



Building a new career through Community

Steve Boucher, one of many Community members made redundant when Alphasteel in Newport went into receivership, tells us how things are looking up for him, thanks to Community.

It wasn't a Merry Christmas for the 400 or so workers at Alphasteel Ltd in Newport, South Wales – or for their families.

'On 21 December the receivers came in and told us the company had gone into administrative receivership. They sent us home without our wages – just four days before Christmas, it was a shock,' says Steve Boucher (pictured left), then a Community rep at the plant. 'But the union rushed through our holiday pay – a week in hand and four weeks' notice - so we had some money for our families at Christmas.'

The shock was felt throughout the community as the plant, which mostly made reinforcement rods for the construction sector, was seen as a viable concern in a steel market that was buoyant. 'It was a license to print money if it had been managed properly,' says Karl Gauden, Member Liaison Officer, who represented Alphasteel members at that time. 'We'd already tried to help the company with its problems over power supplies and unpaid bills but it was like they'd given up...'

Even though it was the Christmas holidays, by 5 January Community had set up a mass meeting. More than 300 members attended to find out about the union's plans to help them from General Secretary Michael Leahy, Communitas' Lyndon Peach, the union's solicitors, and Newport East MP Jessica Morden.

Steve went along. 'We all felt down but it was reassuring to hear that Community and Communitas had managed so quickly to put together a support package.' The package included a range of advice and counselling sessions, help with benefits applications, job search, IT and basic skills training to help members find alternative employment and subsidies to encourage local firms to take on ex Alphasteel workers. Communitas also organised a job fair at the end of January, where redundant workers met with potential new employers, training companies, Career Wales and Job Centre Plus representatives.

'We were told that we could access £2,500 funding through Career Wales for vocational training,' explains Steve. 'I arranged a meeting with Communitas' Jeff Morgan. I wanted to retrain as a tower crane operator as I'd had a spell as a self-employed builder and there was a lot of construction going on in the area. In the same day, he had helped me secure funding for a two-week course at the National Construction Training College in Kings Lynn in March.'

'But there was a problem. While I had funding for the course, I didn't have money for my accommodation and travel. But the union's Benevolent Fund came up trumps and gave me the £508 I needed. I completed the course and now have recognised qualifications in tower crane driving and am making good money. The union's help was invaluable – without it I might be on benefits...'

So what of the plant's future? As well as job-seeking and retraining support, since Christmas Community's main priority has been making representations to the official receivers, Welsh Assembly members and local authorities to keep the plant open and find a buyer.

Jenny Smith, Community's Regional Director for the West Midlands, South Wales and South West England, said: 'The plant is perfectly

sound and we believe that it's a very viable, ongoing concern, with the demand for steel currently strong both globally and domestically. We've done everything possible to help find a buyer who will give a future to Alphasteel, our members who worked there and their communities. We've met with Rhodri Morgan and his deputy and encouraged them to use their influence to encourage potential buyers, for example, through environmental grants. We've attended creditors meeting so we can keep our membership constantly updated via mailshots. Steel is embedded in Newport, as well as our nation's, history and I hope this important tradition can be saved.'



Regional director Jenny Smith at the table with Rhodri Morgan earlier in the year.

'The highly skilled, efficient and committed workforce at Alphasteel showed great loyalty to employers who weren't good at communicating and made many calls on employees and on Community, for help in,' explains Jenny. 'They deserve the opportunity to be re-employed in sustainable jobs in a profitable, expanding and well managed company.'

Since December there have been up to 60 to 70 expressions of interest in the plant from international steel producers. However, on 5 June it was announced that Russian owned company Libala Ltd had had a bid accepted for the company. If the deal goes ahead they hope to restart production at some level in due course and that some of the jobs at the plant will be restored. Community union will be working with the official receivers, Welsh Assembly and the new buyer to secure a sustainable future and bring jobs back to Newport. To keep up to date with developments, visit www.community-tu.org.

Compensation for Alphasteel workers

On 13 June, Community represented former Alphasteel employees at the Cardiff Employment Tribunal and secured maximum compensatory award for those members due to the company's failure to consult with the workforce and Community before going into receivership. This is yet another Community victory for our members who have been badly treated and another win that shows the value of being a member of a recognised trade union.