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Introduction to *Ravenswood: The Steelworkers' Victory and the Revival of American Labor*

Kate Bronfenbrenner
Cornell University, klb23@cornell.edu

Tom Juravich
University of Massachusetts Amherst

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Introduction to *Ravenswood: The Steelworkers' Victory and the Revival of American Labor*

Abstract
[Excerpt] When the Ravenswood Aluminum Company locked out seventeen hundred workers on October 31, 1990, it hardly looked like a big opportunity for labor. In what had become standard operating procedure for employers during the 1980s, management broke off bargaining with the United Steelworkers of America, and then brought hundreds of replacement workers into a heavily fortified plant surrounded by barbed wire and security cameras. Injunctions prevented union members from doing little more than symbolic picketing, and the wheels of justice, as they had done for more than a decade, creaked ever so slowly. All the pieces were in place for another long, drawn-out defeat for labor.

…

This book chronicles the twenty-month battle between the Steelworkers and the Ravenswood Aluminum Company (RAC). It is the story of an international union already reeling from heavy losses in the steel industry and desperately needing some solid ground. It is the story of a tough and determined union membership, most of whom had spent their entire working lives at the local aluminum plant.

Keywords
Ravenswood Aluminum Company, lockout, United Steelworkers of America, steel industry, unions, worker rights

Comments
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Introduction

When the Ravenswood Aluminum Company locked out seventeen hundred workers on October 31, 1990, it hardly looked like a big opportunity for labor. In what had become standard operating procedure for employers during the 1980s, management broke off bargaining with the United Steelworkers of America, and then brought hundreds of replacement workers into a heavily fortified plant surrounded by barbed wire and security cameras. Injunctions prevented union members from doing little more than symbolic picketing, and the wheels of justice, as they had done for more than a decade, creaked ever so slowly. All the pieces were in place for another long, drawn-out defeat for labor.

The seventeen hundred employees of the Ravenswood Aluminum Company were not the only workers in the 1980s who felt the ground shift under their jobs. A bold new group of CEOs, financial consultants, and corporate raiders had emerged who abandoned traditional business practices. They quickly went to work buying and selling companies that had been long-term, stable American employers. Using junk bonds and leveraged buyouts, moving money around at lightning speed, they left American workers in a state of shock, watching as their work was downsized, contracted out, sped up, streamlined, and eliminated. Production was global, American workers were told, and they would have to compete in a worldwide market.

Many lost their jobs and the ability to earn a living, while others just lost their will to fight back. Of those who kept their jobs, many were forced to take massive concessions in wages and benefits. Later they watched as the number of hours they worked steadily increased to make up for the concessions and cutbacks. Their job security had disappeared and in its place came new expectations, new responsibilities—multi-skilling, multi-tasking, and "continuous quality improvement." The net result was that jobs were harder, more stressful, and considerably less safe and secure than even half a generation earlier.

During the 1980s, unions were largely defined by their losses. Little that labor did was effective in stemming the tide of corporate power and

the assault on workers' rights and decent jobs. Unions suffered big public defeats at PATCO, Eastern Airlines, International Paper, Hormel, Phelps-Dodge. Strike activity plummeted to its lowest level since the 1920s.

Labor also lost its ability to deliver the wages, cost-of-living increases, ever-widening benefits, and safe working conditions that had been the cornerstone of collective bargaining in the postwar years. Employers fine-tuned the use of both legal and illegal tactics against workers and unions in contract negotiations, in organizing drives, and on the shop and office floor. The stability that workers had come to rely on seemed to go into free fall, unchecked by government regulations or union power. For many—even many in the labor movement—it was unclear whether labor would survive this onslaught.

This book chronicles the twenty-month battle between the Steelworkers and the Ravenswood Aluminum Company (RAC). It is the story of an international union already reeling from heavy losses in the steel industry and desperately needing some solid ground. It is the story of a tough and determined union membership, most of whom had spent their entire working lives at the local aluminum plant.

Like so many other workers and unions over the last two decades, the locked-out workers at Ravenswood were facing something unfathomable, even in the context of their toughest bargaining in the past. Their plant, a flagship plant of Kaiser Aluminum when it first opened in the 1950s, had brought a middle-class lifestyle to their families in rural West Virginia. In the late 1980s it was sold in a leveraged buyout. The workers watched as new management—driven to cut costs and increase profits—slashed jobs, cut staffing levels, and let working conditions deteriorate dangerously.

In all of this they were up against a former plant manager, now CEO, who had returned to the plant with a personal grudge against the union. And after many months the Steelworkers would discover a tangled web of overlapping owners and investors revealing that the company and their destiny were ultimately controlled by a world-renowned financier and metal trader, a fugitive from justice and notorious white-collar criminal hiding out in Switzerland. This would be no ordinary fight.

It would take almost two years, but in the end it was the Steelworkers who held out "one day longer" than the company, defying the pattern that emerged out of the 1980s of broken unions and divided communities. Without question, the victory was wrested from Ravenswood Aluminum by the tremendous determination and courage of the Steelworkers and their families. Even through the darkest times of the lockout, the members of Local 5668 held on and held together, far beyond what rea-

son told them. In the twenty months of the lockout, only seventeen of their seventeen hundred members crossed the picket line.

But Ravenswood was not won by will alone. The victory was also the product of one of the most complex and sophisticated contract campaigns ever waged by the American labor movement. It was based on an immense amount of research, as well as careful thinking and strategizing about Ravenswood Aluminum Corporation, its owners, its customers, and its financiers. The Steelworkers never stopped thinking of innovative ways to put this information to use, constantly developing new strategies and tactics to pressure the company back to the bargaining table and get the workers and their union back into the plant. There were no bounds to these initiatives, not even national borders, as locked-out workers and their campaign traveled around the globe.

The Steelworkers did not make the mistake of partitioning off the research and the strategizing from the militancy and commitment of local union members. Virtually every action capitalized on the voices and solidarity of the members of Local 5668, which in turn inspired support from workers, unions, politicians, business leaders, and community groups across the United States and throughout the world.

When the Steelworkers returned to work on June 29, 1992, it was a tremendous victory for the workers and their families. Together they had saved their jobs and their union and in the process saved a community worth rebuilding. But Ravenswood was more than just a victory of aluminum workers in a small town in West Virginia. It demonstrated something that had been unclear for more than a decade—that labor could still win. Not just accidentally, not just against a weak employer—labor could win big against the largest of the corporate giants.

In so many ways the Ravenswood story represents the worst and the best of labor relations in the global economy. Here was yet another multi-national corporation wreaking havoc on workers and their community, all in the name of short-term profits to finance leveraged buyouts in industries thousands of miles away. But here also was a group of workers who found community, solidarity, and, ultimately, victory by reaching and touching hundreds of thousands of others in Eastern and Western Europe, Latin America, Canada, and across the United States.

Other unions won victories at the bargaining table and on the picket line in the 1980s and early 1990s. But it was the Ravenswood model—the research, the strategies, and the full participation of the members and the broader community, locally, nationally, and internationally—that represented both so much of what the labor movement had learned over the past two decades, and the possibility of what it could be in the years to come.