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It's outrageous.

Another multinational company has slammed its doors on American workers.

Electrolux, a multibillion dollar Swedish firm that is the world's largest maker of power appliances, said last week that it will close its Greenville refrigerator plant and relocate to Mexico. Twenty-seven hundred people will lose their jobs, including 2,500 members of UAW Locals 137 and 1554.

Economist Evert Van Der Heide of Calvin College in Grand Rapids estimates that another 3,000 local workers will be laid off due to ripple effects from the Electrolux plant closing. All told, it will cost the region \$883 million in lost wages.

It didn't have to be this way.

The Greenville plant is a profitable operation, and Electrolux is a profitable company. During intensive talks on how to save these jobs, the company never once claimed this plant -- or the corporation as a whole -- was losing money. They just said they aren't making as much money as they need to suit their corporate strategy.

As a union, we're not crazy about reopening contracts for companies that are making money -- but we're not crazy, either. With the jobs of 2,500 of our members on the line, we got busy. Don Oetman, director of UAW Region 1D, led our union's effort to save jobs at Electrolux. Michigan Gov. Jennifer Granholm gave us her full support, and we also received tremendous help from local officials.

Together we made a comprehensive offer to Electrolux. Our members were willing to make contract changes that would save Electrolux \$31.6 million a year. The state of Michigan offered incentives and tax credits worth \$120 million over 20 years. And the city of Greenville came forward with proposal for new land and a new building, worth \$30 million. Electrolux said no.

They wanted more.

The UAW talked with the company late into the night Thursday. We were willing to continue talking as long as necessary to find some way to keep the plant open. But Electrolux wasn't interested. They demanded \$81 million on the table right away, or no deal.

In the end, the company refused to budge. That's why the plant is closing. It's a cold-blooded corporate decision, not a failure to cooperate on the part of our members or state or local officials.

Electrolux's move to Mexico is only the latest result of deeply flawed trade policies that have resulted in more than 30,000 manufacturing jobs lost in the Grand Rapids area since 2000. In fact, since the North American Free Trade Agreement (**NAFTA**) took effect in 1994, more than 700,000 U.S. jobs have disappeared, as scores of employers move to take advantage of low wages and a lax regulatory environment south of the border.

To help get **NAFTA** passed, its supporters claimed that the free movement of capital across national borders would help ease poverty and spur development in Mexico. That hasn't happened. In fact, real wages have been falling in Mexico, at the rate of 0.2 percent per year. But wait a second: If **NAFTA** has encouraged companies to shift jobs to Mexico, that increases the demand for Mexican labor. So shouldn't the free market be pushing Mexican wages up, not down?

There's the rub. **NAFTA** and other similar trade agreements have little to do with either free trade or free markets. They're about managed trade and managed markets -- managed on behalf of multinational capital.

The Mexican government, for example, actively works to suppress independent trade unions, as a strategy to keep wages down in order to attract foreign investment.

And the provisions of **NAFTA**, as Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz has pointed out, give multinationals the right to sue in special, secretive tribunals to overturn democratically-passed environmental, safety and health laws and regulations.

In its 10 years of its existence, **NAFTA** has impoverished workers, weakened our democracy, and compromised vital regulations that protect our health and well-being.

President George W. Bush's response to this disaster is: Let's have more of the same! He has proposed a new Central American Free Trade Agreement, and is also pushing a Free Trade Area of the Americas that would extend **NAFTA**-like rules to the entire Western Hemisphere.

If these trade deals are passed, the results are sadly predictable. We'll see more Greenvilles. More layoffs. More companies like Electrolux using low wages in Mexico to demand unworkable concessions from American workers.

We'll also see less environmental and public health protection. Less ability to protect ourselves from hazards like mad cow disease, SARS or the terrible blight now attacking Michigan trees -- that originates in untreated wood on shipping crates from China.

Had enough? We certainly have. That's why our union will continue our fight to preserve American jobs -- and for fair trade policies that give workers in all countries a chance to benefit from international commerce.

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