

BAD TRADE COSTS ONE WORKER 2 JOBS

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USW member working at an aluminum smelter.

I am 39 years old, and I've already personally experienced the horrible effects of unfair trade on two major American industries: aluminum and plastics.

In June of 2001, I got a job in the smelting side of the Century Aluminum facility in Ravenswood, W.Va., not far from where I grew up, in Point Pleasant, W.Va.

I worked for Century for almost nine years, and there I was a member of USW Local 5668. That was until 2009 when the bottom fell of aluminum prices around the world, and the company shut down the smelting operation. We didn't realize it at the time, but this was the beginning of a crisis for American-made aluminum. Smelters started closing across the country as China flooded the world market with cheap, unfairly traded aluminum. Now, there are only a handful of U.S. smelters left.

There's more than one reason why things like this happen. Sometimes corporate greed gets in the way of smart decisions. But in the case of aluminum, unfair trade is the No. 1 problem. Our leaders have made agreements with too many countries that make the same products we do here, only companies in those countries get government subsidies that violate trade rules, pay workers pennies and don't have to meet the same environmental or safety standards as U.S. companies. It just doesn't make sense that our country lets this happen.

It started with NAFTA, but that's just one of many bad trade decisions we've made. If it doesn't stop, factories and mills like the one at Ravenswood will just keep closing.

In the end, it comes down to corporate greed. Everybody has seen it happening over the years. Companies are always looking for ways to cut costs and make more money.

If a company can get cheap labor and operate with no regard for the environment elsewhere, what's stopping them from just going overseas? This is something we as a country need to address. We need to do a better job of standing up for our workers to make sure we still have American-made aluminum because too many smelters have shut down.

Initially, we hoped that Century's smelter

closure would be temporary. But it wasn't. That meant almost 700 people lost good, family-supporting jobs forever. The aluminum finishing side of the business is still operating there, but it's not the same.

The aluminum can be smelted overseas, then imported and finished here. But we should be doing that first step, smelting it, here ourselves.

These factory closures don't just hurt the workers. There's a huge ripple effect on everyone in the community. Taxes go up. Shops go under because people aren't spending as much money. And it hurts our school systems.

The American people want to buy good products that are made here, and they want good jobs to stay here. When we get products like this shipped from overseas, it takes money out of our economy. As a consumer, though, sometimes you're stuck buying an import because that's your only option. It shouldn't be that way.

After I lost my job at Century, I went back to school through funding from the federal Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) program, which helps workers who lose their jobs because of bad trade. Eventually, I was able to find another job at a company called M&G Polymers in Apple Grove, W.Va..

I was hired at M&G in April 2012. It was a good union job. I was a member of USW Local 644L. I worked there until October of 2017, when the company filed for bankruptcy and shut down. Once again, unfair competition from overseas was a big factor in the loss of more good jobs.

Shortly before closing, M&G joined three other companies in petitioning the U.S. Commerce Department to impose penalties on imports of polyethylene terephthalate (PET) resin from five countries. The American firms said the PET from those countries was being dumped here, which means it was sold at prices below the cost of production.

Trade cases like this require that the petitioning American companies show that the dumping injured their business. I think forcing M&G to close, costing 100 of us our jobs, should qualify.

These job losses have taken a toll on my family. My oldest son is 21. I have a daughter who is 15 and another son who just turned 5. It's difficult to deal with losing a

job when you have people who rely on you.

I've always been the kind of person who lives within my means, so when things get tough, we try to save money any way we can.

My oldest son is in college, so we've make sacrifices to make sure he can have a better life. You always want your children to have a better life than you had, but it's not easy. There are things we'd like to have, things we would like to do as a family. But you have to make do with what you have.

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Right now, I'm unemployed and trying to figure out what to do next. We're looking at getting more assistance through the TAA program. I'm not sure yet what the future holds, but I'm going to keep working hard, keep getting out of bed every morning, and try to find something that will last.

At the M&G plant, there has been some talk of another company coming in, but I'm not sure what it'll be. I hope it's not a situation where they come in and stay for five years and shut down again.

Sometimes I wish I could see the future. My kids will be looking for jobs someday. I hope they can find good jobs that will be around for a long time. But the way bad trade keeps sending these good jobs overseas, I'm not sure.