

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

BIG PHARMA VS THE PEOPLE: THE FIGHT TO SAVE AMERICA'S LARGEST GENERIC DRUG MANUFACTURER

LAURA FLANDERS: Morgantown, West Virginia is slated to lose over 2000 well-paying jobs if the closure of this factory behind me goes ahead at the end of July. The implications for the people here and for this place are dire. There are also public health concerns because this facility over the last six decades has produced critical generic drugs, everything from penicillin to thyroid medication to, yes, the EpiPen. It's been managed in different ways as a company, as you'll hear. But the people here are asking, isn't there a role now for government, for the public sector to step in, in the service of the public interest here. They're also concerned about political backlash in a red state with a lot of questions about the silence of President Joe Biden and Senior Senator Joe Manchin. They haven't stepped in yet to stop this closure. Will they? There are other choices that could be made and other ways to preserve this company and this community. That's what we're gonna be exploring today on "The Laura Flanders Show." Thanks for joining me. Reporting from Morgantown, West Virginia.

Dana Brown heads up The Next System Project at The Democracy Collaborative, which calls itself a think and do lab for the democratic economy.

DANA BROWN: I'm here in front of the Viatris pharmaceutical manufacturing plant in Morgantown, West Virginia. This facility was run since the '60s by Mylan Pharmaceuticals, which last year had a merger with Upjohn and created Viatris. Pretty much right after the merger though, Viatris announced that they were gonna be laying off all 1500 workers in this plant and offshoring a lot of those jobs to India. So we're here because we're very concerned about the closure of this plant and what it could mean both for jobs and the economy in West Virginia, but also the pharmaceutical supply chain and public health for all of us Americans. I think the question is really who benefits? This to me is a decision of and for capital, maybe shareholders benefit if these jobs are off shore and they go to India and we save in labor costs. But do the people of West Virginia benefit? Has anyone taken the time to look and see, as a country, can we afford to lose this entirely?

LAURA FLANDERS: Just down the road, Joe Gouzd heads up the union local representing United Steelworkers members who work at this factory.

JOE GOUZD: This is our union hall. Welcome. When I ran for office in 2018, my motto was service before self, and I'm here to fulfill that commitment until the day that we close.

LAURA FLANDERS: Take us back to December 11th, 2020. What was the news and how did it make you feel?

JOE GOUZD: The night before we received phone calls stating that an all-officer meeting was going to take place December the 11th, that was a Friday morning at 7:45 AM. We were told in a pre-written statement that they had made a decision to downsize their portfolio of production sites, and I'm paraphrasing this in that Morgantown, West Virginia that had produced 15 to 18 to 20 billion doses annually of generic high grade pharmaceuticals was being shut down by Viatris and they had rendered a decision to shut this facility. And the immediate question posed in my mind was for what reason? Here we are losing 2000 jobs paying an average of 60 to \$70,000 a year as a typical cross section. If you just look at the trickle down effect of that, it's about an estimated \$200 million that's coming out of North Central West Virginia in terms of income.

LAURA FLANDERS: What's been the reaction from your representatives to this news?

JOE GOUZD: We've been calling out to the government, the US senators that represent our state of West Virginia, we've called out to our Congressman David McKinley. We've even went to the United Steelworkers International and asked them to contact Richard Trumka from the AFL-CIO and the Biden administration folks. We have heard nothing from anyone. They have ducked and hidden the issue.

LAURA FLANDERS: West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin is one of the most powerful Democrats, most powerful senators in the US right now. He's not so far removed from this story. Can you talk about his connections?

JOE GOUZD: It is true. Senator Manchin isn't far removed from the story. His constituents live here. We vote here. We ask for support from here. And his daughter was our CEO for years. And strangely enough, she resigned before we were given our shutdown notification by Viatris, and Senator Manchin, he's ridden off somewhere. There's been a deafening silence in Morgantown, West Virginia. Nobody has whispered a murmur and we find that inexplicable.

