

Remembering Pittsburgh^α

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To understand my role in this struggle it's important to understand a couple of other things.

First, in the mid to late sixties I ran with Jerry Rubin and Abby Hoffman. I was one of the Yippies. I was at Chicago in '68. I was in New Haven in '69. I was at the moratoriums in D.C I came out of that kind of culture and that kind of activist background, so going into the steel mills from that kind of background was an incredible transition for me.

When I got a job at Homestead in 1977, the shutdown process hadn't started yet. It didn't actually begin until late '77 with the Campbell Works in Youngstown, the Lackawanna Works and a number of other facilities. When I was hired at Homestead I had been a musician and worked odd jobs most of my life. I had been a professional musician. And when I got a job in a steel mill it wasn't really to do political activism. It was to get a stable job with a nice income.

This Marine-looking guy gave us orientation and said, "I want people in here—I don't want fly-by-night part-timers. I want people who are going to be here for thirty years." And I went, "Yeah."

It wasn't more than a year and a half later that the shutdown process started.

At the time I got into the Homestead Works, there was a wave of rank-and-file activism at Homestead that swept out of office a regime that had been supported by the International Union. Local 1397 became one of the most radical local unions in the country and certainly the most radical local union in the Steelworkers. For a number of years it was the scourge of the Steelworkers International Union. It got to the point where we would go to conventions, and our table would be surrounded by goons with guns to keep us in line and to keep us from passing out our newspaper, which was pretty irreverent.

A friend of mine named Michelle McMills, the woman who started the rank-and-file movement at Homestead, took me to Youngstown around April or May, 1979. A rally was taking place in downtown Youngstown and the International Union sent a technician named Jim Smith to read to the workers what we considered their funeral rights. Jim Smith got up and was reading, "oh, well, you have severance pay here and you can get this and if you have this much time you can get a pension," and some of the steelworkers behind us from Youngstown started screaming and carrying on. One of them kept saying, "You're full of shit, you're full of bullshit. Why don't you tell the truth?" And I said to Michelle, "Who's that?" And she said, "Oh, that's Ed Mann."

I said, "I want to meet him." So shortly after the rally I got to meet Staughton, Alice, Ed Mann, his wife, Betty, and John Barbero and his wife, in a little restaurant in downtown Youngstown. The importance of this meeting was the electricity and the

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consciousness that they brought to me and those in the Monongahela valley. We could not have done what we did or accomplished what we accomplished without the movement that happened in Youngstown and particularly Staughton, John Barbero and Ed Mann.

You've got to understand that at that time in the Steelworkers Union, while there might have been steelworkers who were very radical about the economic situation within the context of the union, most steelworkers were pretty conservative when it came to social issues. When it came to issues of war and civil rights and gay rights and all the other social issues, they were pretty conservative, but Ed Mann and John Barbero were not. They were about as anti-war and about as socialist-minded and radical as you can get. At the same time, to quote Gerald Dickey and two other young workers at Youngstown, "they were the first union officials we had at the Brier Hill Works where we knew when we went to them with a grievance that we weren't going to get screwed with our pants on. That we were going to have somebody that would stand up for us." It's important to understand that.

The second thing I'd like to say is that to understand the relationship between the law and social movements you have to understand it in the context of the situation and the times. And by that I mean that what was happening in Youngstown and what was happening in Pittsburgh was the beginning of the entire dismantling of the US manufacturing base. While some opening salvos had been fired earlier in the textile and shoe industries, these were the real opening cannon ball shots at the manufacturing base and the industrial base in the United States, something that not only picked up full steam, but continued unabated for the next twenty to thirty years.

You have to understand what happened in Youngstown and Pittsburgh in that context. This was something that was not isolated, something that was not just happening in that particular time period. This was the beginning and the upgrading of a process that continues to this day, our manufacturing base was dismantled and the jobs spread to other parts of the world that paid one one-hundredth the wages and benefits that we were getting paid here.

So after we went to Youngstown to this rally, it didn't take us too long to see that there was a major storm brewing in the industrial Northeast. This was beyond a hurricane and beyond a tornado. I termed it a slow motion industrial holocaust because in fact what was happening was the complete destruction of our steel industry and our manufacturing base, and all the workers and all the communities that went along with that.

