Colt Shuts Plant, Workers Talk To CT Lawmakers

Susan Haigh, Associated Press

HARTFORD, Conn. (AP) — The president of one of the nation's oldest gun manufacturers closed down his Connecticut factory Thursday morning and bused 400 of his workers to the state Capitol so they could personally urge lawmakers not to pass gun control legislation that they say could risk their livelihoods.

Dennis Veilleux, president of the Hartford-based Colt's Manufacturing Co., said even though he has spoken with legislators and Gov. Dannel P. Malloy's staff about his trepidations several times, he believes they don't truly understand the financial ramifications of the legislation being proposed in the wake of the deadly Dec. 14 massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown.

State officials have listened to the concerns he and other Connecticut gun company officials have voiced, "but I would say it's more pacifying us," Veilleux said. That's why he decided to rent 10 buses and bring over his first shift workers, plus some second- and third-shift ones, and some suppliers.

"These are the faces of the jobs at Colt," Veilleux said in an interview with The Associated Press while riding on a bus back to the factory. "Each of these people represents other people in the state. They represent the community and, in a lot of cases, they're the breadwinners of their families. And more and more, manufacturing jobs are hard to come by."

Colt has been operating in Connecticut for the past 175 years.

The Colt workers packed the Legislative Office Building, many holding signs that read "Save Our Jobs," as legislative leaders continued to meet behind closed doors, trying to craft a bipartisan response to the school massacre. They're scheduled to meet again on Friday.

Meanwhile, members of the General Assembly's Public Safety and Security Committee heard testimony on numerous gun control bills, including a new gun offender registry, an expanded assault weapons ban, ammunition restrictions and a ban on bulk purchases of handguns.

Ron Pinciaro, executive director of Connecticut Against Gun Violence, defended the breadth of legislation.

"We feel that because of the enormity of the situation that happened on Dec. 14, that if we just put some Band-Aids on things, it's really not going to be enough," Pinciaro said. Twenty first-graders and six educators were killed at Sandy Hook. The shooter had also killed his mother before eventually committing suicide.

Eric Koenigs, a manufacturing engineer at Colt for the past nine years, has worked

in the industry for 18 years. Even though Veilleux has not threatened to move Colt out of Connecticut, Koenigs said he is extremely concerned about the fate of his job if, for example, the state's current assault weapons ban is expanded.

"I never thought it would happen here," said Koenigs.

Connecticut is known as the "Arsenal of the Nation," a reputation first gained in the American Revolution. In the early 19th century, inventors Eli Whitney and Simeon North began making firearms in Connecticut with interchangeable parts, which is often recognized as the beginning of modern mass production.

Democratic members of a legislative subcommittee charged with reviewing gun laws recently recommended exempting Connecticut gun manufacturers from a proposed law expanding the definition of an assault weapon. Even though the weapons could not be purchased in the state, they could still be manufactured here.

Veilleux contends his company would still suffer, even though it currently doesn't sell many rifles in Connecticut.

"If we ban this product in the state where we make it, our customers will take their business to another brand," he said. "When we start to get erosion of our customers, we lose our market share."

There are numerous postings on Colt's Facebook page from gun advocates urging the company to move out of Connecticut, which they claim does not respect the constitutional right to bear arms. There also are postings from people urging Colt not to supply law enforcement with guns in New York, a state that recently enacted strong gun control initiatives.

Veilleux said gun customers are well-connected and know what is happening in different states in terms of gun control efforts.

"Our customers don't want to support the state of New York. So our customers aren't going to want to support the state of Connecticut," he said. "And our association is so strong with the state of Connecticut, that it's inevitable that it's going to begin to erode."

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