

# Learning About Greed

## *Glen Harper*

I couldn't believe what I heard from a Human Resources representative at a job of mine in Moncton, New Brunswick. While we stood around the shipping department at a window and door factory, she told us that the company owner "wasn't making any money," and that he was doing this just "to give his guys some work." In our department we carried out tasks with too few staff, and often alone. We pushed ourselves hard to finish up the job by the end of our shift, and often went into overtime work. We exhausted and injured ourselves trying to speed things up. He sure as hell was making money, off our backs, and then some.

The day started out okay. After the first orders were released, two of our crew started pulling windows out of the bins around the shipping area, and the other two of us wheeled two metal carts to the other end of the plant for the doors. Two people were available for each task, and they could help each other with the lifting. Heavy windows could be manhandled over to the loading dock with one person at each end, pushing and pulling, and the doors could be hoisted onto the carts with one person lifting on each side. The two guys taking care of the doors, finishing up sooner, could even help with the windows.

Then the first company flatbed truck arrived at the main loading dock for a local order. We had not quite finished pulling out all of the windows for the first large truck. Nor had we started wrapping the windows and doors with industrial stretch wrap for protection during transportation, a two-man job at least. It would take at least another half-an-hour to finish preparing the load

with all four of us on the job. But the local order had to be assembled and loaded immediately, as the construction crew was waiting at the worksite. Two of us broke off from the first orders to go to work on the order for the first flatbed truck.

Now a contractor arrives at the plant looking for his order of windows. The first main order really has to get done, as the truck will be arriving soon. Moreover, part of that order is a large bay window, which has to be moved up from the specialty department. But the contractor also wants to get moving on the job. Both guys remaining on the original task break off to help the contractor, a task made all the more difficult as his truck is not stationed at a loading dock that is level with the shop floor. The guys will have to hoist the windows up several feet into the back of the truck.

Then the second company flatbed truck pulls into the second loading dock with twenty boxes of aluminum siding from another branch of the company. This load must be taken off immediately as the siding is going out with the first main load, which is still not done. The guy collecting the two doors for the first company flatbed truck has just finished, and should help the other fellow with the remaining windows and loading the truck. But he knows that lifting the twenty-foot boxes of aluminum siding requires two people. So he heads for the second flatbed truck, and after an argument with the driver over helping out, both of them start unloading the siding.

The contractor has been loaded, and the two guys are freed up to go back to the first main load, or help with the first flatbed truck. Except that one of them is the supervisor, and he has

been called up to the office to sort out a problem with a previous load. The customer didn't receive two windows and a manifest is missing. And the other fellow has to immediately receive a small shipment of specialty parts and supplies that has arrived in a van. Furthermore, he has to dump the glass bin. It's been full for two days, and the cutters have no place to dump broken and scrap glass. So the first load remains unfinished.

Then the truck for the first orders arrives, and as the driver is going on a long haul, needs to be loaded immediately. Then the truck arrives from Quebec to pick up all of our scrap vinyl from window production, and needs to get loaded immediately. Then another contractor arrives looking for his windows. Then we have to load the truck that was carrying the aluminum siding for a second local order, which means moving the windows from the shipping area to the other loading dock on metal carts. Then the orders for the next big truck are released, and still we have not quite finished preparing the load for the first truck. Then lunch arrives.

It was not like that every day, but close, and still did not take into account the other problems. Our supervisor missed a full week once from illness. Our supervisor had a full hour for lunch, while the rest of us had only thirty minutes, and he was not required to do overtime work. Our supervisor got called away on special jobs, as did our assistant supervisor, such as dismantling the inside of a company truck that was in an accident. One fellow with personal problems missed work for several days. During all of these periods, nobody else in the plant was brought over to fill in as they could not be spared, leaving us even more understaffed.

Often I found myself lifting windows alone, instead of with a partner. I would pull the window out of the storage bin and slide it over to the cart. I would then lift one end of the window up onto the cart, shuffle down to the other end, and lift while trying to balance the whole window on the front edge of the cart. After loading up five or six heavy windows, I pulled the cart down to the other loading dock and reversed the process. This process was done for multiple

loads in a day. It took only six months of that work to seriously injure the back and front of my right shoulder.

I also found myself accelerating the pace so as to cut down on the overtime work, which happened daily. As the assistant supervisor told us, we were "pre-authorized for overtime." Instead of leaving windows in bins until the second or third large trucks arrived, I pulled them out and pushed them closer to the dock to cut down on the eventual loading time, even when the windows were really too much for one man. Indeed, one of our regular models weighed about 200 pounds. This surely benefitted the company owner, but pushing twenty or more of these windows across the floor daily further wrecked my right shoulder and did the same to my right pectoral muscle.

That extra effort was still not enough to cut down on the overtime work. One Friday, we had to load a full-sized transport trailer with windows and doors. After lunch, two of us started hauling the stuff onto the trailer while the assistant supervisor stayed inside to pack it all in tight. Two hours later we still had a lot to do, and so pushed ourselves harder. By 3:30 it was clear that we were headed for overtime, and so pushed ourselves even harder. Finally we finished the truck at 5:15 p.m., forty-five minutes after the end of our shift. We had exerted ourselves almost non-stop for well over four hours and I was stupid with exhaustion.

The HR representative was surprised that I disagreed with her generous comments about the company owner. She thought her word was final, that she understood the company's situation and we did not. But all a shipper had to do was look around at what was going on. Essentially, each man was doing the work of almost two, and the owner was getting a crew of almost eight for the pay of only four. And I was not the only one injured or exhausted. Our assistant supervisor, much bigger than me, had strained his back, and our department had a high rate of staff turnover. Our work conditions and performance went beyond profits for the owner, to greed. •

*Glen Harper is an independent writer living in Regina, Saskatchewan. Contact him at harperglen70@gmail.com.*