



Lisa Crissman

BAD TRADE KILLS JOB SECURITY

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I am about to be snake-bitten again.

It first happened in 2012 when Flabeg closed down its Brackenridge, Pa., auto mirror plant and ditched me and 100 other workers.

Now it's happening again. My new employer, Pittsburgh Glass Works (PGW), announced in October that it would shutter its East Deer, Pa., auto windshield factory in June and send half of our work to a factory in Mexico.

This is what bad trade does to American factories, American workers, American communities.

I worked for Flabeg for 16 years. I can tell you the exact date when I started, Feb.

12, 1996. That was a good job, but it vanished when they closed in June of 2012. We made 14 million auto mirrors a year then, 70 percent of the domestic market.

Not long after that, the hydro-electric plant where my husband worked was sold, and the new owner laid off all the guys with the most seniority, including my husband.

So both of us were out in the cold. My daughter, who was only 15, was scared we would lose our home, that the bank would foreclose on us.

I am always fearful about something, so I had some concerns too. But we were okay because I was getting extended unemployment benefits through the federal Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) program. The Flabeg workers qualified for it because the company moved our work to Brazil and China. And Flabeg flat out told the federal government it moved because it could get low-cost labor there. Flabeg said cheap mirrors imported from Asia forced it to offshore

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what had been our work.

So Flabeg dumped 100 dedicated and skilled American workers, moved production overseas, exploits workers there, then ships the mirrors back to the United States to be installed on cars here. It's not right.

With the help of TAA, I went to school to become a medical biller and coder. I graduated and was looking for a job in that when I saw this position at PGW advertised. I applied and got it. I was a member of the United Steelworkers union again, just like I was at Flabeg.

What that means is decent pay and benefits. And when a company like PGW skips town, it means the union bargains for severance benefits. I am afraid I won't get any this time, though, because I have only three years at PGW.

The Steelworkers have applied for TAA for the 200 workers at PGW in East Deer. I think we should get it since the company is moving so much of our work to Mexico. Frankly, that's not too surprising because PGW is owned by Mexico's largest glass maker, Vitro S.A.B. de C.V. The Mexican company bought PGW in March of 2017, and little over a year later, they're shutting our factory down and taking our work.

There are several PGW plants across the United States, and Vitro says it plans to transfer some of our work to factories in Evansville, Ind., and Berea, Ky.

But Vitro admitted that half of the work we do now in East Deer will go to Mexico. It's just like my experience with Flabeg, which closed my plant to move production to low-wage countries.

Vitro said the East Deer plant is too old to keep up with industry demands. Well, why doesn't Vitro invest in

upgrading it? Why didn't the previous owner, LKQ?

It is a shame too. The workers will all get hurt. And the little town of East Deer will get hurt. East Deer officials already announced they won't repair tennis and hockey courts in Memorial Park this year because they're afraid the town won't receive sufficient tax revenue. The factory is the largest employer and largest taxpayer. When it closes, all those jobs and all that tax money will vanish.

In addition, a community treasure will be lost. That two-story factory along the Allegheny River was where the giant Pittsburgh Plate Glass (PPG) first operated in 1883. It was Works No. 1.

It produced glass for the military during World War II. It employed more than 4,000 during the 1950s. In the 1960s, it began fabricating windshields, and by the 1990s, the number of workers dropped to less than a tenth of what it had been 40 years earlier.

Once the Mexican company, Vitro, abandons the building, it will be just another hulking factory zombie, joining too many others in Western Pennsylvania, including the Flabeg plant in Brackenridge. Standing but lacking the heart of production.

Our government did this with bad trade. They ran us into the ground. They need to fix that. And they need to spend some money to upgrade infrastructure, so American factories get contracts and American workers get jobs.

I think, though, when PGW closes, I will try to get a job in what I was trained to do after Flabeg shut down, medical biller and coder. I am 52 and have been through enough that I have learned my lesson. No job is secure. Nothing is set in stone. Nothing is safe.