



Striking Steel (Solidarity Remembered) (Critical Perspectives on the past series)

Jack Metzgar

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Having come of age during a period of vibrant union-centered activism, Jack Metzgar begins this book wondering how his father, a U.S. Steel shop steward in the 1950s and '60s, and so many contemporary historians could forget what this country owes to the union movement. Combining personal memoir and historical narrative, *Striking Steel* argues for a reassessment of unionism in American life during the second half of the twentieth century and a recasting of "official memory." As he traces the history of union steelworkers after World War II, Metzgar draws on his father's powerful stories about the punishing work in the mills, stories in which time is divided between "before the union" and since. His father, Johnny Metzgar, fought ardently for workplace rules as a means of giving "the men" some control over their working conditions and protection from venal foremen. He pursued grievances until he eroded management's authority, and he badgered foremen until he established shopfloor practices that would become part of the next negotiated contract.

As a passionate advocate of solidarity, he urged coworkers to stick together so that the rules were upheld and so that everyone could earn a decent wage. *Striking Steel's* pivotal event is the four-month nationwide steel strike of 1959, a landmark union victory that has been all but erased from public memory. With remarkable tenacity, union members held out for the shopfloor rules that gave them dignity in the workplace and raised their standard of living. Their victory underscored the value of sticking together and reinforced their sense that they were contributing to a general improvement in American working and living conditions. The Metzgar family's story vividly illustrates the larger narrative of how unionism lifted the fortunes and prospects of working-class families. It also offers an account of how the broad social changes of the period helped to shift the balance of power in a conflict-ridden, patriarchal household. Even if the optimism of his generation faded in the upheavals of the 1960s, Johnny Metzgar's commitment to his union and the strike itself stands as honorable examples of what collective action can and did achieve.

Jack Metzgar's *Striking Steel* is a stirring call to remember and renew the struggle. Author note: Jack Metzgar is Professor of Humanities at Roosevelt University.

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