When you see something like that happening, you not only want to sound the alarm, and you not only want to fight to protect the workers and protect the communities—which people in Youngstown and people in Pittsburgh did valiantly—but we wanted to find solutions to the problems. We wanted to find alternatives, not just defenses. I wrote some articles back in 1983 when the Tri-State Conference on Steel was in its earliest days. I've been publicly speaking and singing since I was eighteen years old and I never read a speech in my life, but I would like to quote a few things here. "Volumes have been written on what we need. Massive government-sponsored job programs and national reindustrialization policy; retraining for displaced workers; extending unemployment benefits; union contracts and federal laws that prevent or

minimize the cost of plant shutdowns on workers and communities. But tactics, strategies and concrete programs that mobilize masses of people to reach these goals have been few and far between.”

What we set out to do with the Tri-State Conference on Steel in Pittsburgh was to come up not only with tactics but with a strategy and a program that would reverse the situation, not just in our area, but for the whole country. And what we did was we looked within the law itself, within the rights of the people of the United States, to see if we could find a basis to create and develop that strategy.

Staughton talked a lot about the promises that were made to the workers in Youngstown, but what we saw in the Tri-State Conference on Steel was that it was more than just promises. There was a social contract that had developed over a period of a hundred years that workers and their communities had developed with the corporations, and the corporations had no right just to walk away from that social contract any more than they had a right to walk away from their legal contract with the United Steelworkers of America.

In the Tri-State Conference on Steel, we had a former state legislator who was also a former local union president named Frank O'Brien. We had a meeting in December 1980 in Pittsburgh when Jones & Laughlin decided to shut down its rolling mill in Hazelwood. Frank O'Brien stood up at the meeting and he said that as a state legislator he had seen the company use the power of eminent domain. They shut down a community called Scotch Bottom so they could build a new extension to the rolling mill. It was the same mill that they were shutting down now.

Frank said they used the power of eminent domain and the power of eminent domain is based in a particular state law that he cited. The state law was called the Municipal Authorities Act. The Act was passed in the late 1940s. It was used to raze “the Point,” the downtown area of Pittsburgh where the Monongahela and Allegheny rivers meet to form the Ohio, and to put up fancy office buildings and hotels. Frank said if these corporations did it to Scotch Bottom in Hazelwood and used the same eminent domain law downtown, why can't we just use it for workers and for working people in their communities?

So we investigated and we found that section 306 of the law stated, and I quote, that a public authority, very similar to the Tennessee Valley Authority, could be established by any number of government entities including a borough or town council “for the purpose of acquiring, holding, constructing, improving, maintaining and operating, owning, leasing any projects of the following kind of character: industrial development projects including but not limited to projects to retain or develop existing industries and the development of new industries.”

So we found the basis in the law. All we needed was a public authority. Well, then, we had to create that public authority. For four years a ragtag group of us— union people, church people, and a few token number of egg heads, we called them, university types who were very instrumental, by the way, in interpreting the law and guiding us through this thing set about putting our theory into practice and creating what I call the vehicle: the Tennessee Valley-type authority.

Initially we called it the something else. We called it the Monongahela Authority. Eventually it developed into the Steel Valley Authority and we tried two or three

different towns. We tried West Homestead first in 1982 with the shutdown of Mesta Machine Company and we tried at Crucible Steel up in Midland. But the towns weren't ready.

Most importantly, they thought that this type of plan challenged the free enterprise system, and they weren't ready to do that for a good four years. It wasn't until the Dorothy Six shutdown and the Duquesne Mill shutdown that we could get people to accept that this was a viable option, a weapon to use in the battle to save our plants and our community. The Duquesne Works was one of six U.S. Steel facilities. I worked at the Homestead Works up the river. The Duquesne Works was the next mill down. The Duquesne Works had a basic oxygen furnace that was pretty advanced compared to the antiquated open hearth furnace. It broke all production records in 1983 and received the most prestigious award that you could give a basic oxygen furnace. One month later they shut it down.

People were in shock. Then in September 1984 they announced their intention not just to shut it, but to tear it down. Our plan and our strategy shot through the communities like electricity, like a lightning bolt. We called a town meeting. Close to a thousand people showed up at the meeting. We met with a number of county officials, state officials, United Steelworkers Union officials from the local, district and international unions, and we laid out a four-point plan. The first point was to stop the demolition, then make an assessment of the equipment inside and protect the equipment, form a public authority to take over the plant, and find the financing to run the mill.

