

# The Homestead Strike

## The Basics

### Time Required

1-2 class periods

### Subject Areas

10<sup>th</sup> Grade American Literature

Emergence of Modern America, 1890-1930

### Common Core Standards Addressed:

Writing Standards for English Language Arts 6-12

### Author

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## The Lesson

### Introduction

This song was written after the Homestead Strike of 1892, when steelworkers clashed with captains of the steel industry over working conditions in the mills. A movement to unionize labor forces was brought to a screeching halt when incomplete media coverage of the Battle of 1892 caused a public outcry against the workers' treatment of the Pinkertons, and laborers brought in from the outside to maintain output in the mills during the workers' strike.

This song captures the spirit of the workers, and communicates the deeply-held beliefs that men have a right to defend their livelihoods from the machinations of a "grasping corporation." Additional information about the Homestead Strike is available at [www.riversofsteel.com](http://www.riversofsteel.com).

### Guiding Questions

- How does Chicago history reflect the national issues of labor and unionization?
- How did national changes in industry impact the social and economic condition of South Chicago?
- How do songs and other forms of literature serve to communicate the ideas and issues of the day?
- What makes music an effective conduit for communication?

### Learning Objectives

Using a variety of texts, students will examine the national labor movement at the end of the nineteenth century, focusing on worker motivation as well as local ramifications of the rise and fall of industry.

### Preparation Instructions

Song used in this lesson: "Song of a Strike" (George Swetnam, 1892)

## Lesson Activities

Opening Activity – Free Write (5 mins)

- Respond to the following quote:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.”

- Possible guiding questions: What is the source of this quote? (Declaration of Independence) What issues come into your mind when you read this? Does it apply to all people? What events in American History show people struggling to obtain/maintain these rights?

## Main Activity

- Step One: Working with the Text:
  - Use the information available in the lyrics to answer the following questions: What were the goals of the workers in the Homestead Strike? How did they go about achieving their goals? How did the workers feel about the people opposing them? How do we know? Based on what the lyrics tell us, what do you think was the final outcome of the Homestead Strike?
  - How do the instrumental sounds of the song add to its overall meaning? Do you think the musical tone matches the emotional content of the lyrics? How does the music serve to emphasize the more important sections of lyric?
- Step Two: Internet Research
  - Conduct a web search on the Homestead Strike of 1892. What actually happened at the Homestead Strike, and what were the consequences?
- Step Three: Timed writing prompt: (5 mins)
  - Does the way the song is performed in this recording suggest a strategy or purpose beyond entertainment? Who do you think is the intended audience for this song, and why?

\*\*Teachers may also need to consider pre-teaching vocabulary on the following terms: syndicate, toil, indignation, recourse to arms, audacity, renounce, forswear\*\*

## Assessment

- View models of poetry slam (see resources below) and discuss elements of “slam.” What does it look like? What does it sound like? What kinds of messages are being communicated? (Rubric for project could be developed based on student input at this stage)

- Write a poem/song dealing with the issues of worker rights, past or present. These poems will be performed in “slam” format—so be conscious of how you will present them...What percussive elements, or movements, or verbal emphases, can add additional layers of meaning to your message?

### **Extending the Lesson**

- Field Trips to local historic sites: Pullman model town, Chicago historical society, etc...
- Extended Research projects on local events or individuals

### **Resources**

#### **Lyrics**

##### “Song of a Strike”

We are asking one another  
 as we pass the time of day  
 Why working men resort to arms  
 to get their proper pay,  
 And why our labor unions  
 they must not be recognized,  
 While the actions of a syndicate  
 must not be criticized.

Now the troubles down at Homestead  
 were brought about this way  
 When a grasping corporation  
 had the audacity to say:  
 "You must all renounce your union  
 and forswear your liberty,  
 And we'll give you a chance to live  
 and die in slavery."

Cho.  
 Now the man that fights for honor,  
 none can blame him.  
 May luck attend wherever he may roam.  
 And no son of his will ever live  
 to shame him.  
 Whilst Liberty and Honor rule our Home.

Now this sturdy band of working men  
 started out at the break of day  
 Determination in their faces  
 which plainly meant to say:  
 "No one can come and take our homes  
 for which we have toiled so long

No one can come and take our places ---  
no, here's where we belong!"

A woman with a rifle  
saw her husband in the crowd,  
She handed him the weapon  
and they cheered her long and loud.  
He kissed her and said, "Mary,  
you go home till we're through."  
She answered, "No. If you must die,  
my place is here with you."

Cho.

When a lot of tramp detectives  
came without authority  
Like thieves at night when decent men  
were sleeping peacefully---  
Can you wonder why all honest hearts  
with indignation burn,  
And why the slimy worm that treads the earth  
when trod upon will turn?

When they locked out men at Homestead  
so they were face to face  
With a lot of bum detectives  
and they knew it was their place  
To protect their homes and families,  
and this was neatly done  
And the public will reward them  
for the victories they won.