LAURA FLANDERS: Carla Shultz worked at this factory for 13 years, many of them on the midnight shift, happy to be able to provide for her family and her mother who has serious medical concerns.

CARLA SHULTZ: When I was hired in my initiation class, they said they got like 2000 hits a day on their job sites, people wanting in that door, and I never would have ever dreamed 13 years from then that it would be closing. It was very, very emotional and I just, I couldn't, the tears just rolled. I had to look at my mom who had had major health issues over the 13 years and tell her that I'm not gonna have a job after July. And she knew I was getting her medicine there too and

"What about my medicine?" And then, she had to start worrying about of all things. We wanna keep her positive and keep her healthy and I had to break that news to her, and that was tough, it really was. I'm just a year or two away from retirement, so I'm too old to go to school I feel. And I don't know, I need to be here in the daytime to care for my mom, so I might have to try to find another midnight shift job that is not gonna pay as well, of course, and probably not gonna have the benefits. So it's just devastating for the whole community, not just our family. It's a ripple effect. They've already raised the prices of water in Morgantown because our plant's gonna shut down. So the utility companies are already anticipating and they're raising rates and they're gonna have layoffs. And yeah, when that happens, and you see that on the headlines in the news, you know it's real.

LAURA FLANDERS: People now are wondering why won't President Biden act, a Democrat who ran on jobs and bringing people together.

PRESIDENT BIDEN: No industry has taken a greater advantage of Trump's offshoring tax loopholes than the pharmaceutical industry. Big Pharma lobbied Trump for a handout. That's exactly what they got from him. Farmers building, US pharma, is building factories overseas instead of the United States, skipping out on having to pay US taxes.

LAURA FLANDERS: What's your response?

JOE GOUZD: Okay, so if I saw that correctly and I heard that message from President Biden, the only thing that's changed is the seven months of he being in office. We were told by the United Steelworkers that we're going to see a noticeable difference come March and April. The noticeable difference is it's gotten worse. I thought the motto was to bring jobs to the United States to restore America. The response from those people who are politically responsible for the wellbeing of our country and keeping jobs in domestic manufacturing in the United States should be ashamed of themselves.

IXYA VEGA: I'm running for city council to ensure that young people have a seat at the table and so that young people feel like they have a voice here and they feel like they can stay. Young people are a crucial part of the community and by investing in young people and opening up opportunities for us to be involved, we can create lasting change in Morgantown and make this a place young people want to stay.

LAURA FLANDERS: Ixya Vega is a 23-year-old daughter of immigrants who ran for city council here in Morgantown directly out of college and got herself elected, becoming the only BIPOC member of the council. I sat down with her here at her home with Jenny Craig, another union member, public school teacher and an organizer with Our Revolution. They have a vision

that could be bright of the future here in West Virginia, and very serious concerns about what could happen if this plant closure goes ahead.

IXYA VEGA: About a couple months ago, I decided to run for city council. I was already kind of late into the game so I was a write-in candidate for the third ward in Morgantown. But you know, I kind of decided that I wanted to run for city council because I wasn't seeing myself being represented in the city, but yet a bunch of people in the community and that live in Morgantown are people like me. So this closure of the Mylan plant is going to impact a lot of families and young people are a part of those families too. The state is trying to bring people into West Virginia, but what are we doing to keep people in West Virginia? People who have roots here and have a history and have already a love for the state and have made their lives here. And when they feel like they can't stay in their home, I can't imagine what that feels like to be uprooted from where you belong.

JENNY CRAIG: It's just absolutely heartbreaking. At a time where we are hemorrhaging people, we have the highest rate of population loss of any state in our country. If this closure goes ahead, one of the biggest fears of myself, of the community, of the workers that I've spoke with is that another company who treats their workers similarly comes in or worse, kicks out a union altogether and or hires people from other places, particularly if a company from another state comes in, we won't have good paying jobs for West Virginians. We'll have jobs for other folks. I'm from the Northern Panhandle, the northern part of the state. And so I've seen that when the steel mills have closed and we've never recovered from that even decades later. These are members of our community, these are our neighbors, and they do give back. The workers at Mylan have a long history of giving back to the community. The Women Of Steel, they've helped with Habitat For Humanity homes. They feel as if we've put in so much time and so much work to give back to the community and to produce medication that they're very proud of. That's only gonna lead to more of a divide and more resentment and more anger.

