

**NOTE:** *In 1949, African-American workers are still confined to low-level, deadend jobs in the steel mills of the Monongahela Valley. When a black worker is briefly assigned to a forbidden job in one such mill, a wildcat strike by white workers threatens to explode into racial warfare. Local union president Joe Miravich can ensure his reelection by supporting the whites' position, but doing so would compromise his own beliefs and cost the friendship of an old ally, the black leader Walt Tyrell.*

## **CHAPTER 6: July 1949**

At 6:30, a half-hour before morning shift change, Miravich and three committeemen are driven through the mill grounds by a lieutenant of the plant guard. Dawn came officially an hour ago, but it's a misty morning, still half-dark. Fiery reflections leap and dance in the windows of mill buildings as the lieutenant slams the jeep to a halt at a side entrance of the open hearth shop. Most of the day-turn furnace crew, a few dozen men, are idling around the large open doorway, standing, sitting, squatting. Instead of reporting for work, they obviously intend to continue a wildcat strike not sanctioned by the union. These workers, one and all identified as "male, Caucasian" in the employer's record books, walked off the job yesterday morning and later persuaded the afternoon and night crews to do the same.

Across the narrow roadway, a smaller group of workers, all Negroes, stand with folded arms at the entrance of the ingot-stripping area. Over their shoulders, behind Blast Furnace Betty, the sun appears suppurating in the low margins of a turbulent sky.

Miravich gets out of the jeep, hitches his pants and slowly and deliberately crosses in front of the strikers to get to the colored men. Walt Tyrell is in the front rank.

"Hello, Walt." A friendly nod to the others. "We're going to get this straightened out."

"Depends on who gets straightened out, Joe." That slow, measured voice. "Up to now, it's been us. We been straightened out, laid out, left out, and shut out... Wherever *out* is, we there." His eyes, which have been traversing from left to right, jumping over Miravich, now return to center and bear directly on his face.

The union official in Miravich wants to make an officious reply, but he merely nods again. "Well, give me a chance to see what's up."

"You know damn well what's up, man. These white boys striking to keep us out. Black men can strike too, Joe."

Other colored men have crowded in close to listen, and they mutter in agreement. "Right, man... Yessir... Damn right!"

Miravich swiftly calculates: less than five hundred coloreds work at the Watts, the majority in laboring jobs, not critical to turning out steel, even if Tyrell could induce all to strike. "Look fellas, we might all be on strike pretty soon anyway. Black, white and in between. Phil Murray's demanding that the big steel companies set up pension plans for all steelworkers." It can never hurt, he thinks, to interject the name of a popular union president. "We should conserve our strength for a real fight, not this worker against worker bullshit."

"But it hasn't come to that," Tyrell says sharply. "It's come to this, right here! The black man's tired of this one-for-all and all-for-one bullshit only when it benefits the white man."

Miravich walks back to the striking open hearth crew. Men in the front rank seem to be straining toward the Negro workers, hate flowing across ten yards of dirt road. He hears the lieutenant on his walkie-talkie, calling for reinforcements.

*Mooohh!* goes the seven o'clock whistle. As if produced by a harmonica player with puffed up cheeks, it starts at full blast and holds that single mournful note long enough for one-

half person, on average, to die in McKeesport, then expires itself, falling down the scale and ending with a *pffft!* of used-up steam. Men look up as if they've never heard it before. An echo back in the hills plays it again. Slowly, reluctantly, the Negro workers begin dispersing, going to their jobs elsewhere in the plant. The open hearth men remain where they are. A few mockingly wave bye-bye to the blacks.

Paul Whipple, the open hearth superintendent, is striding toward Miravich, white shirt and tie demanding obedience. "Get these men back to work. This is an illegal strike."

Miravich and his committeemen, Fran Luptak, Rudy Semchek, and Thomassini of the open hearth, confer with a couple of strike leaders, giving them hell. What are they trying to do, start a race war? Miravich spreads his arms and begins herding people through the doorway. Most go willingly; they can see the situation was getting out of hand. Across the road, Walt Tyrell stands staring.

Union and company officials split off in a small group. Miravich asks for a recounting of yesterday's events leading up to the strike, and Whipple summons the melter foreman who was in charge when it started. Out of the shadows comes—by God!—Jack Kiefer. Transferred from the blast furnace department in the middle of one controversy, he has landed in another one, here in the open hearth shop.

