

POSTCARDS FROM OHIO

Wage-earners dancing for survival

By Sandy Woodthorpe | June 27, 2004

This isn't where I thought I'd be at age 47: Laid off, living in Ohio, and working round the clock for little pay. I'm a writer/editor with 15 years experience who lost my job as a technical writer when my company down-sized. In better times, my qualifications could land a \$45,000 to \$60,000 a year job. Instead I'm making \$7.50 per hour. My day begins at 6 a.m. and ends after 10 p.m. I go to bed exhausted and wake feeling the same. By the time I arrive at my seasonal garden center job, I've put in several hours already -- networking by e-mail, writing freelance assignments, and applying to online job postings.

When I return home after 6 p.m., I fix a hasty meal and toss laundry into the washer. By 7 p.m. I'm stationed at the computer chasing dollars again. Or, I'm rushing to a business mixer or volunteering for a nonprofit. (Volunteering expands my sphere of contacts while I'm doing the world some good.) Last year my total earnings barely topped \$11,000. My husband brought in about the same. A little creative financing paid off our mortgage. But for that, we'd have lost the house by now. When I was laid off in 2002, I never expected to be out of work this long.

Catastrophe is looming in the Buckeye State. More than 170,000 manufacturing jobs erased. More than 45,000 jobs outsourced. Tax dollars vaporized. Columbus is losing more jobs this year than it did last year. Some economists tell us we're in recovery. But tell that to the 1,300 workers of the Timken Company in Canton who will be laid off when the ball bearing manufacturer closes three local plants. Wasn't it just last spring that President Bush visited Timken's research facilities to promote his tax cuts? That's one way to cut taxes -- eliminate people's jobs. But is this any way to run an economy?

As unemployment drags on, I try to think optimistically. This can't go on forever. But every evening, my husband, a card-carrying union man, watches Lou Dobbs and curses the Republicans, NAFTA, greedy CEOs -- anything he believes is sucking the life from his family's commercial excavation business. In this climate, everybody hires cheap, nonunion labor. Payroll and overhead devour what would have been his own salary, and he refuses to take a low-wage job as I've done. We don't talk much anymore.

My friends tell similar stories. Bankruptcy looms while Laura's soon-to-be laid off husband escapes into Internet war games. She has edited technical journals. Now she works part-time in a junk store for \$8.50 per hour. My former co-worker, Barbara, a 56-year-old marketing consultant, draws on

savings while she builds her business. Her healthcare insurer hiked her monthly premium \$200 recently. How will she afford it?

None of us plunged enthusiastically into self-employment. We landed here when we were cast out of good jobs that provided a middle-class lifestyle. Truth is, Ohio never came back from the crippling effects of the 1970 and 1980 recessions. For a look at the havoc wreaked by those recessions, take a look at Warren, Youngstown, Mansfield, Ashtabula -- former manufacturing towns that are mere skeletons of what they were before free trade and union busting melted factory flesh and muscle. What people fail to realize is that white collar jobs, like ours, were connected to Ohio's manufacturing backbone. Lose industry and everything around it collapses.

On May 30, The Cleveland Plain Dealer's headline trumpeted: "Bush Leads Kerry in Ohio." By 6 percentage points. I'm dumbfounded! I know Republicans and Democrats here in Cleveland, and not one is backing Bush.

Recently, a Cleveland media consortium convened a roundtable on local success stories. They discussed encouraging a new manufacturing era, and all agreed that Cleveland's future must include "making stuff." Finally, somebody's talking sense. But unless the race to the bottom is slowed by legal restrictions, creative tax incentives, and sensible agreements on environmental and labor issues, the cascade of losses will continue. The only "stuff" Ohio will be making is work for analysts -- to explain what went wrong.

Sandy Woodthorpe is a writer in Fairport Harbor, Ohio. She is working on a book about her underemployment experience, "The Survival Dance."