

WISCONSIN-MADE FURNITURE NOW MADE IN MEXICO

BY MAURY KING

Former President, USW Local 333

Just weeks before the Joerns Healthcare furniture factory in Stevens Point, Wis., closed forever, the former company president joined me and members of the United Steelworkers union to protest bad trade deals that send plants like mine to Mexico.

His name is Ray Nass. He is a great guy, and was a wonderful employer. Nobody was more upset about our work moving to Mexico than he was, even though he had been retired for 25 years at that point. He says that although he resigned in 1987, his heart never left. And I believe that's true.

He was committed to his workers, to Wisconsin, and to high-quality American-made products. The new owners, a venture capital group that the company was sold to after he left, had no love for Wisconsin or for American manufacturing.

In fact, those venture capitalists knew nothing about the product or how it was made. They didn't know the furniture business. All they cared about was the money. That's why they built a factory in Mexico, for the "freedom" to push up their profits by paying dirt-poor wages and polluting at will.

They don't have an American soul like the Steelworkers who made the furniture or like Ray, who nurtured the company that his wife's grandfather, a man named Joerns, started with his brothers. The allegiance of venture capitalists isn't to God or country but only to the almighty dollar.

Like the Joernses, this factory was in my family's blood. My dad worked there before me. I began work

there in 1972, just six months out of high school, and stayed 43 years. That included a year or so doing maintenance after the machines went quiet in 2012.

If Ray had been in charge, the shutdown never would have happened. A hundred and fifty U.S. factory workers and another 50 office workers would not have lost their jobs.

The venture capitalists lied to us about a factory they opened in Mexico. They said it would not affect our work. Then all of a sudden, the CEO came up to Stevens Point and told us they were shutting us down.

They gathered us together in the factory for the announcement. He was up there for five minutes. He said they were closing us down. He said some people from the local management team would give us the details. Then he walked out. He didn't hang around to listen to anyone. He hopped on a plane back to North Carolina, where the headquarters was.

There was no time for us to react. We were just in shock.

After that, Ray and I and the mayor and some others did everything we could to try to keep the place open. I had been president of the United Steelworkers local union at the factory for about a dozen years, so I felt it was my

“We put more sweat into saving the place than they did. They didn't make any effort. It was going to close no matter what we did.”

responsibility to try to preserve those jobs. Ray was in his mid-70s then, but he was right there with the rest of us trying to work a deal to keep that factory in Stevens Point.

We went to the governor's office and to our state representatives. The state offered to give the company some money to retain the factory. We came up with a whole package of benefits. But those venture capitalists wouldn't even listen.

We put more sweat into saving the place than they did. They didn't make any effort. It was going to close no matter what we did. They didn't care about anybody in Wisconsin.

This wasn't even the first time they sent our work off shore. In 2004, they moved almost all of the wood manufacturing business to China.

Initially, when the Joerns brothers started the company decades before I worked there, it made wooden household furniture. Highly skilled workers crafted expensive furniture. Later, Joerns began manufacturing a lot of furniture for medical and nursing home use, including wooden and metal-framed hospital beds.

We still did some woodwork after the bulk of it went to China. The Chinese-made cabinets would be shipped to Wisconsin, where we would install locks and move doors because the Chinese fastened all of them as right-hand opening and some needed to open left. For some reason they couldn't handle left-opening doors.

The factory in China wouldn't take special orders either. They produced only a couple of standard sizes. The Wisconsin workers, by contrast, could easily produce cabinets in a multitude of depths and widths. And we could quickly change styles and colors. The Chinese factory wasn't flexible like that.

Also, the quality of the cabinets fell dramatically. They were cheaply put together. There were times when we would open a carton and the thing would basically fall apart right out of the box. I am sure they got complaints from customers.

They thought it was a way to save money, to get it made in China. But eventually, toward the end, they admitted it didn't really work.

When the Joerns family and Ray ran the factory, it wasn't like that. The Joerns brothers started the company in the area of Minneapolis and St. Paul. They moved it to

Sheboygan. When that factory burned down, they rebuilt in Stevens Point, not Mexico or China.

Later, when that Stevens Point factory was, as Ray put it, "falling down around our ears," he worked with the governor to get a new kind of funding, industrial revenue bonds, approved by the state supreme court. A new factory was constructed with the first of those bonds ever issued in Wisconsin.

I was accustomed to working for Ray, a guy who did whatever he could to keep Joerns in Wisconsin and to preserve the good jobs it provided. Ray went to Catholic school and lives his life by Catholic social teaching. He says he believes that company executives who have control over worker pay scales, vendors' balance sheets, and customer treatment will answer to the good Lord for how they do their jobs. He says, "people will lose or win their souls by the way they run their companies."

That obviously is not what those venture capital guys believe.

Some workers retired after the factory closed. Others were able to find jobs at other factories around Stevens Point. I got a position with Greenheck Manufacturing, which is headquartered in Schofield, Wis. It's a union job, so I earn good money, but not as much as I did at Joerns.

I think most of the former Joerns workers were not able to get union jobs, so they're making a lot less without many of the benefits or the level of benefits we received at Joerns. For many workers who had been with the company for 25 years or more, just losing their vacation time at that age was difficult.

Every year, Joerns would hold a company picnic in the Stevens Point Park. After the shutdown notice, Ray and his wife sponsored the picnic. Several hundred people came, including retirees.

He gave a speech and thanked everyone for all of their efforts over the years. He said the closure was something that never should have happened.

Former plant owner Ray Nass, second from left in front row, and Maury King, beside him, listen to USW District 2 Director Mike Bolton at protest.