At the start of yesterday's day shift, Kiefer found himself short of men in the production crew because of vacations and illness. He had to find a replacement quickly. One furnace had been tapped just before shift change; its two hundred tons of molten steel, dangling over the pit in a teeming ladle, had to be poured into ingot molds before it began to solidify. Most foremen would have gone looking for a white man, any white man, and wasted a half hour doing so. Kiefer spotted a Negro laborer right at hand, shoveling slag behind No. 5 furnace. Earl Busby,

Badge No. 333810, eight years' seniority, a man who knew the operation and was as smart as any other guy of whatever color. The custom for sixty years has been that Negroes can work as laborers in the shop but cannot work in higher-paid production jobs. Kiefer ignored the unwritten rule and promoted Busby to the pouring platform as "slagger," a low-level but essential job. The rest of the pouring crew grudgingly worked through one pouring cycle so the heat would not be lost. When all ingot molds were filled, they walked off the job and vowed to stay away until Busby was removed. Kiefer refused to countermand his order.

Whipple has authority to assert, that's his job, and he talks a blue streak, goddamning them all to hell several times over, not excluding Kiefer. If the open hearths don't resume production by early afternoon, he says, the Watts's rolling and finishing mills will run out of stockpiled steel. The entire plant will go down, and seven thousand men will be out of work.

"You can't shut down an entire steel works because of one man," Whipple says.

Kiefer says, "Some see it as more than one man."

"We don't see it that way, and we run the plant."

Miravich and the committeemen go to the locker room where the men of the day crew are lounging around, awaiting a decision. A man named Ramsey, a first helper—the highest rated hourly worker—steps forward. A heavy man with bowed legs and stooped shoulders, he once served as a union grievanceman himself and obviously commands respect. "I'll tell you right off," he says to Miravich, "we never had colored in the open hearth crews, and we never will. We're keeping this place shut down till that nigger's gone."

He seems to speak for the whole group. A few men turn their heads aside, but most yell and whistle in agreement.

The union officials retreat and caucus. The easiest way to deal with the situation is to demand that the company stick with the local seniority rules and take Earl Busby off the open hearth crew. Whipple obviously would welcome this decision. An uninterrupted flow of steel is more important than any theoretical commitment to civil rights.

"We got seniority rules, we got to stick by them," says Thomassini, the open hearth committeeman.

"Balls!" Semchek declares with unexpected conviction. "These guys are wrong. The coloreds ought to have rights like any other."

"Rudy's right," Luptak says. "It's a matter of principle." He stops short and looks down at his feet moving in the dust. As grievance committee chairman, he's regarded as a "thinker."

"You're pawing dirt," Miravich says. "Say what's on your mind."

Luptak speaks in a low, even voice. "If we go against these guys and stick up for the coloreds, you'll never be elected again. You were lucky to survive the Red-baiting. Add this and you're dead. Maybe we all are."

"So what's your solution?"

"The only way to eliminate racial hatred is through education. It's a long-term process."

"Francis! For Chrissake!"

Word arrives by messenger that John Marple, the union's district director, will come to the Watts and take charge of this delicate situation. "Let Marple handle it. That's what he gets paid for," Luptak says.

"What do we get paid for then?" Miravich says. "To sit back and have everybody tell us what to do? Management, the district office, Phil Murray—"

Luptak walks away. After more palaver, Miravich tells Semchek to go back to the local and organize phone calls to all open hearth crew members on all turns, urging them to come down to the shop for a mass meeting at 10 o'clock. Marple should be here by then.

