

Homestead Steel Mill: The Final Ten Years - Local 1397 and the Fight for Union Democracy

“Mike Stout’s *Homestead Steel Mill: The Final Ten Years: Local 1397 and the Fight for Union Democracy* tells the story of the Rank and File Caucus at the Homestead, Pennsylvania, steel mill from 1977 to 1987. Homestead was an epicenter of the era’s burgeoning rank and file revolt against not only one of the biggest steel corporations during its acceleration toward globalization and retreat from its steelmaking business, but also a sclerotic union bureaucracy ill-equipped ideologically or organizationally to deal with the crisis and catastrophe. It is the story of a ‘slow-motion holocaust that much of the country was oblivious to. Where U.S. Steel had employed thirty thousand workers in seven mills in the Monongahela Valley in 1977 when Mike arrived on the scene - including 7,000 at Homestead alone - only three thousand remained ten years later, the entire Homestead mill razed and replaced by a shopping mall. Ten of his friends and co-workers committed suicide, dozens died prematurely of strokes, heart-attacks or cancer; hundreds of workers and their families dismembered and strewn across the 50 states.

Unlike early historical and bloody battles between capital and labor, like Ludlow, Haymarket and the union drives at Republic and J&L in the 1930s, the last years of the steelworks in Homestead, Pennsylvania, involved murder of another sort, more lethal than gunfire, because it happened slowly, by memoranda from Company suites, by lying language and the subterfuges of finance; when it was over, the bodies weren’t lying around to count on a battlefield, but scattered in graveyards throughout the region, having fallen through the cracks of history. This important historical account drives home the obvious truth that active and democratic local unions were crucial for workers’ survival, health and well-being throughout the history of the past two centuries, especially during the massive plant closures of the late 20th century, and are a necessity even more so today.

Homestead Steel Mill – the Final Ten Years is the radical history of a people and workers too commonly believed to have none. It is a history largely absent from popular records of the political tumult of the 1960s and 1970s, though its energy, militancy, and imagination grew out of that era and extended, like so many fierce but near forgotten political projects, into the 1980s. It is a story of class struggle in a society whose official scribes are mostly stupid about class when they aren’t willfully deceptive. It is a story of the built world—of some of the men and women who made it, and who, in one extraordinary moment in time, strove not just to halt their own unmaking but to dream something different and beautiful.—and of its freewheeling working-class cultural and political antiauthoritarianism. The book vividly describes how the Rank and File Caucus evolved tactics ranging from a rank-and-file newspaper to inventive grievance campaigns, union elections, benefit rock concerts, unemployed committees, food banks, coalitions with community and environmental groups, occupations of corporate headquarters, work-ins, work stoppages, and working to rule, complete with practical details that workers in any workplace could learn from today. Central to Local 1397’s leadership role in the plant shutdown struggle was an approach to coalition-building that included a sustained search for allies among other unions, churches, community and progressive organizations.

Mike Stout recovers a complex experience here and reminds a new generation (and some of the old) that providing alternatives is the art of politics, that people provided some at Homestead and absorbed some lessons for the future. It is necessary to recognize the violence of the context, violence that was physical, psychological, and economic; but what Stout lived and what he tells is not a sob story nor is it romantic. The workers’ effort to control their own union, to make democracy real in Steelworkers Local 1397, to practice solidarity before and after the boom came down, to advocate for eminent domain and collective ownership in a Steel Valley Authority, is a study in human creativity, by turns thrilling and messy. It is an epic of the political courage and weakness, of humor, intelligence, and sometimes guile, of flawed and brilliant people acting together, thinking together, making mistakes, discovering skills they didn’t know they had, leaning on their strengths, paying for their blind spots, and changing their circumstances. The secret to all its successes, however historically fleeting, was the local’s unleashing the creativity and involvement of hundreds of its members in their own defense and local union activities. Laced with compelling stories, lively oral histories, and the author’s own rock and roll song lyrics, for Mike Stout, *1892 and 1982 were part of a whole*, two points on the same pole of resistance and spirit of solidarity that sprung up, thrived, and was only suffocated with the shutdown and demolition of the great Homestead steel mill. It is a story of working class heroes and heroines at Homestead and in the Monongahela Valley whose stories have never been told. This book is, first and foremost, their record.

He concludes from his experience during those tumultuous years with a strident plea for the labor movement, environmental movement, Black Lives Matter, Me Too, Immigrants’ Rights and other movements today to find common ground with their own independent political voice, in opposition to the system that is driving us all to the brink of extinction.

To purchase Mike’s book (hard or soft-back cover) contact:

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