

Police escort workers out of closed plant in Central Pennsylvania

By Samuel Davidson
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Nearly 1,000 workers were abruptly thrown out of their jobs last Monday afternoon at a cabinetmaking plant in the small central Pennsylvania town of Kreamer, about 60 miles north of the state capital of Harrisburg. Pennsylvania State Police, county sheriff deputies and nearby Middleburg Borough police who had been called to the plant stood by as shocked employees walked to their cars after being told the plant was permanently closing and that they were all out of jobs.

The company, Wood-Mode Inc., waited until 2:45 in the afternoon to inform workers that they were closing their doors. In a matter of moments, workers, including Tim and Penny Benner, lost their livelihoods. “I don’t know what we’re going to do,” Tim told the *Daily Item*.

In addition to jobs, workers also lost their health insurance. Most workers, who are in their 40s, 50s and 60s, are too young to qualify for the federal Medicare program but have little prospects of finding comparable employment with medical benefits in the area.

Tammy Heeter, 59, who was employed at Wood-Mode for nearly 20 years, told the *Daily Item*: “I expected to retire here, now I’m thinking about paying bills and lack of insurance.”

Workers will shortly receive letters telling them how they can buy health insurance under the government COBRA program, but it will likely cost over \$1,200 a month for a family—an impossibly high amount for most workers.

On Wednesday, workers picked up their last full paycheck. They had not even been given the mandatory 60-day notice required by law before a plant closing. Company and government officials justified this by claiming advanced notice would have alerted creditors and potential buyers of the factory of its financial state.

The 77-year-old business employed 938 workers, many of whom have worked at the factory for 20, 30 and more years. The company made cabinets for kitchens and baths and was by far the largest employer in the county.

In a statement, Wood-Mode blamed the closure on the company’s prime lender being “unwilling to provide normal funding” and after a deal to sell the company fell through.

Workers at the plant told local media that they were blind-sided by the announcement but knew the factory was having troubles. Workers reported that they earn about \$40,000 a year, including overtime, making the job one of the best paying in the area.

Located in rural Pennsylvania, Snyder County has a population of 40,570 according to the US Census Bureau, and a median household income of \$54,182. The official unemployment rate of 3.7 percent and poverty rate of 11.2 percent is about average for the state as a whole. However, data on the school district paints a bleaker picture with nearly half of all children growing up in households that earn less than 185 percent of the official poverty rate.

The plant closure will be a major blow to the area. The factory accounts for five percent of all jobs in the county and about half of all manufacturing jobs.

Neither Democrats nor Republicans have anything to offer the one thousand workers who are losing their jobs and health care. Today President Trump, who claims the US economy is booming, is scheduled to hold a campaign rally at the nearby Williamsport airport. Trump narrowly won the popular vote in Pennsylvania in 2016 and the state is anticipated to be another major battleground in 2020. So far, the president who postures as a champion of dispossessed workers—while blaming unemployment and low wages

on immigrants and “unfair trade” with China and Mexico—has said nothing about the closure of the Wood-Mode plant.

The Democratic Party is no less contemptuous of workers. Democratic Governor Tom Wolf—a multi-millionaire former owner of the Wolf Organization, a kitchen cabinet and building supply company—is deploying the state’s Rapid Response Team to meet with the company about its future. Meanwhile, laid off workers are being told to sign up for unemployment benefits, roughly \$400 a week, for 26 weeks and to start looking for largely nonexistent jobs.

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