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Doug Gamble

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DR. DOUG GAMBLE'S COMMENTS – PANEL I

DOUG GAMBLE

“Corporations on their own will not make things better ...”

Good morning. It's quite daunting to be here. I've worked with Fran and the people seated to my left much of my adult life, one way or another. It is a real honor to be able to do this. It's allowed me to rethink some things. I'm kind of embarrassed about what I've learned about what I didn't know when we did the work we are talking about today.

I started working in 1985 for ACTWU, the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, mostly in East Tennessee. I came to that work having been a college history professor and worked at Highlander, and I sort of got roped into being a union rep without knowing nearly enough about what I was getting myself into.

The job was to work with specific local unions in this region, in the textile, clothing, and auto parts industries. One of the companies where I was the union rep was Allied Signal, where Luvernal, seated to my left, was a union officer, and we worked together pretty closely for a long time.

We were charged with trying to protect manufacturing workers from concessions in wages, working conditions, and benefits. This was the era when companies began to try and get people to agree to substitute 401k retirement plans for real defined benefit pensions, and we at least had enough sense to know that this was a bad idea for workers. Knowing that did not often help us stop the process of shifting the risk from corporations to workers.

Underlying all these challenges to our protecting wages and benefits and working conditions was constant threats of plants closing if workers did not “cooperate.” We slowly began to try to figure out how to save manufacturing jobs. Even as a practicing historian of the United States, I did not at that time fully understand the systemic nature of the trauma that de-industrialization was causing outside of the plants and outside of the lives of workers with whom I was working.

The trauma – the damage done to communities – was not as clear to me then as it should have been. We kept thinking we could just deal with this internally...one plant at a time. I didn't realize that from the ten years before 1987 in Tennessee, 40,000 manufacturing and construction jobs were lost and replaced by service sector jobs that paid 60% on average of the wages made by people in manufacturing.

The consequences were bad enough for the workers themselves. But we began to understand the greater effect on the community...the loss of buying power, the residual damage all throughout the

communities in and around which this de-industrialization was happening.

In 1985 Allied Signal moved the jobs of 170 workers from Knoxville to Mexico. It was before I got there, but Luvernal was working there then. I didn't understand what that meant when I walked in to become a union rep there. We realized slowly that we could not do much about this de-industrialization process unless we involved communities in the work. We could not, just within the Union, figure out any way to deal with this.

There was an ACTWU textile mill in Chattanooga that announced that it was going to close. We hired some people to do a community benefit study. The study demonstrated very clearly what the cost was going to be, not only to the workers, but also to the community around Chattanooga. This raised my awareness about the community trauma that was involved, and that led us to meet people in other parts of the country who were trying to deal with de-industrialization at the same time that we were.

That Chattanooga study introduced us to the existence of a national organization called the Federation for Industrial Retention and Renewal.

FIRR was founded in 1987 by people representing 15 different local groups across the country, each of which, in one way or another, was trying to figure out what to do about the de-industrialization of their communities. The groups were trying to support and learn from each other about what kinds of things worked and did not work and to try to build a national industrial agenda, a policy agenda that could deal with these issues on a more systemic level. The use of both "retention" and "renewal" in the group's name reflected an understanding of the need for more manufacturing and not just the protection of what was already under threat.

Prompted by others examples and our own instincts, people in this room helped create TIRN, the Tennessee Industrial Renewal Network. I think it was 1987. The organizations that founded it included the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, where I worked, the Commission on Religion in Appalachia, which brother Jim Sessions was part of, and The Highlander Research and Education Center, where Susan Williams, also seated to my left, still works. We all knew and worked with each other and decided to form a local version of what was going on nationally with FIRR.

We realized that preventing or responding to de-industrialization could not be done plant by plant, or really town by town. TIRN then began to offer workshops for communities and leaders and workers and scholars. We ran sessions on early warning signs to help people figure out if their plant might close and then begin thinking about what they might do about it and on fighting plant closings with

community pressure and other things. We talked about employee ownership possibilities for places that found themselves being removed from their jobs and about organizing dislocated workers.

Then some people in TIRN (maybe Fran, but I do not know!) had the brilliant idea to do a worker exchange program with manufacturing workers here and in Mexico. This initiative, which if not unique nationally was certainly rare, is the real theme of this panel. The challenge was to disabuse workers in Tennessee of the idea that the Mexicans were “stealing our jobs.” TIRN tried to focus on who, in fact, was engineering de-industrialization... that it was corporations and not other workers. It was one thing to know and say this and something entirely more powerful to show it by introducing workers across national borders to each other personally.

So that's a setup for the rest of this panel and the entire symposium. People on this panel and in the others have done great work and celebrating it in Fran's honor and with appreciation for the parts she has played is a great idea!

The challenges continue. Thirty years later, I am involved in the creation of a new Federation for a Manufacturing Renaissance. Several people who have been in this struggle for a long time are trying to revisit and revitalize the old FIRR network and its proposals and concepts. The agenda is unsettlingly similar: to build support and resources for a national industrial policy (and adequate funding) that can deal with the continuing deindustrialization of this country on a systemic level. We'll see how we do. But we have the same challenges that we had the first time, including few controls on how capitalism functions.

One thing that's different is that we have more of a focus on and understanding of equity. If industrial policy in the future is not different from the way it has been, inequity will get more extreme. Corporations on their own will not make things better for working people or the rest of us.

