

NOT MADE IN AMERICA ANYMORE

BY DOUG HILLIARD

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I will always remember my 40th birthday. Not for a special gift or party, but I'll recall it bitterly as the day an employer forced me to change my life, my expectations, my goals.

Indspec, a chemical company with a factory in Petrolia, Pa., laid me off that day, April 13, 2017, along with 100 of my co-workers. Guys with less seniority like me, a pipefitter and general maintenance technician with 13 years of experience, got axed first. But in the end, everyone from Indspec, all 220 of us, were on the street by Sept. 1.

That's because Occidental Chemical Corp. of Dallas, which owns Indspec, sold its Penacolate resins business to a foreign competitor, Sumitomo Chemicals of Japan.

As a result, not one American firm will produce Indspec's main product, resorcinol, a chemical used primarily to aid in bonding rubber to steel cords in tire manufacturing, but also in pharmaceuticals and as an adhesive in wood products. Although the United States consumes nearly a quarter of the resorcinol produced in the world,

Occidental's decision means the nation will have to import all of it. The United States will manufacture none.

It won't be made in America anymore.

This is all so wrong. If Japan and Germany and China can make resorcinol, there's no reason America can't. There's no reason for America to find itself dependent on foreign firms for this essential product.

Also, what this deal means is that Occidental walks away with all the profits while U.S. taxpayers cover the cost of retraining workers. In addition, families are devastated, shops in Petrolia face bankruptcy and the school district is forced to raise taxes and cut programs.

Some of us contacted our local lawmakers and President Donald Trump because he intervened to save some jobs at the Carrier plant in Indiana after its owner, United Technologies, announced it would move that manufacturing to Mexico.

I tweeted to President Trump and explained the situation at Indspec. He never responded. I know he can't save everything. But I wish there were some kind of contact. I wish they would change the rules so companies can't just sell out American workers and American manufacturing.

The sudden revelation that you are out on your ear with no prospects hurts. The company first told the officers for the local union representing the workers, United Steelworkers Local 13300. I served on the executive committee, so I was there. It was a shock. When they told the guys in the plant, there were a few questions, but everyone was pretty silent. People were numb.

Once it set in, a few spoke out. One guy said, "This is our livelihood. You guys have a corporate office to go back to in Texas. But we will be out in the street without a job, and you didn't give anyone a head's up."

The past couple of months have been hard. I had to explain to my eight-year-old daughter that a lot of things we used to spend money on or do, we just can't do anymore, like vacations and buying things she wants at the store.

I was making as much as \$85,000 a year with overtime, and now, with unemployment, it's down to like \$29,000, and I am going to have to pay close to \$600 a month for

health insurance out of that.

For 220 workers to find new jobs here will not be easy. This is a rural area. Petrolia has a population of 200. There are two other chemical plants, but neither is hiring.

Like many of my co-workers, I want to stay. My wife is from here. I was born and raised six miles from Petrolia. I am active in the local hunting club, and I coach Little League baseball in nearby Eau Claire. My parents and brother and sister and my wife's parents are here. The grandparents are close to my daughter and would miss her terribly if we left.

Also, I've been away, and I didn't like it. After high school, I served four years in the Air Force. Then I worked four years at Andrews Air Force Base as a civilian refueling Air Force One and Marine One. I lived on the outskirts of Washington, D.C., and the traffic and crime made me homesick for rural Western Pennsylvania.

I got the chance to return in 2004, and I don't like the prospect of going back to D.C. But I needed a job. So I called my old employer at Andrews. They weren't hiring either.

For a time, I considered attending New Castle School of Trades to get an associate's degree in industrial maintenance or HVAC. Because so-called free trade cost Indspec workers our jobs, we all qualify for federal Trade Adjustment Assistance benefits. That includes limited tuition for retraining and some help with health care costs.

But now I have accepted a job with an oil and gas exploration and development company. It is, however, in no way, shape or form comparable to my job at Indspec. I'll be making \$14 less an hour. I will have a high, \$6,000 deductible on my health insurance. There will be no pension and no company match on the 401(k).

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At Indspec, we had good pension and health benefits. Now, I have to rebuild with a new company and try to do without these benefits. With a much lower wage, a whole new set of obstacles has emerged. How can I afford to pay a high deductible on my health insurance? How can I save for retirement when I'm barely making enough to live? How can I contribute to the 401(k) when I'm making so much less and there's no company match?

Even though I have accepted a new job, it doesn't mean that my problems have been solved and my prayers answered. I've spent many sleepless nights leading up to this point trying to decide whether to accept this offer. I have decided to give it a shot since there's no guarantee that I could find a good job here after getting my associate's degree.

Either way you look at this situation, whether you go to school or get a job, Indspec and the government sold us out and our lives have changed forever.

Petrolia has been in this spot before. The site of America's first oil boom, the town had 5,000 residents in 1876. Four years later, after those initial wells went dry, the population was down to 1,180.

But this is different. This isn't depleted natural resources. This is a lack of commitment to loyal workers and a lack of enforcement of trade laws in the best interest of the American people.



Doug Hilliard at Indspec