

# BAD TRADE **DEVASTATED** AMERICAN PAPER INDUSTRY

BY LINDA DEANE

Member, USW Local 4-900, Maine Council Chair, USW Women of Steel

**T**he paper industry isn't just a job for me. It's part of my family's legacy. My father worked at a paper mill. Following in his footsteps, I've worked at paper mills my whole life, first at an International Paper mill and then, for the past 29 years, for the paper mill in Rumford, Maine.

Today, my plant is run by Catalyst Paper, but over the years it has had several different owners, including Boise Cascade, Mead and Verso.

To us in this region, paper has always meant jobs. It was the basis for our entire economy at one time.

Through those years, no matter who ran our plant, we always took pride in the fact that we – especially as USW members – made some of the best paper products on the planet.

It's sad to say that over the past 20 or 30 years, mostly because of the problem of unfair trade, our industry and our communities have been struggling to survive. It doesn't matter how good our products are – it's really hard to compete when the playing field is so out of whack.

Since NAFTA started in 1994, so much has changed in

my town of Livermore Falls, Maine.

What was once a thriving industrial town is now not that much more than a bedroom community for people who work in bigger cities like Lewiston and Portland. In the morning, you'll see a line of cars leaving town and, at night, you'll see a line of cars coming back.

Over the years, thanks to NAFTA and other bad trade deals coming out of Washington, we've seen paper mills in Maine and around the country closing down.

At my plant, we used to have 12 machines running. Now, we're running four.

Fewer machines running means fewer people working, of course. When I first started working at the plant, there were more than 1,000 people. In fact, at one time there were 1,200 people working there. Now we have less than half that many.

In 1906, there were more than 100 pulp and paper mills in Maine; today there are six.

And it hasn't just been the paper industry that's been hurting. Since NAFTA went into effect, other industries around here have been hurt, too.

At one time, we had a lot of shoe factories in this area. They were the first to go. When they started closing, the companies made the workers train the people in Mexico who were going to take their place. Imagine that.

Then, after the shoe shops, it was the textile mills. Now, it seems to be the paper industry that's hurting.

When NAFTA first took effect, I noticed the companies started shutting down paper machines in the mills. Then, they started selling the machines for parts.

That's when I realized how bad it was – that meant they were never coming back. We could see what was happening while it was happening, but we couldn't do anything to stop it.

The factories – they are just falling like dominoes, and a lot of the reason is trade deals that give other countries the upper hand over us, and it just isn't right.

Then, the people who lose their jobs end up working for much less. That means people have less money to spend. Then local businesses end up closing because they're making less money, too.

This area used to be booming – we had malls and shops, all kinds of main street businesses. There's just not much here anymore. All the mom and pop stores are gone. They just can't make it.

A lot of the people who used to work in the mills have had to find jobs at other places. But unless you are lucky

“**In 1906, there were more than 100 pulp and paper mills in Maine; today there are six.**”

to work in the medical field or Bath Iron Works, which involves a 100-mile round trip commute, you're never going to make the same wages you made at the paper mill.

You're lucky if you can find a \$15-an-hour job around here these days. Most people end up going to work at fast-food restaurants, McDonald's, Dunkin' Donuts, or someplace like that. Those places don't pay much more than minimum wage. They don't have good benefits like a union job does.

The truth is, unless we can really change the way our trade laws work, it's just going to end up being more of the same – here and in other towns like this around the country.

I hope when they finally renegotiate NAFTA, they think about places like this and the effect that trade can have on one little town. Take this town and multiply it by hundreds – there are hundreds of other places out there like this that are hurting, too, thanks to bad trade.

Young people today, they're afraid to go into the paper trade. They think that it's a dying industry. But it doesn't have to be.

Whenever I go shopping, I always look for “Made in America” on the label. When I talk to my family and friends, I tell them to buy American-made products, especially paper.

We can turn places like this around, but it's going to take real trade deals that protect workers, not the kind like NAFTA that keep sending our jobs overseas.



Linda Deane