U.S. Steel Shutdown Comes As A Shock

Daniel Nolan

HAMILTON — Steelworkers are expressing shock that U.S. Steel is temporarily shutting down its local operations because of the sinking economy and laying off the bulk of its workforce.

Workers said Tuesday night they believed the firm might lay off more workers on top of the 684 laid off since last year, but they didn't foresee an idling of the landmark plant, which U.S. Steel bought when it took over Stelco in 2007, nor the laying off of a further 720 workers.

"We were hoping we were going to weather the storm with two plants idle in the States," said Barry Cavanagh, 50, who was heading into work as a Cold Mill worker Tuesday afternoon.

"We were told we were going to pick up more tonnage, but we didn't know we were going to have the rug pulled out from under our feet."

Jean Pierre Plourde, 52, a millwright, said the mood in the plant had "been doom and gloom for a long time, but U.S. Steel was indicating to workers they still needed products for their customers."

"We were being told we were running good stuff, the product is good and we were getting jobs that were being done in the States, their orders," said Plourde, who has worked at the steel plant for 32 years.

While some believe this will put a big dent in Steeltown, none believe it's the end.

"I doubt it, but it's just going to take a while for us to come back," said Tim Blackwood as he headed into work.

Neil Everson, Hamilton's director of economic development and real estate, noted "(U.S. Steel) is not shutting down and locking its gates.

"It says it is 'temporarily idling.' I don't think fearmongering is what we need in this community right now."

Workers learned the terrible news a few different ways.

Some workers inside the plant called their buddies who were coming in to work. Others heard through supervisors, the union and through the media.

Some didn't get the news until they showed up to work and were met by reporters and TV crews.

Ken Budikoser, 41, was slightly stunned when given the news by reporters.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," said the married father of two. "I guess I will live on EI for awhile, but then what?"

At the steelworkers union office, union president Rolf Gerstenberger was delivered the news by phone at 2:30 p.m.

"I really think it's outrageous they're doing this," said Gerstenberger. "No one is telling us laying off workers is going to make (the recession) better."

(Hamilton Spectator)

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