

Homestead Steel Mill, the Final Ten Years:
USWA Local 1397 and the Fight for Union Democracy

By Mike Stout, PM Press, 2020

Book Review by Millie Beik

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I recently finished reading Mike Stout's book about the history of the Homestead Steel Mill, with its focus on the democratic movements that tried to save the mill from its closure during the last ten years of the mill's existence. There are few books that tell the detailed story of deindustrialization or plant closings from the perspective of those workers who actually lived through such events. To have the union's top grievance man, coincidentally the last person to leave the plant when it closed in 1985, is a rare and valuable gift to readers and anyone else who asks, "Why? What happened?"

This book is well-written, informative, and a genuine pleasure to read. It is hard to put down. Mike speaks in a refreshing manner, that is, he is clear and forthright about himself, his subject, what the book is and is not about. He covers the entire history of the mill from 1880 to its closure and beyond. His chapter on the 1892 lockout and strike is concise but conveys the overall importance of the event and later suggests that the experiences of the steelworkers of the 1980s were similar to those of the steelworkers of the 1880s. Thus, the link of the past to the present and future stands out.

I especially liked several features of the book, including the author's chronological approach. In particular, I found his division of information into multiple chapters, instead of a few, extremely readable. Each chapter tells a valuable story of its own. In the process, I learned a lot. Ever since I arrived in Pittsburgh in 2007, I have overheard allusions to "Dorothy Six" or other key references, without knowing precisely what was meant. Mike informs us not only about Dorothy Six but also about terms such as "griever" and others commonly used to describe the jobs and work in the steel industry.

Another rare and invaluable feature of the book is that Mike has tried to name every single person and organization that took part in the movement to save the Homestead plant and establish a higher form of union democracy. Most accounts of union struggles mention the top leaders of a union or movement and neglect the many rank-and-file union members and the alliances that made a struggle possible in the first place. In an outstanding way, Mike specifically names hundreds of individuals, perhaps more, cites their contributions, and shares photographs of them, whenever possible. Participants receive a welcome validation of themselves and their experiences, and readers see the broader significance of their struggles. Mike is to be credited for having saved so many of the documents and materials that were otherwise doomed to perdition.

Mike's conclusion is especially thoughtful and respectful. As an activist from the 1960s on, he himself confronted many difficulties, hardships, and personal hurts. His struggles with being labeled a communist and drug addict by others in the union, including a president of Local 1397, are part of the movement's story and can not be ignored but require reflection.

Mike takes the high road and emphasizes the positive accomplishments of those union people who opposed him during the struggles. His real concern is the future and how people can unite to bring about real change. He concludes the Homestead mill story by relating the aftermath of the lost struggle to save Homestead and greater union democracy to 1892 to the current struggles of labor today. In so doing, he highlights the importance of other issues besides labor, i.e. the environment, and hopes for actions to make the Blue Green Alliance genuinely viable while noting the difficulties against achieving that possibility.

Union organizers and activists who were involved in lost struggles and later write books about them are often bitter people who have lost hope. Some even turn against the whole concept of democratic unionism and blame others entirely. Not so. Reading Mike Stout, a forthright, proud, outspoken, grievance manager who has "saved" the history of an important movement to preserve the Homestead mill and greater union democracy. It is essential reading for anyone who wants to know more about the Homestead story.

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Millie Beik is an independent labor historian who currently works as a reference librarian at Georgia Perimeter College. She earned her doctorate at Northern Illinois University and has taught history at Emory University and the Georgia Institute of Technology. The International Labor History Association honored her book, *The Miners of Windber: The Struggles of New Immigrants for Unionization, 1890s-1930s* (1996) as the Best Book of the Year in 1996.

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