

NAFTA SHIPS WHIRLPOOL REFRIGERATOR JOBS FROM ARKANSAS TO MEXICO

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Before Whirlpool announced they were shutting down our refrigerator plant in Fort Smith, Ark., the writing was on the wall. Folks at the top started to leave, and layoffs kicked up again for the first time since the early 1990s when NAFTA was enacted.

We knew something was up, but we couldn't get management to admit what they eventually told us in 2011 – they were closing our plant and sending our jobs to Mexico.

I started working at Whirlpool when I was 18. Like most people, I got the coveted manufacturing job because of family ties. My mother had worked there her whole life and retired with 28 years under her belt. I thought the



same would happen for me even though we would occasionally be laid off for a few months at a time here or there due to temporary downturns in the market.

That temporary aspect changed after NAFTA.

This trade deal killed us. We were told it was going to bring up standards in Mexico. We were told that would help us. Nobody said that corporations were going to be allowed to move their factories there and use cheap Mexican labor.

As soon as it was passed, companies started moving to Mexico, including GE. Next thing we knew, Whirlpool followed. But our plant was reassured time and time again not to worry – we were their most reliable ship in the fleet. We made a high-quality product that wasn't like the products coming out of Mexico. So we thought we were safe.

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When we first shut down, it really hurt our town. Businesses that relied on us buying parts from them closed up shop. Restaurants shuttered. The jobs that some of the workers found weren't paying nearly as well, the benefits weren't as good, and none of them were union facilities.

These are the things our lawmakers didn't think about when they approved NAFTA.

At the time, I felt like the whole world was crashing down on me. To make matters worse, I was diagnosed with cancer the same year we closed. And since I was on medical leave to take care of myself, I didn't qualify for the severance package. That left me struggling to get one of my kids through college. I'm on medical disability still to this day.

The Fort Smith plant had been there since the early 1960s. It was a staple of the community. To just walk away from that – it's sad. It's sad to even drive by and see it. You just see grass growing in the parking lot where there used to be cars. It's difficult knowing you've spent

your life in that building – that's how you supported your family, how you fed your kids.

I know we need trade agreements, whether we want them or not. But they absolutely need to be better for the workers – the people who actually make the products that make the companies money.

They negotiated NAFTA to benefit CEOs. They didn't consider any of us on the factory floors. They cleaned up on it, and we were just left holding the empty bag.

If I could tell the people at the table renegotiating NAFTA one thing, it would be to think before you sign a document that is going to affect the entire U.S. economy. And be honest with us. Label it what it is instead of deceiving us with coded language, like right-to-work laws.

I'm glad the American people are finally waking up. And I hope something good comes out of these renegotiations.