Miravich strolls alone into the open hearth shop, reacquainting himself with the terrain. He worked here during his first months in the mill. He remembers roaring furnaces and whirring overhead cranes, carrying enormous ladles dripping molten steel. Today, unnatural dusk has fallen in the open hearth "pit," a place normally aglow with pulsating light. The pit area extends along the rear side of a row of twelve open hearths. On the front side, molten pig iron, scrap, limestone, and other elements are fed into the 20-foot high, rectangular brick furnaces. Cooked steel is tapped on the "pit side" into teeming ladles and transported by crane across the pit to a "pouring platform" where it is poured into ingot molds. Crossing the pit, he wades through three or four inches of soot and cinders, residue of thousands of steel heats that have passed overhead. A history of the steel-framed twentieth century is buried here. If only dirt could talk. A litter of slag piles, grimy slag pots, thrown-down tools, and two huge teeming ladles lying drunkenly in the dust. He remembers a never-ending shoveling and shifting of slag starting with his first day in the Watts. A foreman gave him a shovel, and said, "Do what the nigger's doing." Which is how he came to meet Walt Tyrell, already a ten-year man at the Watts but still a laborer. He taught Miravich the ropes. Every day, for several months in the summer and fall of 1939, they shoveled, raked, banged caked slag off of slag pots, coughing and spitting black guck, and all the while they told one another stories and jokes, and laughed till their sides split.

One day a slagger's job became vacant, and Miravich's name was next on the bid list—the whites-only bid list. He moved out of the pit and up to the pouring platform. Tyrell stayed in the pit and got a new young white boy to teach the ropes to. After a while, he stopped waving to

Miravich and started staring from afar. It could not have been with malice. What did Miravich do wrong? Was he supposed to turn down a 20-cent an hour pay raise and stay in the pit? Tyrell understood this, but he kept staring.

Miravich climbs to the pouring platform, a six-foot high dock extending along the east wall of the building, with railroad tracks running in front. He gazes out across the pit, imagining the crane carrying a teeming ladle with two hundred tons of molten steel hovering above ingot molds sitting on rail flat cars next to the pouring platform. When a ladle plug is extracted, molten metal streams down into the molds, with the crane operator moving the ladle down the line, filling them one at a time. Wind is moaning in the roof trusses. Somewhere the loose end of a tarp is flapping, a winged dinosaur circling the dark shop. Miravich closes his eyes and remembers his days as a slagger. When a mold is full, a slagger moves in with his tool, a technological marvel otherwise known as a board slightly larger than a two-by-four. He leans out over the track and skims slag off the top of the boiling steel, risking what is called "catching a flyer," which occurs when hot metal explodes up out of the mold, spraying everyone in the vicinity.

A slagger's job is the starting slot in a line of progression leading to a variety of higher-paid jobs. Good money may make the health risk acceptable. But how would Earl Busby put a price on the hostility of white crew members? Is he willing to take all that shit and a crappy job to boot? Maybe a union leader's duty is to follow the majority's wishes, keep the peace and, not so incidentally, protect Earl Busby from the consequences of a fired up ambition to go places where he's not wanted.

An hour has passed. Miravich makes his way to the southside entrance. A lot of people are milling around. Two jeeps filled with plant policemen are parked at the fork in the road. Jack Kiefer catches his eye and approaches.

"Management wants to get this over with." He has that caught-in-the-middle look that first-line foremen often wear to mask their feelings. "Production comes first. We'll move Busby back to the pit laboring job if the men go to work." He gives a slight shrug: *What can I say?*

"That's what they want to hear," Miravich says, keeping his eyes fixed on a far point. Kiefer, he knows, wants to say what he really thinks, but walks away.

Walt Tyrell approaches with a young colored man. "Joe, this is Earl Busby."

He is darker than Tyrell, darker than most colored, and he has a pendulum lip. Wary but eager, the kid sticks out his hand, flashing an off-white palm as if displaying a card.

Miravich shakes briefly. "The Jackie Robinson of the open hearth, huh." He turns to Tyrell. "Your foreman give you the day off? What do you want us to do if you get suspended?"

"Fuck you, Joe!" That mellow-edged Negro voice, half Deep South and half First Ward McKeesport. "You take care of union business, and I'll take care of myself."

Busby's soft brown eyes take on a glitter imitating Tyrell's. They must take staring lessons in the First Ward. Fury tinged with a feeling of powerlessness. He pulls up the pendulum lip and closes his mouth, and Miravich senses a certain stiffness of body that indicates the kid is doing something inside to hold himself together. Miravich knows what it is like to be scared shitless. It squeezes out all the good, leaving a hollow tube of a man. That's the object of Jim Crow customs and the Red Scare, to scoop out your insides and fill you with other peoples' ideas of what is right.

He watches them walk away, passing through a narrow lane between hostile whites.

