Despite the stunning clashes, industrial unionism did not become an inexorable tide. The failure of the NRA to enforce labor codes, the ambivalence of the Roosevelt administration, and the hostility of business owners to the entire idea of independent unions prevented the movement from congealing in 1934. The inability of the Amalgamated to coordinate a national movement revived the ghosts of 1919, when the steel strike failed to achieve a united front. In 1934 and into 1935, John L. Lewis and Philip Murray of the United Mine Workers (UMW) resisted any steel strike under the guidance of rank-and-file leadership. They wanted a government-sanctioned effort that they could control, not a grassroots insurgency that threatened a more radical form of unionism than they would ever support. Arrayed against businesses that flouted Section 7(a) and hobbled by its inherent weaknesses, the union tide receded.1 Even so the embers of working-class militancy would continue to smolder. Before they caught flame, however, Chicago’s steelworkers would have to rediscover the merits of working-class self-determination.

Journalist Mauritz A. Hallgren captured the source of worker frustration at the NRA. “Nowhere in the Roosevelt program,” Hallgren observed, “is there any suggestion (apart from the appointment of a few conservative labor leaders to sit on an ‘advisory’ board) that the workers are to have a voice in the affairs of the trade associations or the state.”2 The NIRA had opened the door to collective bargaining, but standing inside were a collection of steel companies defiantly opposed to unionization. Still reeling from the worst of the Depression, the steel companies were determined to restore the old order. That determination would run headlong into an organizing
drive animated by the cooperative ethos of the New Deal. Fired by new federal legislation, it would powerfully challenge the authoritarian claims of the steel magnates. It would test the democratic possibilities of the era. It would culminate in the streets of South Chicago. The road to that challenge would be a circuitous one, leading through the steel districts of Ohio, the ethnic neighborhoods of Southeast Chicago, and the Senate chamber of the nation’s capital.

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The NAM and the American Iron and Steel Institute had already thrown down the gauntlet during the Senate hearings on the NIRA. It would resist the efforts of the Roosevelt administration to alter the balance of power, even when that effort benefited business recovery. “We had weathered the depression,” Republic president Tom Girdler recalled, “but the great force bent on our destruction thereafter was the government of the United States.” Earlier than most, Girdler announced industry’s irreconcilable opposition to the New Deal. Struck to investigate the violation of civil liberties in American industry, Senator Robert La Follette’s Senate Committee on Civil Liberties found the steel industry monolithically hostile to unionization: “From the time the National Industrial Recovery Act became law [the steel industry] adopted a vigorous policy of opposition to any interpretation of Section 7(a) that would encourage the organization of independent trade unions or that would give employees the idea that employers are required to recognize and bargain with trade unions.” Determined to contain the union insurgency, the steel industry developed a dual strategy of mailed fist and velvet glove that proved very effective. This resilient antiunionism reflected the views of independent steelmakers like Tom Girdler. At the same time, it captured the impact of the Depression and expressed the character of American big business itself.

Despite the ravages of the Depression, Republic Steel had become the shining example of the up-and-coming steel manufacturer. Committed to growth, technological innovation, and competitiveness, the Republic Steel Corporation developed out of a merger between four steel companies. At the time of the merger, Tom Girdler became chair and president of the new corporation. One of the companies was the Republic Iron and Steel, where the Amalgamated had made inroads as early as 1908. As the La Follette Committee researchers pointed out, though, Republic Steel “was organized at an inauspicious time since the great depression of the early 30s had already started.” From 1930