

REPUBLIC STORAGE CLOSURE IN CANTON COSTS 300 THEIR LIVELIHOODS

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Just after lunch on April 10, 2015, I saw the guys from Republic Storage's powder coat shop going home. Sometimes they left early when they got ahead, so I didn't think much of it.

Then their foreman came walking by. I asked him if they were done for the day. He said, "You haven't heard?"

I said, "What are you talking about?"

He said, "We're done for good. They're locking the doors."

It was over, with no notice, no niceties.

A few minutes later, Bob Roberts, the president of our United Steelworkers local union, walked past me with that deer-in-the-headlights look on his face. He was broken. He didn't know what to say. He didn't know it was coming.

In fact, just a few days earlier, Roberts had met with officials from Echelon Capital, another firm that made lockers, because Echelon was talking about buying Republic. The Philadelphia investment bankers, Versa Capital Management, who owned Republic then, were at that meeting too. Echelon agreed to labor terms and talked about bringing back 150 of the guys who Republic had laid off earlier that year.

Then they sucker punched Roberts, closing like that after getting hopes up. They sucker punched all of us, 300 dedicated workers, all thrown to the curb.

The closing also smacked down the town of Canton, Ohio, where the company was founded. When the compa-

ny launched in Canton in 1886, its workers formed metal conductor pipe. During World War II, its workers made components for ships and planes. Afterwards, it became famous for fabricating lockers. Go to any school or YMCA, and you probably will put your stuff in a Republic locker. They're at Disney World and professional sports stadiums. We made the Cadillac of the industry.

Just a couple of days after Versa slammed the doors on Republic, Echelon did buy the company. But instead of resuming fabrication in Canton, Echelon took our dies, our machinery and our equipment and moved it to their other factories. Echelon claims to fabricate Republic lockers now, but they're not the same. They're not made by people like me, with 40 years of experience doing it in Canton.

The real problems were cheap lockers imported from China and cheap steel imported from Mexico and China that other American locker companies began using. That price pressure forced the reduction and consolidation of American locker companies. This was an issue way back in 2004, even before Versa bought Republic and another locker company called Lyon. That year, John Colm, executive director of the West Side Industrial Retention Network, a nonprofit economic development organization, testified to the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission that cheap Chinese imports and China's currency manipulation were injuring Republic.

The cheap steel and lockers from China are why the workers at Republic qualified for Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA). That's a federal program to help workers who lose their jobs because of bad trade. The petition for TAA said, "One of the reasons for Republic's failure was the continual erosion in pricing – that was driven significantly by the relentless pricing pressure caused by Chinese

imports."

The thing is, China allows companies to pay its workers pennies and to pollute the environment. And China subsidizes its industries. There is no way American workers and American corporations in a capitalist system can compete with that.

So 300 of us in Canton were out of work and out of our pensions, vacation pay and severance. It was a nasty deal all the way around.

I started there as a helper when I was 19. It was a good place to work then. They paid decent wages and provided health insurance and a pension. I met my wife, Charlotte, there. She supplied the plant with its work orders. We found ourselves on the same team at a company-sponsored volleyball competition.

The workers believed in Republic. We wanted it to succeed. It was called Republic because it was part of Republic Steel Corp. in the 1930s. Republic sold it to LTV Corp. Then when LTV was in financial trouble, it was going to shut Republic down in 1986. So the workers bought it. We had an employee stock ownership plan, an ESOP. And we ran it for 20 years until Versa bought it in 2006. I had a huge investment there. We all did.

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And we all suffered when it shut down. There was one young guy, Dave, who worked there a dozen years. He had a kid coming and house payments. He was scared. You could see it in his eyes.

Canton suffered too. It has some big employers like TimkenSteel and the hospitals, but mostly it's small businesses. And they supplied Republic. They provided paint, nuts, bolts and other products for production. All that

business disappeared. In a day.

I was 60, and getting another job was a joke. Companies aren't supposed to discriminate against you because of your age, but when they see 60 on that application, things happen. They say you aren't qualified or you don't have enough education.

I submitted about 50 applications. Finally, just before my unemployment ran out, the Fairless School System hired me. I went from being a production leader, making sure a line was running properly at Republic for \$17.50 an hour, to working as a janitor for minimum wage.

I worked there until I was 62, then I quit and took my Social Security. Charlotte is 65 and qualifies for Medicare, but I've got another year and a half of paying \$1,000 a month for a bare-bones health plan before I qualify.

This changed our lives, our plans. We lost our company pensions. The federal Pension Benefit Guaranty Corp. took them over when Republic bailed. That means instead of getting \$2,200 a month, I will get about \$900. Same for Charlotte, who had 34 years at Republic.

Everything we planned on doing when we retired went away. We can't afford to travel now. The biggest traveling I do is to the basement to oil paint. Thank God we have our grandkids around.

Because of our age, Charlotte and I didn't have to struggle that long. But there were young people with 17 years in the plant, people whose dads and granddads worked there before them. What do you do if you are 45 and thrown out of the only work you have ever known?

There were a lot of bitter people in this whole thing. There were rumors of two suicides not long after the plant shut. I read one of the obits in the paper.

But I see some people, and they are okay. Some of us get together for breakfast once in a while. I saw Dave recently, and he told me he'd used the Trade Adjustment Assistance to go to nursing school and he'd graduated.

Still, in the 1970s, Republic employed 1,200 people, working three shifts. That's opportunity and family-supporting jobs for 1,200. Bad trade killed it all.

Things like this get swept under the rug and no one ever hears about it. But lawmakers should be doing something to stop it.