

A History of Struggle

By: Michael Sacco, Business Representative

I just finished reading a book, Staley: The Fight For A New American Labor Movement by Steven Ashby and C.J. Hawking (2009 University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago) and relived an important piece of recent labor history as well as my own personal history. I think in our own fights with our employers there are lessons for all of us to learn from this book.

The book exhaustively recounts the 1992-1995 fight of 762 union members of Allied Industrial Workers (AIW) Local 837 in Decatur, Illinois against a giant multinational corporation to defend their union contract and their way of life.

A.E. Staley is a giant century-old corn processing whose main product is high-fructose corn syrup. Workers organized into the AIW in 1943 and the union and company enjoyed 4 decades of a largely-respectful relationship. In 1988 the operation was bought by multinational Tate & Lyle and things began to change as Tate & Lyle tried to squeeze maximum profits from its new property. Does this sound familiar AT&T and Jones Cable members?

In response, the leadership shared control of the union with its rank & file who re-organized and invigorated their brothers and sisters. Workers educated themselves on labor history and its struggles, quadrupled their union dues and began to fight the multinational on the shop floor with a “work-to-rule” campaign that caused members to deprive the company of their inside knowledge of the plant and threw the responsibility for production decisions back into the laps of ill-equipped managers.

As expected, without the workers’ knowledge, production dropped and the company lost control of the plant. Staley locked the workers out of the plant, brought in scabs and contractors and AIW Local 837 was on the picket lines.

This is where the story really gets interesting. Instead of keeping their fight in Decatur, AIW members took their fight to the world as “Road Warriors” and told their story across the country soliciting help from unionists. I recall these brothers and sisters coming to our meetings in Local 336 and inspiring and electrifying our members in the ‘90s. Many of us made trips to Decatur to support these brave workers.

Alas, the workers eventually lost when their union merged with another international union who wanted the fight to end and the workers to return to the plant. They were sold out.

My feeble thumbnail sketch here does no justice in 500 words to the valiant struggle of the Staley workers and this fine and readable account of their story. As I read the book I found myself thinking of how common the story of workers being abused by corporations, like Tate & Lyle, AT&T and Comcast is. What isn’t common is how this

small local union fought back. I recommend that we all read this book and find out for yourself what I mean. You will see your daily struggle in this book.

By way of full disclosure, I was deeply involved in this fight for a couple of years and the book's authors, Steven Ashby and C.J. Hawking are friends of mine. That shouldn't discourage you from going to www.staleybook.org and buying a copy of this great new book.