The Steelworkers hired an ex-radical named Mike Locker (who was in the Revolutionary Union with me in New York City) to do a feasibility study on the Duquesne Works. Mike did his initial study and we had another town meeting in Duquesne. Over 800 people showed up and Mike read the results of the study saying not only is the Duquesne mill viable, but there are customers out there and there's a market out there for the semi-finished steel that it could produce.

We then went on to build a movement to implement the other parts of our plan because nobody trusted David Roderick or U.S. Steel. We knew they had every intention of shutting the facility down so we set up a guard shanty across the street from the main gate of the mill. For more than six months, twenty four hours, seven days a week, steelworkers guarded the Duquesne Works to make sure that nothing happened to it and no equipment was removed. In December 1984, eighteen steelworkers on their own time, with their own money, and with anti-freeze provided by the International Union, went into the Duquesne Works and winterized it to protect the equipment.

Two months later, when it was rumored that trucks were going to go in and remove a piece of equipment, in less than half an hour we had fifty steelworkers at the front gates to block the trucks from going into the mill. During a six-month period, U.S. Steel had to cancel its plans to dismantle the mill on three different occasions. The movement was very powerful.

Where we failed, as Staughton said, was that the Steelworkers, not us, hired a firm out of Wall Street called Lazard (I call them "Lazy") Frères. Lazard Frères took the project over, and totally defined the project within the confines of the free enterprise

system and the massive globalization and dislocation of our manufacturing base, and said, “well, there’s no hope. We cannot get the financing. We can’t find the banks.” They basically sabotaged the struggle.

Meanwhile, though you have to remember that I was also grievance chairman at Homestead, and we were in the midst of a shutdown battle, we went town by town to convince the borough councils to form the Steel Valley Authority. In some of these towns it took as many as four or five meetings with the borough councils to convince them. When we couldn’t convince the borough councils to form the Steel Valley Authority, we would call a town meeting. At Homestead, the borough council announced before the town meeting that they were going to vote nine to nothing to not join the Steel Valley Authority. But when over a hundred steelworkers showed up at the meeting the borough council voted nine to nothing to support forming the Authority.

The main lesson that I learned and that we learned through the course of this struggle was the inner relationship between the legal strategy, the financial strategy and the social movement.

I’ll be right up front with you about what I consider our biggest mistakes. I was part of making those mistakes. When we took over the U.S. Steel building in Pittsburgh in November 1979, when we took over the U.S. Steel building in March 1980 in Youngstown, we never should have left. These corporations are nothing but a bunch of lying and exploiting thieves. They lied to us. They told us they would sit down and negotiate with us and it wasn’t even twenty four hours later in Youngstown that they reneged on their promise. We should have known that. They’d been reneging on their promises ever since we were in existence, whether it was through the grievance procedure, through the contractual negotiations or through the social contract.

You have to understand how radical it was when they shut this place down because Homestead was the premier steel mill in the United States for more than forty years. Homestead was taken over during World War II under eminent domain law by the U.S. Federal Government and most of the mill was built with taxpayer money during World War II. Homestead provided two-thirds of the steel for the Western European war front during World War II. It came from the mill that I worked at: the 160 plate mill. Then in 1946 the government sold the mill back to US Steel, for 10 cents on the dollar. So it was our tax money that built and financed that mill in the first place. That was our steel mill, not U.S. Steel’s. And those steelworkers at Homestead continued to produce steel under federal contracts for the Army, the Navy and the Air Force.

There’s not a city or building that you can go to in the United States, I don’t care if it’s San Francisco or New York City; the Pan Am building; what was the World Trade Center; the Empire State building; the Verrazano Bridge; the George Washington Bridge; the Golden Gate Bridge—all that steel came from Homestead. So these workers thought that they would never shut that place down. And when they did shut it down, it was as if somebody pulled the floor out from underneath these workers and these communities and the psychological effect was even more devastating than the economic effect. People’s families were destroyed. People’s lives were destroyed. Entire communities were destroyed.

Within a five-year period from 1981 through 1986, I personally knew ninety-one workers under the age of sixty who died of strokes, cancer, heart attacks or suicide. It was very much a war like any other war that you can talk about or read about. It wasn't a military war. It was an economic war. We feel very strongly that workers have to figure out how to defend themselves. The way you have to view this thing is that this was not just a war being waged on the workers at Homestead. This was not just a war being waged on our communities in Youngtown and Homestead. This was a war being waged on all of you. This was a war being waged on our entire country.

