

SPECIAL REPORT
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The Radicalization of Mike Emmons

Until he was laid off by a company moving jobs offshore, Mike Emmons rarely voted. Now the computer programmer is considering a run for Congress.

BY BEN WORTHEN

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Longwood, Fla.—Mike Emmons' home office doesn't look like much: just a desk, some shelves littered with books, a couple of computers, a server, a printer and some other gadgets. But for the past 11 months, it's been headquarters for a ferocious one-man campaign against the practice of offshore outsourcing and supplanting American workers with foreigners on temporary work visas. Emmons lost his programming job last winter when his entire IT department at Siemens Information Communication Networks (ICN) was outsourced to an Indian company. Until last year, the University of Florida graduate rarely voted; now he plans to run for Congress ("I'll probably lose," he concedes). During the past year, Emmons has made himself an expert on labor policy. He has harassed corporate executives, gotten himself on television and is one of the main reasons that legislation reforming the L-1 visa was introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives in May.

"They took my job; they took my livelihood," he says, with a crisp cadence that barely hides his anger. "You don't do something like this to someone and expect them to turn a blind eye."

The radicalization of Mike Emmons provides a personal window on the growing backlash against the offshoring of IT jobs and importing of nonimmigrant temporary workers on H-1B or L-1 visas. (Read more about this trend in "[Backlash](#)".) This story could even be considered a wake-up call: CIOs beware; you might have a Mike Emmons on your staff.

Fighting Back

At age 41, Emmons is the type of programmer that companies used to dream about. Tireless and dedicated, he taught himself Cobol, 4GL, database design and Web programming as the times demanded. In January 1997 he started working as a contractor for Siemens Business Communication Systems in California, earning \$90,000 a year. His office merged with the Lake Mary, Fla., division in 2000, forming Siemens ICN, in June, and Emmons and his family moved back to the state where he had grown up.

On April 19, 2002, Siemens ICN told employees it was going to outsource its IT department and that they would all be laid off once the transition was complete. While the news was bad, none of the 20 employees was devastated; the layoffs wouldn't

take place for a few months, and they figured that some of them would stick around as consultants. But in the last week of June, Siemens announced it had selected Tata Consulting Services, and by July 1 the office was filled with consultants—all from India—who would eventually take the Siemens employees' jobs. The American workers were offered severance packages as high as \$13,000 if they would train the Indians to do their jobs. (Siemens spokesman Bud Grebey says that only a handful of the company's 70,000 U.S. employees have been affected. "Our customers are big telecommunications companies, and telecom has been hit hard," he says. "We need to do things to make the business more efficient.")



Mike Emmons, who lost his job to programmers in India, has been waging a campaign from his Florida home to protect other IT workers from a similar fate.

Despite feeling betrayed, Emmons and the other laid-off workers did what was asked of them. The money was too good to pass up, especially when the alternative was immediate unemployment. Meanwhile, training the replacement workers proved challenging. According to Emmons and other ex-Siemens employees, some of the Tata consultants had only two weeks of preparation before they arrived. This raised a red flag for Pat Fluno, a now ex-senior systems analyst who started inquiring about the visa status of the replacement workers.

On Aug. 15, Fluno sent a letter to her U.S. representative, John Mica, asking him to investigate a situation she thought was illegal. "An L-1B visa is for a specialist knowledge worker who has in-depth knowledge of the company's products, policies and procedures," she wrote. "It is not meant for generic skill sets, such as computer programming, but for skills specific to the sponsoring company. If these people were brought over on L-1B visas, it is an attempt to avoid the strict [Department of Labor] laws regarding displacement of Americans."

No Americans Need Apply

Daniel Soong, who lost his programming job to Indian offshore companies, is willing to relocate to India. But Indian officials have told him they don't hire Americans.

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Fluno showed Emmons this letter. "That's when it hit me," he says. "Something has got to be done. I said to myself, I can fight this and get caught and lose 12 weeks pay, or I can get paid for 12 weeks and never work again."

Fluno was laid off 15 days later. For Emmons, whose termination date was Dec. 20, the battle was just beginning. He called and e-mailed Mica's office almost daily and distributed fliers about the alleged visa abuse throughout his neighborhood. In late September, he received a phone call from Mica in which the representative assured Emmons he would try to help and that he would make inquiries with the INS, now known as the Bureau of Citizen and Immigration Services. On Oct. 11, Mica sent a letter outlining the situation at Siemens to Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao. Emmons put a sign supporting Mica in his front yard and voted for him in the November election.

Then, Emmons says, nothing happened. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, a Washington, D.C., campaign finance watchdog

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organization, Mica received four donations totaling \$3,999 from Siemens between the time Emmons first contacted him in August and the November election. Emmons, who was still training the replacement workers at Siemens, was livid when he learned this. By the time he resigned to take another position on Nov. 24, just weeks before his termination date, he concluded that he had to fight not just the corporations that were replacing American workers but also the government.

Two days after he quit, Emmons drove to Mica's house and hand-delivered a letter to the representative's wife in which he accused Mica of sacrificing American jobs for corporate donations. He also contacted congressional aides, and when none of this produced any legislation, he went to the media. In mid-February, Orlando television Channel 6 ran a series on Florida workers who had lost their jobs to offshoring. The channel interviewed Mica and then revealed his voting record, which has consistently supported raising visa caps and loosening visa restrictions.

Gary Burns, legislative director for Mica, says the Florida congressman has done plenty for laid-off workers: In addition to bringing the Siemens case to the attention of the INS, Mica has called for a Department of Justice study on the issue and introduced legislation to prohibit bringing in offshore workers on L-1 visas. (For more, read ["The Visa War"](#).)



When Mike Emmons lost his job at Siemens, the devoted family man (pictured above with his two children) knew he had to get another full-time position with health benefits.

A Guerrilla Campaign

Emmons has been equally aggressive in pursuing his former employer. While he maintains that he has nothing against either Siemens or the Indian workers who took his and his colleagues' jobs, he says, "I learned that I have to use this situation to expose what's happening to Americans." At 5:30 in the morning on Jan. 14, 2003, he began what he calls his "e-mail bombing campaign." Knowing the Siemens e-mail administrators wouldn't be at work, he sent a message describing what had happened to him and his fellow employees to thousands of Siemens employees, including the executives in Florida and at Siemens AG's headquarters in Germany. (He had written a program to collect their e-mail addresses from the Internet and other documents.) In the e-mail campaign, he named Siemens' executives and accused them of selling out their company's workers. Emmons says that the 1,000 workers in the Lake Mary Siemens plant openly cheered when they read it. It is the moment in his campaign that he is most proud of.

The Florida native considers himself lucky. He got a job as a database manager at the district attorney's office. At \$55,000 a year, it pays him 40 percent less than he made at Siemens. (H-1B workers at Siemens ICN make as little as \$28,000, according to immigration documents.) But Emmons' new job does come with health insurance, which he needs since his 7-year-old daughter, who has spina bifida, has already undergone eight operations and will likely need more. Two of Emmons' friends haven't been so lucky. One who worked at Siemens for 23 years is now doing landscaping and odd jobs. A 15-year veteran is trying to make a living as a woodworker.

They can't just give all our jobs away and expect this country to survive.

—MIKE EMMONS,
COMPUTER PROGRAMMER

Emmons calls his political campaign against offshoring a war. "They can't just give all these jobs away and expect this country to survive," he says. "What's happening now is going to haunt this country for years to come."



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Are displaced workers like Emmons right to take up political campaigns against offshoring?

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