a list of the speakers be submitted to the Mayor before the meeting is held.

Very truly yours,  
(Signed) Geo. H. Lysle, Mayor

16. Although pressured to allow workers to meet, what limitations did the mayor place on pro-union gatherings and why might that be the case?

17. Why does it seem unfair to block or limit workers' meetings?

Document 9

Taken from: *The Great Steel Strike and Its Lessons*, William Z Foster. New York, 1920  
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/foster/1920/great-steel-strike-its-lessons/ch05.htm>

*Blacksmith*  
**BALLOT**  
**IRON & STEEL WORKERS**

The Union Committees are now seeking to get higher wages, shorter hours and better working conditions from the steel companies. Are you willing to back them up to the extent of stopping work should the companies refuse to concede these demands?

TAJNO GLASANJE

Odbor junije sada traži da se dobije bolja plaća, kraći radni satovi i bolji uvjeti za rad od kompanija čelika. Dali ste voljni isti do skrajnosti podupreti da se prestane sa radom ako bi kompanija odbila da udovolji zahtevima?

SZAVAZZONI

Az Union Bizottsága, az Acél Társaságoktól való—magasabb fizetés, rövidebb munka idő és jobb munka feltételek—elnyerése után törekszik. Akar ezek után törekedni? s a végsőkéig kitartani—ni? és ha a társaságok ezen kívánalmaknak nem tesznek eleget a munkát beszüntetni?

VOTAZIONE.

I comitati dell'Unione stanno cercando di ottenere paghe piu' alte, ore di lavoro piu' brevi, e migliori condizioni di lavoro. Desiderate voi assecondarli, anche quando dovesse essere necessario di fermare il lavoro se le Compagnie rifiutassero di accettare le domande?

HLÁSOVACI LÍSTOK


Výbor uniový chce dosiahnuť podvýšenie mzdy, menej hodín robíť a lepšie robotnícke polozenie od oceliarskych spoločností. Ste vy ochotní ich podporovať do krajnosti, až do zástavenia práce, v páde by spoločnosť odoprela žiadostučiníť tým požiadavkám.

BALOT

Komitet Unii stara się obecnie o uzyskanie od Stalowych Kompanij większej płacy, krótszych godzin i lepszych warunków pracy. Czy jesteś gotów poprzeć nas aż do możliwości wstrzymania pracy na wypadek, gdyby Kompanie odmówiły naszym żądaniom?

VOTE YES OR NO.

Mark X in square indicating how you vote

 Yes  No

National Committee for Organizing Iron and Steel Workers

WM. Z. FOSTER, Secy-Treas. 303 Magee Bldg., Pittsburgh, Pa.



18. What does the fact that the workers' ballot is written in several languages suggest?

19. What relationship is there between the rules for meetings put in place by the Mayor of McKeesport and the Steelworkers' ballot?



## Document 11

Taken from: *Investigation of the Strike In Steel Industries, Hearings Before the Committee on Education and Labor, United States Senate Sixty-Sixth Congress, 1919.*

<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008899486>

Statement of Joseph Smith of Homestead

Smith testified that he was a roller in the Homestead Works and made, on average, \$22 to \$23. He worked 12 hours, six days a week.

Chairman: Have you talked with the different men in the mills about any troubles or complaints which would cause this strike?

Smith: Yes sir; I spoke to a few of those fellows that had joined the union. I asked them what was the reason of them joining the union and they said that they wanted to get eight hours a day and \$8 a day...

Chairman: There has been an active campaign to secure members of the union? Smith: Yes, sir, the foreign element. They do not want American people.

Chairman: What do you mean by that?

Smith: They do not want any English-speaking people to attend their meetings; they just want the foreign element to attend their meetings...

Senator Sterling: Why do you think that?... How do you know that?

Smith: We have evidence to prove that by men who went there and were told to get out... The reason given was that they thought they were spies and that they would carry the news back to the works.

Chairman: How many went out in this mill?...

