

## Steelworkers Face a Bleak Future After Layoffs, 1984

David Bensman and Roberta Lynch, *Rusted Dreams: Hard Times in a Steel Community*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1987), pp. 93-94. Reprinted by permission of McGraw-Hill Publishing Company.

### Carl Stezko, White Male, Mid-50s

I worked at Wisconsin Steel for almost thirty years. I get a partial pension of \$300 a month, that's all. No other benefits. Nothing. I had a hernia. The doctor said I could die if I didn't have an operation. I didn't have any hospitalization, no money to pay for it. I tried to get a green card [Medicaid] to pay for it, but they said sell your house and car if you want it. I couldn't do that. Finally, my doctor says if you can get into the hospital, I'll do the operation. So I lied to the hospital, just went in there and told them I had insurance. I never could have imagined doing such a thing.

I've been everywhere looking for a job-White Castle, Burger King, McDonald's, Sears, K Mart. I've been to hospitals and cemeteries. I went to Jays Potato Chips. They gave me a test and said, "You're overqualified." I said, "I'll tell you what, you said you're paying \$5 an hour, well I'll work for \$3." They still wouldn't take me. I'm a skilled electrician, plumber, a pipe fitter. But they ain't gonna hire a guy like me. I still go out every day and look.

My wife isn't healthy. She can't work. We have a two-flat [two-family house], but the mortgage isn't paid off. I get \$160 a month in rent on the other apartment. I'm paying \$200 on the mortgage and \$160 in gas bills. So you can't make ends meet. I only eat one meal a day. Food stamps turned me down. I don't know where to turn. I'm ashamed to ask for anything. I always swore I'd never go on pension-I'd work till the day I died.

I did go to the alderman for a year and a half trying to get a job. I was begging, pleading. I saw him at least twenty times. They kept telling me, "You're at the top of the list." You know you get desperate: one day I *approached him in the parking lot* to ask about the job. The next time I saw him, he really went after me, just about spit on me cause I did that. You're never supposed to come up to him about something like that outside of his office. I just had to sit there and take it. I'm a big guy. Fifteen years ago, maybe I would have knocked him down. But when you got nothing, you've got to take that kind of stuff. Maybe the good Lord will come down and help me. I pray every day. That's all I have faith in anymore.

### Mary Morgan, Black Female, Early 50s

I started in at South Works in 1973. I had two kids still at home and was just separated from my husband. He died a few months later. I really liked that job. By me being a widow, I could support myself. I didn't have to go out and ask somebody for money. I didn't have to go on Aid. I could support my own self. That's very important to me.

I've been off work since January of '82. I haven't been able to find anything else. And all my benefits is ran out, even my little savings. My children help a little. I have six-all grown now. They're all unemployed. Three of them worked at one company that was sort of like the mill. It's all but closed down now. They had been going on unemployment and trying to find a job, but that has ran out now. I have my youngest son, my oldest daughter, and one little grandchild living with me. Altogether I have ten grandchildren. That's what makes it rough.

I've been looking for other jobs. I've been to Sweetheart, Tootsie Roll, Sure-Plus, Libby's, Soft Sheen. I've been to places to find something in the line of what maybe I could do. 'Cause, you see, some of these

jobs you can't apply for them if you don't have the ability or education. Most of them just say they're not hiring. It gets discouraging.

I definitely blame Reagan. Because you know like they say, you're supposed to clean up your own backyard before you go and clean up somebody else's. And all this money he's got going for all these other things, like nuclear, he could be using that to put people back to work. I hope and pray-if I live-if they do get another president, that he'll do better than this one has been doing. Because he just don't care about women-he don't understand that we've got to live just like the men do. We've got to make a living.

I have very little hope-very, very little. I'm praying that I can find me a job somewhere. But if they don't open up something where peoples can get a job, it don't look very good at all. I guess they just want us all to dig a hole and get in it.

### **Victor Gonzalez, Hispanic Male, Early 50s**

I spent most of my life at Wisconsin Steel. I thought I was set. In four more years, I'd have had my thirty years and got my pension.

I'm a carpenter. I've tried everything to get a job. But you don't have the opportunity to prove to anyone what you can do. When you tell people you're a former steelworker, they won't hire you. I went down to the Job Service [Illinois Bureau of Employment Security] and they were going to send me out for an interview. But when I told the guy I'd worked for Wisconsin, he said, "Forget it, they won't want you."

Then I went to Florida to look for work because my wife's mother lives there. I got a job in the fields trimming trees for \$2 an hour. Then I got into construction; I was hauling cement bricks for \$4 an hour. The boss really liked me, but the job ended and there wasn't any more work. So we came back up here.

We had just moved from South Chicago to Dolton [a nearby suburb] the year before the mill closed. The mortgage payments were \$310 a month and we couldn't handle them on top of all our other bills. Our unemployment ran out. We lost the house-and our car too. We went to live with our daughter in South Chicago. But that's hard. You feel like you're intruding. You wish you had a place of your own.

Our children are hurting too. Out of six, only one has a regular job. One daughter worked at South Works, another at Wisconsin; our son was at Wisconsin; one son-in-law was there, another at South Works. So it's the whole family.

So many people that I know, they just gave up. But I'm not giving up. Right now, I'm trying to get into construction. It's hard, though. I feel like I've been robbed-robbed of twenty-five, twenty-six years of my life really.