

WERNER LADDER LET DOWN ITS AMERICAN WORKERS

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My wife had been sick for a while before my employer, the Werner ladder company, began dropping hints that it would close shop in Greenville, Pa. This was a big deal to me, obviously, because we needed the health insurance.

I was the United Steelworkers local union president at the factory in Greenville, so I heard the crap from the bosses for a while, stuff like, “Things are going to change around here,” and “We have to be more global.”

This was just after the turn of the century, not quite a decade after the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) took effect in 1994. I had seen other factories pull up their American stakes and skip off to Mexico. So I knew what Werner was going to do.

The company announced in March of 2003 that it would shut down ladder production in the plant located right next to the corporate headquarters.

Werner said it would eliminate 500 family-supporting jobs making aluminum ladders in little Greenville, population 6,400. This was a big deal to Mercer County because Werner was the second-largest industrial employer there. It was a big deal to all of us who worked there too. I was 38 and had 15 years in, but others were older and had more time. It was harder for them.

Werner was the largest manufacturer of ladders and

climbing products in the United States and was making tens of millions of dollars in profits each year – \$180 million in 2003. Just a year before they told us they were closing the Greenville plant, Werner had handed a company officer \$1.6 million to get rid of him.

Werner was paying the company president half a million in salary and doubling that with bonuses, but they were going to throw to the

curb the workers whose labor created the millions in profits from which executives siphoned off those extravagant salaries and perks.

Early on, Werner bosses told us that if we took concessions, they would reconsider the decision to leave.

Lots of guys wanted to believe that. They hoped it was true. The prospect of trying to find new jobs in rural Mercer County was daunting. But I told them there was no point in giving stuff back to the corporation. Nothing would change unless we were willing to work for nothing. Werner was going to take the money and leave anyway. It didn’t matter what we did.

“Although Werner abandoned manufacturing in the United States, other companies made a go of it in their old Greenville facilities.”

I got Werner to agree to make payments to the laid-off workers from accounts that had been our pension funds. We also received Trade Adjustment Assistance, which is federal money that helps workers who lose their jobs because of NAFTA get retrained and pay their bills until they can find new work.

And, of course, Werner was supposed to provide COBRA health insurance for 18 months for the workers who could afford to make the payments. That was

important to me because my wife was sick, so I paid.

Werner closed the Greenville factory within months after it announced it would. Then, a few months later, it began ladder production in leased space in Mexico.

Early the following year, Werner killed more American jobs by closing its wooden ladder plant in Carrollton, Ky. Then it announced plans to construct a brand new ladder factory in Juarez, Mexico. That would become the largest ladder production facility in the world, employing 1,500 people in five buildings.

In the meantime, though, Werner shut a third American factory, the Anniston, Ala., shop, destroying another 530 American jobs.

In 2011, as Werner expanded the Juarez facilities, it padlocked its Merced, Calif., factory and sent another 140 skilled and dedicated American workers packing. The year before, those workers had produced 1.1 million ladders.

Werner began another huge addition to its Juarez campus in 2015. It included a warehouse, new offices, a cafeteria and tool shops. The plant manager said the main reasons Werner was constructing in Juarez were the great population, educated work force and training facilities.

That’s all a bunch of bull. A great population, educated work force and training facilities are all available in the United States – in Greenville and Anniston and Carrollton and Merced.

The main reason Werner dumped American workers and keeps hiring in Mexico is the dirt-cheap wages there. This is a place where the minimum wage is \$4. That’s for a day, not an hour. NAFTA didn’t benefit Mexican workers either. They earn less now than they did before it was enacted. And the less Werner pays its workers, the more the top dogs get.

A few months after Werner laid me off, my wife needed surgery. But when the physician called the health insurer, they said we weren’t covered. I said something must be wrong because I had been paying the COBRA premiums to Werner every month, and Werner had cashed the checks.

I went to Werner, and they told me there was no insurance. When Werner operated in Greenville, they were self-insured, which means they put money aside to pay the medical claims, and Blue Cross/Blue Shield administered the plan, basically doing the paperwork.

Werner told me the company didn’t exist anymore, so there was nothing they could do. They gave me my money back – after I insisted – but my wife and I didn’t have health insurance.

The first insurance company I applied to turned me down. This was years before Obamacare stopped insurers from rejecting applicants with pre-existing conditions, so I was lucky to find one that would cover us.

Werner called me back from time to time to work in the aluminum extrusion part of the factory, which it didn’t close until 2005. In the meantime, I expanded a small business that I had operated on the side doing lawncare, landscaping and installing outdoor Christmas lighting.

Although Werner abandoned manufacturing in the United States, other companies made a go of it in their old Greenville facilities. ILSCO extrudes aluminum there, Clifton set up its precision tube-cutting shop, and Dad’s Dog Food operates a distribution center out of part of the building.

I was irritated when it happened, when Werner shut the place down, but I feel like I am better off now. I have my own business. I control my life. They don’t. Why work for someone when you don’t know if you are going to have a job the next day?

My wife died last year. It was a long battle with cancer, back and forth. She had surgery, and she was good, then it came back. It was hard. Werner made it worse.



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