

HOMESTEAD STEEL MILL: THE FINAL TEN YEARS

Local 1397 and the Fight for Union Democracy

By Mike Stout

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Reviewed by L.E. McCullough

This new book on the final years of the historic U.S. Homestead Works is a riveting page-turner, an absolutely gripping read from start to finish.

That's not what you'd typically expect from a labor history memoir, but the colorful first-person narrative by author Mike Stout offers a detailed insider look at an important story most of us glimpsed only in headline fragments and television sound bites.

After spending his twenties in New York as a singer/songwriter and community activist, the Kentucky-born Stout came to Pittsburgh in 1977 and was hired as a utility crane operator at Homestead Works' 100" Plate Mill.

He couldn't have known that, years before his arrival, U.S. Steel had already begun to deliberately shed jobs and would soon epitomize America's massive manufacturing decline that continues into our time. The workforce of 30,000 steelworkers Stout joined his first day on the job would dwindle to less than 3,000 in the entire Monongahela Valley when he left a decade later.

The union at Stout's plant, 1397 Rank and File Caucus, was an "insurgent" local that often took vigorous issue with the policies not only of U. S. Steel but those of its parent United Steelworkers of America union.

Stout helped write and edit the local's *1397 Rank and File* newspaper that, unlike other union publications, aggressively called out instances of union and company wrongdoing. When he was appointed Head Grievanceman of the Slab and Plate Division in 1981 with the mandate to represent workers in disciplinary and contract matters, he became deeply involved in union and community efforts to prevent Homestead Works from closing.

For readers whose familiarity with labor unions has been shaped chiefly by films like *Norma Rae*, *Salt of the Earth* and *On the Waterfront*, Stout's recounting will greatly expand that knowledge base.

The reader will learn the intricacies of grievance filing and what happens at an arbitration hearing. Light is shed on the vastly under-acknowledged role of African-American and women steelworkers, the constantly shifting alliances of community groups and the intermittent conflict among different sectors of the American labor establishment.

Homestead Steel Mill: The Final Ten Years shows the human cost of ill-advised corporate decisions in a "transitional" economy. The onsite suicide of a laid-off foreman unable to face a jobless future

highlights numerous stories of individual steelworkers whose lives and families were shattered by the relentless downsizing. To Stout, each loss was an assault on his “mill family”.

Ultimately, *Homestead Steel Mill: The Final Ten Years* tells the story of Stout himself, a man who finds his life purpose looking after and fighting for the welfare and dignity of his fellow workers. Throughout a decade of contention that not uncommonly required him to carry a licensed firearm, he comes to realize what ethical lines he will not cross, the nature of true solidarity and that even the most unreasoning power hierarchy is vulnerable to morally principled persuasion.

Introductory chapters by labor historian Dr. Charles McColleston, former *Nation* editor JoAnn Wypijewski and legal scholar Staughton Lynd offer important historical and social frameworks for the Homestead saga and its lingering impact on our current economy. Eleven pages of textnotes elucidate the specialized industry and legal terms used.

If you want to know why a book about a union democracy movement at a long-dormant steel mill has relevance to your life today, *Homestead Steel Mill: The Final Ten Years* will provide plenty of answers.

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