

BAD TRADE DESTROYS HIGH-PAYING JOBS IN WEST VIRGINIA

BY JAY DILLON

Former President, USW Local 8-0180

Until October of 2017, I worked at Flint Group Pigments in Huntington, W.Va., where we made a high-strength toner for black ink called alkali blue. I was 30 years old when I got the job in 1993. Even back then, it was one of the highest-paying jobs in the county, and there were more than 130 workers in the plant.

Last October, when the doors finally shut on us, there

were 40 of us working there in the factory that first opened in 1912 as Standard Ultramarine. It was sold several times over the years with Flint buying it in 2005.

I liked my job. I liked everyone I worked with, even those from corporate. We had a great relationship with them, which made it even harder when, in June 2017, they told me Flint was shutting our plant down.

Even before the formal announcement, I knew something was going on. People were walking around with almost nothing to do, which normally wouldn't happen. Still, when I got called in for a meeting and they told me that they were closing the plant, it hit me like a sledgehammer.

As it turns out, Flint had gotten into bed with a company overseas in a country that regularly cheats trade laws by subsidizing corporations. With the way tariffs are set up under trade deals like NAFTA, these corporations can bring government-subsidized ink, and any other product, into the United States way cheaper than we can produce it, especially when workers in the foreign country are paid poverty wages and pollution is ignored.

How are we supposed to compete with that?

We can't. And we haven't. American factories just close or move overseas.

The only jobs left in Huntington now are service jobs, like burger flipping and housekeeping. But service jobs pay poorly compared to factory jobs, and they're no good if you have no one to service, and nobody here has any money anymore.

It's like the Wild West here, to be honest. The crime rate shot up over the past 10 years in the area, and now

we're also known as the heroin capital of the world. There's just nowhere for people to turn. And it's getting worse.

Most of us who were left at Flint are in our 50s. Luckily, we got awarded Trade Adjustment Assistance, which provides tuition assistance for retraining to people who lost their jobs because of bad trade. But even if we do that at our age, there are no good jobs here. And if we wanted to move, we wouldn't be able to sell our homes because they're in Huntington. No one is moving here because there aren't any decent jobs left.

The only hope I have for us or for anyone is to bring manufacturing back.

I understand that we want trade deals that make business fair for all workers, especially those in disadvantaged countries, but we got sold out with NAFTA.

We need to take care of what we have here first and make sure American workers can compete. We need to put the "fair" back in fair trade.

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Flint Group Pigments, Huntington W.Va.

