Illinois Steel Works, Joliet, between 1880 and 1901. Photographer: Detroit Publishing Company. Source: Library of Congress.

national protest coordinated by the American Federation of Labor (AFL) that sought union recognition and the 8-hour day. The strike temporarily halted steel production, but, after state and federal troops were called in, workers returned to their plants. A nationwide collapse followed soon thereafter. When the steel industry agreed to an 8-hour day in 1923, the change resulted more from public pressure and the efforts of U.S. president Harding than from the strength of organized labor.

During the 1930s, in the midst of the GREAT DEPRESSION and the reforms of the NEW DEAL, steelworkers in the Chicago area and across the nation finally won substantial gains through UNIONIZATION. The successful unionization efforts of the 1930s brought together tens of thousands of workers of various ethnic backgrounds. At the turn of the century, most steelworkers in the Calumet and Indiana mills had been immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe. During the 1910s and 1920s, large numbers of MEXICAN and AFRICAN AMERICAN men found WORK in the mills. Often, area steel companies attempted to exploit ethnic differences among workers to fight unionization. For many years, steelworkers were divided by ethnicity and craft distinctions. But in the late

1930s, after New Deal legislation made unionization easier, workers were organized across the industry. In Chicago and elsewhere, Amalgamated joined the Steel Workers Organizing Committee of the CONGRESS OF INDUSTRIAL ORGANIZATIONS (CIO) in launching a 1936 organization drive that won recognition by U.S. Steel in 1937. The most violent of the Chicago-area clashes accompanying this effort was the "MEMORIAL DAY MASSACRE," in which 10 people were killed by police gunfire during a strike outside the EAST SIDE plant of Republic Steel. But this incident did not prevent unionization, and, in 1942, steelworkers formed a powerful national union, the United Steelworkers of America (USWA). By the beginning of the 1970s, when the USWA counted 130,000 members in the Chicago region, the predominant ethnic groups in the mills were Mexicans and African Americans.

From the 1940s until the 1970s, the steel industry remained one of the Chicago area's leading economic sectors. Immediately after World War II, the United States was making over half the world's steel, and mills in Indiana and Illinois accounted for about 20 percent of total U.S. production capacity. Many of the large open-hearth plants established in

the early part of the century continued to make huge amounts of steel. Between 1959 and 1964, Interlake and Wisconsin Steel became two of the first U.S. mills to install basic oxygen furnaces, which were faster and cheaper than the older open-hearth equipment. Meanwhile, a large new plant was built by Bethlehem Steel at BURNS HARBOR, Indiana. The last giant mill constructed in the Chicago region, the Bethlehem plant helped make the Illinois-Indiana region the geographical center of the U.S. steel industry at the end of the 1960s.

During the COLD WAR, when most Chicago-area steelworkers were represented by the USWA, relatively high wage levels did not prevent labor conflict. Between 1945 and 1959, there were five industrywide strikes. In 1952, about 80,000 Chicago-area steelworkers walked out for two months. An even more serious work stoppage occurred in 1959, when tens of thousands of workers in the Chicago area joined 500,000 steelworkers nationwide in a four-month strike to win changes in work rules, wage levels, and benefits.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the U.S. steel industry suffered a sudden collapse that threw thousands out of work. U.S. Steel and other

American steel companies that still depended upon large numbers of older, inefficient plants failed to withstand the combination of a decline in demand and the rise of international competition in the 1970s. The sudden decline of American steel stunned the employees of mills across the Chicago area. Between 1979 and 1986, about 16,000 Chicago-area steelworkers lost their jobs. Wisconsin Steel closed abruptly in 1980 after attempts at a financial bailout failed. South Works endured a prolonged shutdown before closing its doors in 1992. Inland Steel cut thousands of workers. Republic Steel dismissed half its employees. In 1984, it merged with LTV Steel, which declared bankruptcy in 1986. The closures left many steelworkers without jobs or health care and decimated communities in northwest Indiana and the Calumet district.

During the final years of the twentieth century, the Chicago region continued to be a leading center of production in an American steel industry that was much weaker and smaller than it had been before. By the mid-1980s, the area was home to several "mini-mills," small-scale plants that used sophisticated electric furnaces to recycle scrap metal. By the end of the 1980s, mills in Northern Indiana were making about a quarter of all the steel produced in the United States. While the region remained a center of steel production, the industry was no longer the powerhouse that had been a crucial part of the Chicago-area economy for over a century.

*David Bensman*
*Mark R. Wilson*

**See also:** Business of Chicago; Calumet Region; Economic Geography; Global Chicago; Poles

**Iron- and Steelworkers.** As early as 1847, Chicago had six IRON foundries. Steelmaking in Chicago began in 1865. As steel production grew nationwide during the late nineteenth century, steel production in Chicago grew too. For decades, immigrants came to Chicago because of the high wages available in the mills. Steel companies specifically recruited many of them.

The first wave of immigrants to the mills, mostly SCOTS, IRISH, and GERMANS, came in the 1870s and 1880s. The second wave, of Slavic immigrants, mostly POLES and SERBS, first arrived in the 1890s and continued to come until the beginning of WORLD WAR I. The third wave, MEXICANS and AFRICAN AMERICANS from the South, began during World War I. The Europeans tended to settle in largely homogeneous ethnic neighborhoods near the mills along the CALUMET RIVER on the SOUTH SIDE, although the dominant group in particular neighborhoods has changed over time. These areas have prospered and declined along with the firms that ran the mills. African American employment in the Chicago steel



Open-hearth blast furnace, U.S. Steel Company's South Works, ca. 1952. Photographer: Unknown. Source: Chicago Historical Society.

industry increased sharply after WORLD WAR II, but hostility from white residents forced these workers to settle on the western and northern fringes of this area.

Around the turn of the century, the largest mills in Chicago were the South Works, built by the North Chicago Rolling Mill Company in 1880, and the Wisconsin Steel Works, built by International Harvester in 1902. When U.S. Steel formed in 1901, it took control of the South Works. Unable to expand its steel-making operations in Chicago proper, U.S. Steel began work on building the city of GARY, Indiana, in 1906 so that it could continue to take advantage of the Chicago region's proximity to RAILROAD and barge routes. Other mills that took advantage of these same geographic conditions operated in Gary, JOLIET, even Milwaukee.

Chicago steelworkers played an important role in the industry's two most important STRIKES of the early twentieth century. The National Committee for Organizing Iron and Steel Workers, chaired by CHICAGO FEDERATION OF LABOR president John Fitzpatrick, began an organizing drive in Chicago during World War I. This push culminated in an unsuccessful nationwide steel strike in 1919. The industry's use of African Americans as strikebreakers during this dispute, particularly in Chicago and Gary, enflamed racial tensions among steelworkers for decades afterwards. In the late 1930s, the Steel Workers Organizing Committee of the CONGRESS OF INDUSTRIAL ORGANIZATIONS (CIO) began the first industrywide union organization since 1892. As part of this effort, employees at Republic Steel in Chicago participated in the unsuccessful