

IN MY OPINION

By Morton Bahr
CWA President

Outsourcing the American Dream



Since the Bush administration thinks corporate offshoring is “a good thing,” perhaps it’s not surprising that our government doesn’t track the numbers of American jobs that are shifted overseas each year.

Various research groups attempt to estimate the job loss based on news reports and corporate announcements, but since executives are sensitive to public reaction, it’s clear that many jobs fly away under the radar.

According to a recent study by Cornell and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, at least 400,000 well-paying jobs went to Asia and Latin America in 2004 — and that’s double the offshoring rate from three years ago, when the same researchers did a similar study.

But what really leaps off the pages of their report is the finding that union jobs are shipped offshore at a much higher rate than other jobs — and what’s more, the proportion of union jobs leaving the U.S. has grown substantially.

“More than half of the jobs leaving the U.S. for Mexico and 34 percent of the jobs leaving the U.S. for China are union jobs, while overall, 39 percent of all jobs leaving the U.S. are union,” said the authors, who noted that these figures are about double the union job shift found in 2001.

While this is largely due to the fact that unionized jobs are higher paying — and the chase for cheap labor drives offshoring — “it also reflects the current labor relations environment,” the report states.

Citing an earlier study on plant closings by one of the co-authors, Cornell’s Kate Bronfenbrenner, the report notes that “...U.S. employers are feeling increasingly emboldened to use the threat of plant closings, or actual plant closings, to keep unions out where they do not exist and get rid of them where they do. In some cases, companies used the threat of an intended production shift to extract concessions from their unionized workers.”

IUE-CWA members at General Electric and other employers and CWAers at AT&T and Lucent for years have dealt with job loss and job extortion because of offshoring in manufacturing. In recent years, we’ve seen the threat grow in white collar occupations — high tech, telecom networking, call centers, state services, health care diagnostics, publishing, entertainment, even journalism.

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Even airline flight attendants, passenger agents and pilots are threatened by a form of offshoring — incursions by foreign airlines into domestic air routes. While foreign carriers currently are prohibited from point-to-point flights in the U.S., British Virgin Atlantic Airways and other carriers are lobbying hard to change that.

One U.S. lawmaker already has suggested that foreign airlines might be allowed to fly between cities that are “under-served.” With growing numbers of major U.S. airlines in bankruptcy and in danger of going under, it’s not hard to envision an upheaval in this industry that would open the door to foreign carriers moving in.

Whether it’s the plight of the airlines, our shrinking manufacturing base, the flight of high tech “jobs of the future,” or a half-trillion-dollar annual trade deficit with the rest of the world, the Bush administration is happy to let “free market forces” sort everything out.

One well-known observer had this to say recently about the corporate/White House attitude about markets and global trade:

“Getting many CEOs and politicians to understand (that outsourcing threatens our economy, our jobs, and our way of life) is going to be tough because they simply don’t believe that anything or anyone should interfere with their almost ecclesiastical views of the political economy.”

Putting faith in “the great Market god... these business leaders act wholly in their self-interest, freed by the Market of concern for their employees, their communities and broad obligations to society. And many — too many — of our elected officials in both parties choose not to annoy the Market, for Corporate America might be annoyed as well, and then the vast campaign funding that flows from big business might slow to a trickle or be directed to candidates who profess their unblinking faith in the Market.”

You might think that is a quote from someone like AFL-CIO President John Sweeney. No, they’re the words of a self-described “lifelong Republican” and dyed in the wool capitalist — CNN financial commentator and news host Lou Dobbs from his book, “Exporting America: Why Corporate Greed is Shipping American Jobs Overseas.”

Dobbs comments that, “Either Corporate America must find a conscience and face the reality that life in this country is about far more than competitiveness and productivity, or all of us who care about this country and one another must demand that our political leaders represent the real interests of this country.”

Sweeney couldn’t have said it better, nor could I.

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