

Third Prize Winner:

Union Mom Carries the Load When Paper Mill Closes

by **John W. Ertl**

Labor unions have had a profound impact on my family and my community. Truly unions saved my family and community from losing everything when the company my father worked for closed. Living through the experience of this past year made me realize the tremendous importance of unions in today's economy. I have a newfound respect for labor unions for what they've done for my community and my family.

When my mother worked for an insurance agency, she never received a raise or payment for overtime. Often times she would work longer than eight hours but would only be paid for eight. She never had health or retirement benefits. When she changed jobs and became a union member in 1997, she received retirement benefits and health insurance for the first time. The day she joined her union, her fellow union members took her out to eat and they had a party. They became more than just coworkers; they were family. For the first time, my mother felt secure and happy in her job.

It was a good thing that my mother belonged to a union, because my father lost his job. In February 2005, a new company purchased the paper mill where my father worked. The new company that bought the mill hated unions. They refused to recognize the existing union, and all employees were forced to reapply for their jobs, regardless of seniority. My father belonged to a union at this mill for over 30 years and was a highly skilled employee, but that meant nothing to the new company.

My father was rehired, but conditions at the paper mill were bleak. My father and his fellow union members were treated very badly. The union members took severe pay cuts, lost vacation time, and eventually lost their pensions. Even my grandfather, who was retired from the paper mill, lost his health insurance. My grandfather was forced to purchase an expensive private policy that severely cut into his fixed income. Within a year, the new company declared bankruptcy and closed the paper mill without giving the required 60 day plant closure notice. My father and I were both moved to tears as I went with him to clean out his locker for the last time.

It was a stark fact that the mill workers were well paid and jobs just didn't exist in the local economy that could readily absorb them. The few jobs that did exist were nonunion, and paid less than half of what the mill workers were accustomed to making. My community suffered greatly as a result of the paper mill closing and the loss of good union jobs. Many small businesses that

depended on revenue generated by the mill ended up closing. I watched with great sadness as I witnessed my friends' families lose their houses and have to move.

For the first time in my life, my family had to rely solely on my mother's job. My family was very fortunate, because my mother, as a dues-paying union member, was paid a fair wage with health insurance and retirement benefits. My parents had a lot of financial demands, because in addition to our own household bills, they were helping two of my siblings in college. We were able to keep our home and get by during the loss of my dad's job by cutting back our expenses and living on a strict budget. I was able to stay in my hometown of Park Falls and finish my senior year of High School with my class, all thanks to unions. That's why I can confidently say labor unions made a huge difference in my life.

There is a happy ending to the story of my father's job, however. Eventually the paper mill in my town was purchased by a new owner that recognized the union. Working conditions and morale greatly improved when the mill workers' former benefits were restored and a new pension plan was developed. My father's new union is aggressively pursuing financial reparation from the former owner for their failure to comply with the law.

I feel indebted to labor unions because I have personally experienced what happens when there is no union. I plan to attain a degree that enables me to promote the values of labor unions. I want to fight for the rights of organized labor, because I believe labor unions make America great. In this age of globalization, too many jobs have been outsourced, and this genuine threat to American families and their way of life must be dealt with.

John's father, John W. Ertl, is a member of United Steelworkers Local 2-0445 since 2003; was a member of Paperworkers Local 445 from 1974 to 1996, and PACE International Union from 1996 to 2003. His mother, Mary E. Ertl, was a member of AFSCME Council 40, Local 2656 from 1997 to 2001 and since then a member of AFSCME Council 24, Local 1941.

ACLU Honors Art Heitzer

Art Heitzer, a long-time member and sponsor of the Wisconsin Labor History Society received in March a 2007 Bill of Rights Award from the American Civil Liberties Union of Wisconsin Foundation. The award, Civil Libertarian of the year, recognized dedication to civil rights and civil liberties in Wisconsin.

Co-awardees were Michael Cohn and Peter Earle.

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Schol. Winner