

Foreword

Metal Fatigue takes this series on to a broader canvas. In previous books our authors explored issues linking working conditions, environmental degradation and sustainability. All these works stress the political and social struggles surrounding the fight for safer work, protection of the environment, and the local and global struggle for a sustainable world. Whether documenting the horrors of cotton dust, the appalling and dangerous conditions in the oil industry, the struggles to link unions and community to fight corporate pollution, or the dangers posed by the petrochemical industry both here and abroad, the books in this series speak directly to the health of workers, community, and the environment. In all these works, the authors, as Farrant does here, keep the politics front and foremost.

As editors, we have always been clear that the analyses presented in this series related to all aspects of work, health, and environment. *Metal Fatigue* takes this further by telling the story of what happened to an industry central not only to the economic core of a manufacturing economy, but also critical to the lives of the workers, their families, and their communities. The impact of what happened here is enormous: jobs and communities destroyed, a whole generation of skilled workers ejected from their jobs and their livelihoods, and a key industry of the U.S. economy essentially eradicated. This is a story of greed, of malfeasance, and of stupidity. It is also the story of the way in which short-term and narrow self-interestedness can leave so many destitute. Similar stories could be told about textiles, boot and shoe manufacture, furniture making, and a host of industries that were the foundations of American industrialization and the livelihood of those who worked in them. There are, however, two important differences distinguishing metal working from many other mass production activities: for the most part, metal workers are highly trained and skilled, and the industry itself makes the equipment that makes the factories.

Farrant writes of this from the heart. He was there, he was a machinist and, later, the business agent for the union. In eight closely argued chapters he unfolds the demise of metal working in the Connecticut River Valley and the consequences not only to the workers and their families but to the region and its economy. When a couple of large companies provide employment to many, and when the secondary industries and tertiary economy are deeply dependent on those companies, their collapse will affect the entire region. And we have seen this movie many times: major manufacturing industry grows up on the natural and

human resources a region provides, bringing good jobs and economic growth. As the industry matures, global competition increases, jobs are moved to the un-unionized south and then abroad, local ownership gets bought out (often ownership is transferred to an international conglomerate), wages and jobs are cut to “improve competitiveness” and protect shareholders and, eventually, the industry shuts down leaving massive unemployment, broken families, and shuttered main streets.

To tell this story is to ask a larger question about what we mean by the relationship between work and health and the environment. When a region loses a major employer, such as American Bosch, more than jobs are lost—declining taxes means less money for town and local governments, less is spent on buildings, roads and bridges, on critical social services, and on initiatives to benefit the community. Property values fall and schools lose funding. As families struggle to survive with unemployment or with family members working in low-paying service jobs (if they can find the work), divorce rates go up, domestic violence increases and, perhaps, most tragic of all, suicide becomes more common. As the local economy spirals down, companies supplying the main industry close, recreation centers lock their doors, and everything from pizza joints to clothing stores face bankruptcy. Hospitals lose staff and resources, disease and poor nutrition increase, and the entire panoply of health problems associated with poverty rise. As crime worsens those that can do so flee, tearing the heart from the urban centers. Often, as with the case of Springfield, political corruption blossoms and mismanagement becomes endemic, resulting in the bankruptcy of the city. This is why this story is not just about the collapse of an industry but also about the collapse of a community and a region—the consequences of which link work to health in an all too typical tale.

This is also a book about sustainability. *Metal Fatigue* shows how union leaders, state and local officials, and community leaders in the region failed to both understand what was going on over a 30-year period or build the necessary responses to protect jobs and the community—in short, to *sustain* the social and economic well-being of the region. This story provides many lessons on what can happen when a key industry closes or leaves a region and tells us, ultimately, that we cannot separate work from health both inside and outside the workplace.

John Wooding