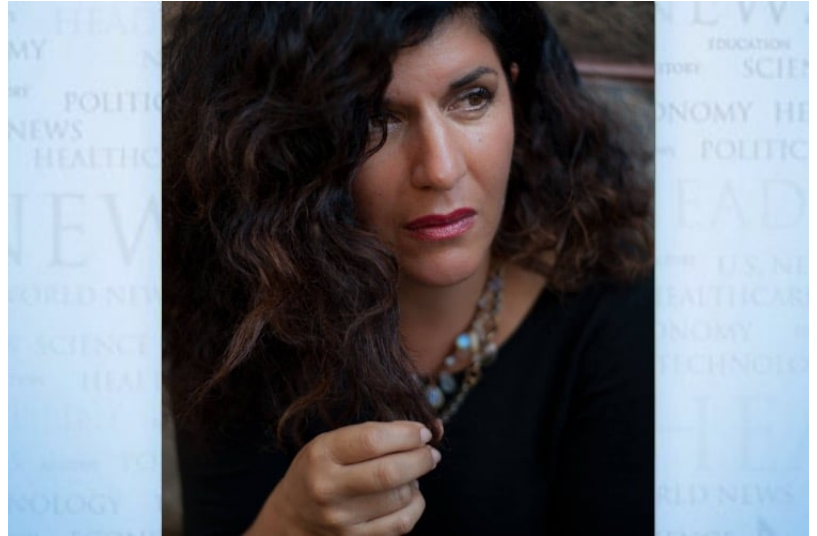




The Silent Death by a Thousand Cuts in Manufacturing

WILMERDING, Pennsylvania — By July of this year, the last man on the job here at the Westinghouse Air Brake Technologies Corporation will, in all likelihood, turn around as he reaches the threshold of the same front door hundreds of thousands of workers have passed through since the 1890s. For the last time, he will look out over the 300,000-square-foot plant that has provided this country with so much technology and innovation for nearly 140 years, and he will think about the men and women who went before, and then turn out the lights for the last time.



Salena Zito

This is a solemn process that has happened across this country for the past 40 years and put into motion here on Christmas Eve when Wabtec filed a Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification notice, which requires employers to let employees know of a scheduled plant closure. It is a move that will affect the remaining 94 employees — from a plant that once employed thousands — with the layoffs beginning next month and the closure expected to be complete by July.

Wabtec spokesman Tim Bader said the WARN notice was part of a negotiated contract agreement with the UE Local 610 in 2022 to close the Wilmerding plant.

“The more than 130-year-old site’s deteriorating condition made it too expensive to maintain,” he added in an emailed statement. “The site also was substantially underutilized and operated at less than a third of its capacity. The plant’s outdated layout did not lend itself to modern production processes and material flows. These challenges were compounded by the difficult business conditions, which hindered the Wilmerding site’s productivity and cost competitiveness.”

It marks the end of an industrial era that began with plants such as this one in the iconic factory home of Westinghouse Air Brake. It was a company founded by George Westinghouse, a pioneer in the electrical engineering world whose brilliance in technology and innovation improved rail safety and literally turned the lights on in American cities in the 1880s and 1890s through powered electricity.

Known for his “war of the currents” battle with Thomas Edison over alternating and direct currents, Westinghouse made a bid to light the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago — which showcased an “Electric City” exhibit — that showed it was he who could deliver a safe and reliable current system to the public.

He was one of a handful of guiding entrepreneurs of his generation who used technology to remake the fortunes of not just himself but of all the men and women he employed here and across the country.

The plant here was founded in 1886 and made turbines, generators, motors, and switching gear for the transmission of electricity. By the time Westinghouse died in 1914, he had founded over 60 companies and held nearly 400 patents, and no one in this region imagined that the name Westinghouse would ever not be associated with jobs, inventions and giving the working men in this region the ability to use their talents to make things.