By 10 o'clock, about a hundred crewmen from all shifts have gathered at the open hearth shop. Marple has not yet appeared, but Pat McNally of his staff, the former Watts local president, comes in his stead, saying that the district director has been delayed. He urges Miravich to delay the meeting.

Miravich says no, it's time to make a decision. He assembles the men on the railroad track just below the pouring platform. He and the committeemen climb the steps. Paul Whipple follows, probably expecting to lead off the meeting with a lecture on the illegality of wildcat strikes. No, Miravich says, this is a union meeting. Semchek and Thomassini escort the superintendent, protesting, off the stage. Jeers for the boss rise from the assembled crewmen. Over near the doorway, Kiefer is holding back the plant guards.

Miravich stands on the lip of the platform. "I'm going to make this short and not so sweet," he says to the crews. "Everything that's happened over the last twelve years makes me believe we are a union. Management doesn't want us to be a union, but we are a union." He takes a breath and calls out, "Am I right?"

"Right!" What else could they say?

"We are a union and the majority rules. Right?"

"Right!"

"Now a lot of you people were around in 'thirty-six and 'thirty-seven when we organized U.S. Steel. We needed every shade of human being we could get, and the coloreds were with us, as I recall. When the Steelworkers finally won over Little Steel, the coloreds were with us. When we struck in 'forty-six, I didn't see any coloreds crossing the picket line." He crouches and looks directly at Ramsey standing in the track bed. "How about it, Ramsey? Did you?"

Before Ramsey can reply, Miravich moves to the next man. "Did you, Burns?" And the next. "Did you, Matty?" He straightens and, seeing that Ramsey is turning to address the men, he roars out, "No one saw anything like that because the majority ruled. The majority said, 'Strike,' and everybody struck. That's what happened. And the majority, speaking through convention delegates, put these no-discrimination clauses in the constitutions of the CIO and the United Steelworkers of America."

Someone shouts, "We don't work with niggers!"

Miravich stands on tiptoes, gazing over the men. "Can't see who said that. Raise your hand." No one does. "That's what I thought. Ignorance always hides. Now, look, I worked with a lot of you men right here on this platform, and I saw a lot of things happen here. I saw a flyer burn off Bob Johnson's face, and I remember the furnace breakout that killed two men in 'forty-two. I ask myself, if the coloreds get the wage increases we've won as a united union, why don't they share in the hazards? Why are we keeping them in reserve? Maybe you think only white boys are expendable."

Someone shouts, "They can't stand the heat."

"You ever see a colored man with a sunburn? Maybe God gave them black skins to work on the pouring platform." He walks a few feet along the edge of the platform, thrusting his chin toward the men. "Yeah, I see a few of you waving me down, but I see a lot more listening to logic. Just before I came up here to talk, management comes to me and says, 'We don't like this business of a strong, united union, and so we're going to rescind that assignment of a colored man to the pouring crew. We are not going to knuckle under to the union policy on equal rights,' they said, 'because that'll make the union stronger.'" He pauses again, inflating his chest. "I'm here to tell you we're not going to let management go back on our rights. We are going to

enforce the policy of the CIO and the United Steelworkers of America. We don't need any coddling by the district office or even Phil Murray. We make our own decisions here, for our own reasons. Right?"

As he talks, he picks up the handles of a wheelbarrow abandoned on the platform and quickly wheels it to the edge. He reaches in and takes out a slagger's board. "So here's the deal. We are going to renegotiate the seniority arrangement in every department in the Watts and open it up to every member in good standing whether he's black, white, red, or brown. But we have to start here in the open hearth. And we are going to do this by majority vote. All in favor of a strong union, shout it out!" Immediately upon saying it, like he's seen Murray do when calling for a vote on a sensitive issue, he slams the board down on the edge of the wheelbarrow. The metallic *bonggg!* almost drowns out the vote, which isn't so weak after all. "Passed," he says. "The majority having voted in favor, I declare this strike to be over. Go back to your jobs, and thanks for being strong."

The men turn and move slowly off. A few stand protesting, but the surge eventually carries them away also. Semchek is the first to shake his hand. "You done it, Joe." Shining eyes. Luptak looks touched and contrite. McNally pats him on the back and says, "That's just about how Marple would've put it."

This PDF version of Chapter 6 in Part 4 of the novel, pages 251-258, contains minor editing changes and has different page numbers.