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The Red River

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On 6th July 1892, one of the most ferocious and dramatic battles of the class struggle between the working class and the 19th century's growing industrial power base took place. For over 12 hours, the workers of the Homestead Steel Works sustained an attack by Andrew Carnegie's company's private security forces, on the banks of the river Monongahela, 30 minutes from the city of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

The violent conflict left 10 people dead by gunshot wounds – seven workers and three officers. Although it wasn't the bloodiest encounter on US soil, it did represent an important change to industrial production and relations, to labour conditions, as well as to the longer term consequences of poverty and social inequality and the almost untouchable private sector power that still prevails to this day.

In 1892 Carnegie Steel was one of the most powerful industrial corporations in the world, employing around 20,000 workers, affiliated to the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers. The strike began during negotiations for a collective bargaining agreement, when the company unilaterally decided to tie wages to the price of steel, which was in decline, as well as imposing 12 hour working days and failing to respect workers' right to freedom of association, since at that time trade unions did not have officially recognised status, and were only associations.

Carnegie travelled to Scotland before the dispute, some say intentionally, but during that period he hired a manager named Henry Clay Frick who had a profound disregard for workers and who came from other companies which had never had a union. His arrogance led him to impose conditions that the staff couldn't accept, provoking the strike dispute, just as so often occurs today.

Once the strike had broken out, Frick hired 300 heavily armed private police officers to attack the strikers in the early hours of 6th July 1892, from barges which approached by river, firing, wounding and killing workers in cold blood. The river was filled with blood, hence why it is also known as the Red River. In the face of the violence, the members of the union association responded and three officers fell. Finally the workers overcame and surrounded the attackers, who surrendered, before burning the boats and barges they had arrived in.

The workers may have won the battle, but they lost the war because the army then became involved; many lost their jobs and the company reopened a few months later staffed by a large number of strike-breakers and contractors brought from other parts of the United States, just as Germán Feliciano Larrea's Grupo México did at the Cananea Mine in Sonora in 2010, when he



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brought dozens of Central Americans and people from the south of the country to displace the genuine, true mining workers of this key region.

Despite this historic battle, American capitalism took nearly 50 years to eventually develop a more humane side, and to open up to political and trade unions working to achieve higher, fairer salaries, better working conditions, health, safety and hygiene in the workplace and legal protection and regulations to support employees, communities and the environment. These successes have been, however, subjected to constant attacks by those who champion inequality and privilege. We still see the same trend and concentration of power in the hands of a few today.

This is why the invitation that I received to be the official speaker at the ceremony to celebrate the 125th anniversary of the battle of Homestead last week is such an enormous privilege and great honour, to be able to remember those brave men and women who decided a century and a quarter ago to take history into their own hands and confront the most radical and aggressive forces of savage capitalism, which had swiftly changed industrial production, suppressing workers' rights in the name of market efficiency and the growing profitability of capital.

The acts of resistance and these heroic events gave rise, after many struggles, to the emergence of a modern industrial and workers movement, to social and political democracy for workers and the establishment of norms and standards for economic justice. Even so, capitalist business owners were relentless. There is now a new class of billionaire which runs the banks and many corporations, and who are making big changes to the means and systems of production, while also destroying trade union organisations and constantly curbing any opportunities for increases in salaries and benefits.

At a global level, these same business owners have forced members of the labour market to compete amongst themselves through the price of work and have put up barriers and hurdles to prevent trade unions having power, based on trade deals such as NAFTA and the trans-pacific TTP.

In Mexico, discrepancies between wages and profits have fostered incendiary conditions that echo or recall the era of the Homestead battle of 1892. While our economy has been transformed by world class technology such as in the automotive, steel, mining and general manufacturing industries, in other sectors medieval or feudal conditions still persist. In many work places managerial control is absolute and unquestionable, and is reinforced by employer protection contracts and state and federal authorities, which are in turn controlled by the very company bosses themselves.

As a result, Mexican manufacturing industry employees earn barely 15 per cent of the earnings of their US counterparts, which is exactly the same ratio as back in 1994 when NAFTA was first founded. These wage discrepancies and a lack of opportunities have forced many Mexicans to emigrate to the United States.



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To close my speech at Homestead I reminded everyone of the importance of unity and solidarity to allow us all to work tirelessly towards common aims of justice, respect and dignity, thereby honouring all those who have fallen in the struggle for social and economic justice.