Written by [Salena Zito](#) on January 9, 2024

As with U.S. Steel, which announced just before Christmas that it was being bought by Japanese steelmaker Nippon, the death of a thousand cuts runs deep among the labor force here. While Nippon has pledged not to change a thing and Wabtec has facilities elsewhere, the uncertainty inherent in both actions has rattled labor leaders like Philip Ameris, president of the Laborers' District Council of Pennsylvania.

"We have incredibly skilled workers in this region, people whose institutional knowledge and experiences have made them invaluable problem solvers, yet each time either a new ownership takes over, they often focus on the wrong things as assets, which is our people, and things can start to go south," said Ameris, who represents nearly 30,000 laborers across the region.

Ameris said what happened at Wabtec and what may happen with Nippon's purchase of U.S. Steel is that these new owners are so far removed from the people who work for them that they don't understand that losing workers like the ones from the old Westinghouse plant isn't just losing bodies. It is losing generations of knowledge, skill sets and pragmatic problem-solving that you can't learn in a college classroom.

"Laborers are truly artisans, craftsmen and women that built the components of the bridges and roads and railroads and our entire infrastructure systems that make our lives better, that frankly make this world go around, and what really bothers me is that few people in power blink when these things happen," he said.

Wabtec is now a multinational company. So are nearly all of the Westinghouse brands, many of which have been parceled out, bought out, divided, and swallowed up by other multinational companies or succumbed to bankruptcy.

Ameris said the challenge for the labor workforce is that lack of connection to their employers as manufacturing companies are sold off.

"Then they are chopped up and sold off again and again," he said. "When you work for U.S. Steel, you worked for U.S. Steel. We saw what happened years ago when steel companies were sold off and broken up multiple times over. They eventually just closed their doors without ever seeing the faces of the men and women who worked for them."

It is a far cry from the days of Westinghouse seeing the plant from his own home (known colloquially as the Westinghouse Castle because, well, it looks like a castle) here in Wilmerding, which overlooked the plant he had built on once-sleepy farmland 14 miles outside the Pittsburgh city limits.

Factory closures force workers — many of them over the age of 45 but under the age of 55 — with vast technical and problem-solving experience, artisans in their own right, to find something to do with all of that knowledge and skills and apply elsewhere.

Assembly lines, technology, computers, artificial intelligence or cheaper labor overseas have all contributed to the devaluation of the skill sets of the men and women who have carved out the American dream working in manufacturing. Those same entities have enabled manufacturing output to soar as manufacturing employment has cratered.

Case in point: in 1979, 19.5 million people worked in manufacturing. That number dropped to 17 million in 2000, and by January of last year, it cratered to 13 million. Yet, according to the National Institute of Standards and Technology, the U.S. is the second largest manufacturing nation in the world behind China.



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So, in theory, we are still an industrial powerhouse; it's just that we are not an employing powerhouse, Ameris said.

"I am all for progress," he said. "However, you cannot replace the human element of problem-solving no matter how brilliant the artificial intelligence program is."

"Wabtec is still headquartered in Pittsburgh; they still have a workforce here at their additive manufacturing production campus — around five people — and 70 miles north of here in Grove City is home to their engine manufacturing and remanufacturing plants, acquired in the company's 2019 merger with GE Transportation which employs 1,000."

The old Westinghouse Company building in all likelihood will fade into history. Over the threshold of the once grand entrance to the Westinghouse Air Brake Company, a quote from the community and his workers dedicated to Westinghouse on his death reads: "Its Product Essential To the Art of Transportation. Its Achievements Acclaim the Genius Of Its Founder."

Ameris said there are no happy endings here or in any of the other little cuts that hit his workers directly or indirectly. "There is a lot of uncertainty, and that is the last thing our labor force needs."

Salena Zito is a CNN political analyst, and a staff reporter and columnist for the Washington Examiner. She reaches the Everyman and Everywoman through shoe-leather journalism, traveling from Main Street to the beltway and all places in between. To find out more about Salena and read her past columns, please visit the Creators Syndicate webpage at www.creators.com.

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