When they dismantle your manufacturing base they dismantle your ability to produce, and they dismantle your ability to create wealth, and no matter what anybody tells you, this entire economy and this entire empire will crumble as a result of it. You're seeing right before your eyes that not only can you not produce and create wealth, but you cannot have a service sector, you cannot have a technology-based economy without a manufacturing base. All you have to do is look at any product that's been moved out of the United States. When they moved radio and TV production out of the United States and centered it in Japan, all the future technologies, all the services, and all the financial sectors eventually moved with it. I don't care if it's CDs. I don't care if it's iPods. I don't care what it was over the last thirty years, it no longer comes from the United States. It comes from the South Asian rim and until we reindustrialize with new technology in the United States, this problem is not going to be reversed. Until we have a social movement that forces their hand you're not going to see this situation reversed.

I'm going to say here that I have been waiting, and I know Staughton and Alice and my wife Stephanie and thousands of us have been waiting for thirty years, for what's happening in Wisconsin right now. Thirty years we've been fighting, we've been organizing. We haven't been sitting in our living rooms, smoking dope and watching TV and hanging out and waiting. We've been out fighting and struggling. We've been waiting for thirty years and our message right now to the academic community is: you've got to realize what we're up against here. You've got to realize what our enemy is all about. And when I say our enemy, I don't just mean the corporate class that's doing what they're doing. I mean this whole system we're up against.

You have to realize that I don't tell you this lightly. Last night they put me up in just about the fanciest hotel I've ever been put up in. I never had a pad like that.

So I was flipping TV stations last night and I got to Fox News. And for about five minutes I watched Fox News and there was a politician, a congressman from Indiana and there was a pundit, a political pundit, and there was one of the Fox people. And for five minutes, they told the truth about what's going on and what the stakes are in Wisconsin and the United States of America today. They said, "we are going to dismantle the public sector unions. We are going to dismantle the working class. And there's nothing the other side can do to stop us. We are the inheritors of the Ronald Reagan strategy with PATCO, and we will be just as victorious as Ronald Reagan was in dismantling PATCO, and we're going to do everything we can in our power and throw everything at them that we can to dismantle these unions and dismantle the entire collective bargaining process."

They make no bones about what the stakes are. We in the labor movement and the progressive community movements of the United States have got to understand the nature of the beast—what we’re up against—and the most important lesson is that we have got to stay in the streets, and the academic community has got to rally to our cause. All of us together have to develop an alternative plan that not only creates another automobile just as we did with the Steel Valley Authority, but makes sure that the right drivers are in that automobile and that the working people are in the car so we can move into the future. That’s my message and that’s the most important contribution I think that you can make.

Now I have a song.

If you go to my website, which is www.mikestoutmusic.com, I have twelve CDs out and a hundred and fifty songs I’ve written in the last fifteen years. What I’d like to do is sing a song that I wrote during the plant shutdown battles in Youngstown because I like to express in no uncertain terms what Staughton and John Barbaro and Ed Mann meant to our movement in the Steel Valley and what they mean to the people of the United States. I like to sing about heroes and heroines that shouldn’t be forgotten and shouldn’t slip through the cracks of history. So this is a song called “Flowers of the Working Class” and it’s about those people.

FLOWERS OF THE WORKING CLASS¹

John Barbero and Ed Mann were Youngstown, Ohioans.
 Steel warriors of the rainbow, they were kind and gentle souls.
 Native sons, two of the ones who would speak for the community.
 Union misters, human resisters to every kind of slavery.

Barbero and Mann were a force pushing forward our history.
 And you know, they were never afraid when confronted with the enemy.
 Prophesizers, organizers of the people in the mills and factories.
 Future molders, courageous foot soldiers in the fight to be free.

Then raise your heads, let your conscience arise;
 The rain and wind are swirling outside.
 Seize the time, grab hold of the day;
 Pick up your sword, we have dragons to slay.
 Hear what they said, remember their names;
 They may be dead but their spirit remains
 In the hearts of you and me!

Barbero and Mann have come and gone,
 Like the sand in the hour glass.

¹ Words and music by C. Michael Stout (Sept. 1992).

Their spirit will live on,
They both were flowers of the working class,
Of the working mass, of the working class.

That's for John and Ed. Thank you.