

CARELESS PURSUIT OF PROFIT KILLS JOBS

BY REX STAPP

Former President, USW Local 11-770

Runaway corporate greed cost me my job, a job I'd had for more than two decades, a job that enabled me to raise two children, a job that is now being done in Mexico.

I started as a welder building gas-hauling trailers in 1993. First I worked for a small, locally owned company in Springfield, Mo., called Custom Trailers. Then after Custom Trailers was purchased by a Minnesota-based company called Polar Tank, I worked for them.

Over the 22 years I was there, our plant grew. When I began, there were around 70 of us. When they shut us down in April 2016, there were close to 300.

Making gas trailers isn't like making cars. We didn't work on assembly lines. We had a lot of custom jobs, and we welded the parts for them ourselves. We did good work, and most of the time we had more orders than we

could fill, even at the end. Polar was a profitable company.

But when Polar was bought by an investment group called American Industrial Partners (AIP) in 2015, they decided they could make more money if they shut us down.

This group had just bought a company called Heil Trailer, and they invested a bunch of money in a new Heil plant in Mexico. They bought our company because shutting us down eliminated a big part of their competition.

To them it was just profits. For us it was 300 jobs, 300 livelihoods, 300 families struck down.

We were angry, obviously, because many of us felt like we had built that company from scratch. We put our whole lives into it, and for a lot of us, it was the only job we ever knew. A person can't just start over when he's 50 or 60 years old, even if the government does offer retraining.

And sure, there's plenty of factory work in the area, but it pays \$10 or maybe \$12 an hour, with no benefits. We were making an average of \$19 an hour at Polar, and our families depended on every cent of our checks to make ends meet.

If you looked at our community 20 years ago before NAFTA and free trade had a chance to really turn the tables on the American worker, you might see one person who was homeless or needed help. Now there are people standing with a sign on every corner.

That can only go on so long before something drastic happens. Our country can't keep starving the working class and expect to remain the most powerful nation on earth.

A lot of people in the media and in the community want to blame us, the workers, for what happened at Polar.

“ I don't know what the exact answer is, but I know that this country can't survive if we're willing to let the middle class die. ”

We were on strike when we got the word that AIP planned to shut us down, and everyone assumed it was because we'd made some unreasonable demand.

The truth is, it was exactly the opposite. We weren't fighting over wages. We were willing to compromise. But AIP forced us to strike because after months of trying, we couldn't get AIP to negotiate with us. Now we know that they never had any intention of bargaining a contract with us. They were just stringing us along until they could shut us down. They even told us that much after it was all over.

The other workers and I really felt like this was our company. We took pride in our work, building these tanks by hand. We burned up in the summer, welding in 110 degree heat. We froze in the winter. We got injured and breathed in clouds of smoke.

We've had four people from our bargaining unit under the age of 50 die of cancer, and I'm currently on a medical disability. I can't say for sure if my poor health is directly

related to my time at Polar, but I do know our working conditions were tough, and we gave everything we had to this company.

And now our company, the one we built through decades of hard work, is gone because a few rich people wanted to get even richer. They even asked us to go down to Mexico to train workers there to do the jobs we spent our whole lives perfecting.

Our country's trade agreements failed us. All they're doing is letting these same rich people take advantage of workers in Mexico. We exported American greed to Mexico, losing American jobs and leaving Mexican workers to keep living in poverty.

I don't know what the exact answer is, but I know that this country can't survive if we're willing to let the middle class die.

Some of the folks who used to work at Polar are now working two and three jobs just to feed their families. All the while CEOs keep getting richer and richer. It makes me wonder, if it takes thousands of people suffering, how much money does one person really need?



Members of USW Local 11-770 protest at Polar Tank.