

UNFAIR TRADE

WEDGES STEELWORKERS BETWEEN ROCK AND HARD PLACE

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It came down to two bad choices.

I could retain the opportunity to be recalled from layoff if U.S. Steel resumed operations in Granite City, Ill., but, as I waited, lose the health insurance my family needs.

Or I could retire, foreclosing the chance to be rehired but gaining affordable health insurance subsidized by U.S. Steel for its retirees.

Like many of the 2,000 Granite City steelworkers laid off by U.S. Steel in 2015, I was trapped between a rock and a hard place by bad trade deals and bad trade policies.

U.S. Steel cited imports as one of the reasons for shutting down its Granite City mill, but United Steelworkers Vice President Tom Conway put it more bluntly. He said, "U.S. Steel's announcement this morning is a result of the continuing effect of a surge of unfairly traded, record-level imports."

The furloughs began in November of 2015. They got me in December. A little over a year later, in February 2017, U.S. Steel recalled 225 workers. That was right after the U.S. International Trade Commission ruled that subsidized imports violated trade agreements.

Even though I had 28 years in, it wasn't enough seniority for me to be among those 225 called back.

The months dragged on. The two-year date when my health benefits would end unless I retired or got recalled drew closer and closer.

That day arrived in December of 2017. I had to make the decision. I knew steel imports had increased by nearly 20 percent in 2017, so the prospect of being recalled didn't seem good. My family really needed the health benefits. So, reluctantly, I chose retirement.

I held out as long as I could, hoping to return to the mill. I had spent nearly three decades there. I had trained to perform numerous dangerous and complex tasks in several departments. I made decent, union-negotiated wages and had good health insurance, pension and other benefits.

It was hard work, but a good job. I wanted it back.

Instead, I am driving a lift truck in a warehouse for half the pay and paltry benefits.

I searched for a better job. I am still looking, really. But when 2,000 people are forced out of work all at once in a city of fewer than 30,000 residents, it's rough. Also, my age was no asset. When employers can choose between a 30-year-old and someone twice that age, they don't go with the old guy.

I got unemployment benefits for six months. And I received SUB pay for two years, but the amount shrank as the shutdown dragged on. SUB pay is supplemental unemployment benefits (SUB) negotiated by the union and paid by the company. God bless the union and the contract we had. I have a wife and four kids to support, two in college. I needed the help.

The local union assisted with food giveaways and gift cards. There is nothing good about being laid off, but the



A Baker family portrait

union support was wonderful.

My family rarely goes out to eat or to shows now. We haven't had a vacation in two years. I haven't bought a new vehicle in ages. My wife cut back everywhere and watches every dollar. She sacrificed everything to keep the kids in school.

Trying to figure out what I could do next to keep everyone fed and the bills paid gave me more grey hairs than I had already.

After a year without work, I got the job at the warehouse. But the pay is so bad that if I can't find a better job, I am going to have to delay retirement. It is difficult because there just are no other manufacturers in the area. A bunch of us from the mill are working in warehouses now.

I know people say that furloughed mill workers should just get retrained. Become a nurse or a computer programmer or something, they say. But talk is cheap. Try figuring out the problems in your kids' math books. The world is different now from when I was in school.

Also, frankly, I've got skills. These are proficiencies honed over decades at U.S. Steel. In one job, I had to know and monitor five different computer systems. In another, I took samples of molten iron to determine how much magnesium and calcium to inject to achieve the correct level of sulfur. From a pulpit, I operated computers and robotic arms to place lances containing additives into ladles of molten iron. I ran lab tests on steel and entered

results in a computer log. I operated X-ray machines to determine the thickness of steel and its galvanized coating.

I learned to run all sorts of machines in the basic oxygen furnace pit, including a remote controlled KT-Grant machine, a grade-all with a jackhammer that descaled the ladles, and a rivet buster, which is 45-pound mini jackhammer that removed layers of heat-resistant brick for replacement.

Just like people tell you to get retrained, others say pick up and move to where there are jobs. But I grew up in Granite City. This is where my kids were born and raised, in this house. My mom and dad are buried down the road from us.

It would be hard to sell my house when so many people around here still are without work. And then there is the expense of moving. After all of that, I could end up with a position that would pay no better than the warehouse job I've got and would be non-union, meaning they could just fire me on a whim.

Around Granite City, 2,000 workers like me and their families are suffering hardship because government-subsidized steel is being dumped illegally on the world market, primarily by China, but also by some of our so-called allies like South Korea.

I just can't figure out how it is that my taxes pay for aircraft carriers to protect South Korea when my government won't protect American-made steel from illegally subsidized foreign imports.

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