

# Laid-off Oregon union millwright goes to D.C.

Steve Phillips of AWPPW was Rep. DeFazio's guest at State of the Union, and didn't like what he heard

By Don McIntosh  
Associate editor

Steve Phillips is the wandering millwright ... but not by choice.

In 1974, right out of high school, he went to work at the Menasha corrugated paper mill in Coos Bay where his father worked. But the 2003 closure of the mill, then owned by Weyerhaeuser, would only be his first. In 2004 he moved to Albany and got a job at a Weyerhaeuser paper mill there. That too closed, in 2009. In 2010 he went to work at the SP Fiber Technologies paper mill in Newberg. It closed indefinitely in November 2015.

And Phillips isn't even the unluckiest member of his union, Association of Western Pulp and Paper Workers (AWPPW). One fellow union member is called the "black cloud," because he's gone through so many layoffs and closures.

In January, Phillips got a chance to tell his union's story in Washington, D.C., when Oregon Congressman Peter DeFazio invited him to be his guest for President Obama's final State of the Union Address. Phillips was there to serve as a flesh-and-blood rebuttal to the president's happy talk about the pending Trans Pacific Partnership, a NAFTA-style deal with Japan, Vietnam, Malaysia, and eight other Pacific Rim nations.

Phillips has repeatedly felt the impacts of America's trade policy. Paper is a capital-intensive industry, relying on expensive machines that Phillips, as a millwright, kept up and running. A millwright is an industrial mechanic, a highly-skilled jack of all trades. Phillips worked 13 years at the Coos Bay mill before he was able to become a millwright apprentice, and after three years of training, became a journeyman in 1990.

But paper is also a trade-sensitive industry. In recent decades, U.S. paper mills have faced stiff competition from Canada and developing countries like China and Indonesia. Cardboard boxes are used to ship goods, and as more and more goods were made overseas, it made more sense to make the boxes there too. Trade was officially deemed a factor in

all three of the closures Phillips went through.

As a union officer—he was recording secretary at several locals—Phillips was several times drafted to serve as a "peer advocate," helping his laid-off co-workers access retraining, relocation and extended unemployment benefits through the government's Trade Act program for workers dislocated by trade.

So he was a fitting choice for DeFazio — a fierce critic of America's NAFTA-style trade policy — to take to D.C. To help DeFazio showcase the effects of that policy, AWPPW, a division of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters, paid Phillips' airfare. So on his first-ever visit to the nation's capital, Phillips got to take part in an anti-TPP press conference, tell his story to Carpenters Political Director Tom Flynn, and meet former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi at an after-hours party in the Capitol Building.

Phillips remembers the glory days of Oregon's unionized wood products industry. When he went to work at the Coos Bay mill in 1974, his starting wage was \$4.82 an hour—at a time when the minimum wage was



\$1.65. "I didn't have any dreams of going to college, but I wasn't planning on staying there, but boy, you get that first paycheck, it's like, 'Oh, my god.' The money was just incredible."

High wages enabled Phillips to buy and restore an old Victorian house, feed his motor-head appetite for muscle cars, and eventually, to afford a vacation home in Sunriver. Those opportunities are no longer available to younger generations. When he began, the paper mill was just one option; there were also chip, plywood, and lumber mills through-

out Southern Oregon. But in the 1980s, logs started being shipped overseas, and those mills began to close. By the time Phillips' mill closed in 2003, there were no similar jobs in the area.

That didn't have to happen, Phillips says, and he blames U.S. trade policy.

Thanks in part to that trade policy, Phillips is laying down his tools at age 59. He never married, so he's the end of a family line in the wood products industry: His grandfather was a logger, his uncle drove log trucks, and his father and

brother, both now deceased, were millwrights.

At the State of the Union, Phillips promised DeFazio he wouldn't boo the president. But he didn't promise not to grit his teeth at what he heard.

"I felt just really disappointed that he could just stand up there and lie to the American public," Phillips says.

"We forged a Trans-Pacific Partnership," Obama declared, "to open markets, protect workers and the environment, and advance American leadership in Asia. It cuts 18,000 taxes on products Made in America, and supports more good jobs. With TPP, China doesn't set the rules in that region, we do. You want to show our strength in this century? Approve this agreement."

"Everything he said," Phillips says, "was a lie... From a blue-collar millworker, voter and taxpayer point of view, the first thing that scares me about the TPP is: They spent seven years negotiating it in private, behind closed doors. They kept it from Congress. They kept it from the American public. If this thing was so great, if this thing was so needed, why would they do it that way?"

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