Smith: Nearer to 4,000 than 3,000...( out of a workforce of 8 to 9 thousand ) Chairman: Have any of the Americans gone out on this strike?

Smith: No sir; I do not believe there is a dozen men of the Americans gone out on the strike...

Chairman: And what do these common laborers get in the mills do you know?

Smith: They get for 12 hours- they receive \$5.10, I believe. Chairman: And is there any complaint about the 12-hour day?

Smith: There is some little complaint, but we do not actually work the 12 hours. We have a rest for lunch at 9:30, and again at 12:30, and in the afternoon we stop to adjust



things around the mills.

Chairman: And do you think there would be less dissatisfaction in the mills if it were put upon an eight-hour basis? Smith: That may be.

## Document 12

Taken from: **Investigation of the Strike in Steel Industries, Hearings Before the Committee on Education and Labor, United States Senate Sixty-Sixth Congress, 1919.**

<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008899486>

Statement of Mr. Ed M. Lynch of McKeesport

Lynch testified that he was a pipe welder at the National Tube plant, McKeesport Chairman:  
How many hours a day do you work?

Lynch: I work 10 hours and 10 minutes on day turn and 12 hours on night turn... I make about \$11 a day.

Senator Phipps: What are the conditions at McKeesport? Are the houses well kept and reasonably comfortable?

Lynch: Yes sir; they are. The houses that the foreigners occupy now years ago the American iron workers used to occupy, and they gradually got out from near the mill district and gone out further from the smoke and dirt; and the majority of the foreigners have taken those houses.

Phipps: Since the strike was called, has there been any disturbance in McKeesport?

Lynch: Yes, sir... About two weeks before the strike was called the mayor had issued orders for no public gatherings. They had had a meeting and they broke it up, and that night, during the night, there was a crowd of men accumulated down by the steel works—which I didn't see, but heard about it—and they went into the mills, stoned the mills, stoned some men, and also one of the foremen had his head cut open with a brick...

Phipps: What was the purpose of that crowd going to the mill and causing a disturbance/ Was that an attempt to organize the men?

Lynch: I could not say what the trouble would be, on account it was the intent to break up these meetings and not allow them to have public gatherings...

## Document 13

Taken from: **Investigation of the Strike In Steel Industries, Hearings Before the Committee on Education and Labor, United States Senate Sixty-Sixth Congress, 1919.**

<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008899486>

Statement of Mr. John A. Hickey of Homestead

Hickey testified to being a bottom maker in the soaker pits, Homestead Works, making about \$14 a day.

Chairman: How many hours a day?

Hickey: I work 10 ½ hours daylight, day turn, and 13 ½ night turn... Chairman: Do you like these long hours?

Hickey: No sir; we would be satisfied with shorter hours. Chairman: Is there any complaint about wages in the mills? Hickey: No, sir.

Chairman: How many men are out on strike at your mill? Hickey: I would judge about 3,000, or around there.

Chairman: How many of those are what have been termed foreigners here in this hearing?

Hickey: They are practically all of them, with the exception of a few...

Chairman: In the plant, do you know about what proportion would be classed as skilled workers and what percentage are unskilled or common laborers?...

Hickey: Yes. About 2,000 general labor. (unskilled)

Chairman: Most of the general labor are what, foreigners and Americans? Hickey: Well, they are mixed, but mostly foreigners.

Chairman: About what do they earn a day, do you know? Hickey: About \$4.60 ten hours.

25. How did the wages of Mr. Smith, Mr. Lynch, and Mr. Hickey compare to those of the unskilled, immigrant laborers?

26. How many hours per day were men working and how did they feel about those hours?

27. Based on the workers' statements, why might the thousands of men on strike at various

plants be largely immigrant laborers?

28. What contradictions were there between the standards laid out at the US Steel stockholders' meeting in 1911 and the conditions in the mills in 1919?

29. Although several steelworkers testified before the committee, none of them were unskilled workers, who were union members, participating in the strike. How does that fact affect the investigation?