LAURA FLANDERS: Are you afraid, as a person of color, as a young person, about the future in this state and in this region if tensions get ever higher and a whole bunch of people get left behind?

IXYA VEGA: It is very scary to think about how at the state level, we are not seeing the type of support that people like me need to be able to live here. My children will probably be BIPOC or are gonna be persons of color, and if they aren't going to be safe in this state, why would I put in the effort to grow my life here? We've seen very few delegates really fight for us and put their entire lives out there and receive the criticism, but they're not being listened to and it kind of just feels like they're shouting into this empty room. And I hope that it doesn't get to a point where we just continue to regress.

LAURA FLANDERS: Corporations and communities can make choices about where they spend their money. Milan Puskar, who founded Mylan Pharmaceuticals in the 1960s, invested a lot of his money right here in Morgantown. Behind me is a free medical clinic based on his principle that nobody should be denied healthcare for the inability to pay. Today, it serves 4,000 patients and provides healthcare to low income and uninsured West Virginians. 22% of adults in this state are uninsured. What could be done here with the money made here?

DANA BROWN: I think what we're seeing here in Morgantown is when a single philanthropist and investor passes or when he passes along a company to the next generation, it's then up to them to make the decisions. And this entire town and potentially the economy of the larger region is really hanging in the balance. And should an entire economy hang in the balance of the decisions of one person or should we have a more collective responsibility and response to such things. Should it be Bill Gates' decision if the world can be vaccinated or not? Should it be a single philanthropist's decision whether Morgantown gets to be a thriving community with good paying jobs or not? The public sector has a number of tools at its disposal. It could do anything from invoke the Defense Production Act to require Viartis to make drugs that are critical for national security and public health to nationalizing the entire company. Almost every industry in America at some point in history, there've been nationalizations or partial nationalizations. Municipalities, states and the federal government own lots of infrastructure and control the production of essential goods, even nationalized parts of Merck and Bayer, two pharmaceutical companies during the first world war, because it was seen in our strategic national interest. This is a tool of public policy that is used when it is needed and I think we just need to be asking the question again right now, what is needed in this moment in time. Lots of people are used to our elected officials making those decisions for us, but I think this is a really a moment where the people of Morgantown, the people of West Virginia, and the people of the United States could say this doesn't work for us and let's come together and find a solution that works better.

LAURA FLANDERS: The weekend we were in town, the Working Families Party was holding a rally in downtown Morgantown.

THADDAUS BRECKENRIDGE: ♪ I wouldn't take nothing from a journey now ♪ ♪
I've gotta make in heaven somehow ♪ ♪ Government took me and tried to turn me around
♪ ♪ I said I've never been there's not a thing ♪ ♪ In the world that I want and the world is
saved ♪ ♪ If I could, still wouldn't take nothing from my journey ♪ ♪ If I could, I still
wouldn't take nothing from my journey ♪ ♪ If I could, still wouldn't take nothing from my
journey ♪ ♪ Now ♪

LAURA FLANDERS: Maurice Mitchell is the national president of the Working Families.

MAURICE MITCHELL: Now is the time to keep the pressure on. Now we need to go big. Big transformative legislation, investments in voting rights, in labor organizing, in infrastructure, in jobs and care, possibly 50,000 jobs for West Virginians, good union jobs so people could stay here, raise their families here, build their families here and build up this community so we could get the recovery that we deserve.

I'm here in Morgantown, West Virginia, because the people of Morgantown deserve a government that cares for its people, the way that we cared for one another during the COVID crisis. And we're bringing people together, we're bringing artists and cultural producers and organizers to have this conversation about what would it mean if the folks in Washington drew down the resources in the infrastructure bill so that the thrive agenda that we've been pushing could manifest here locally, where we get our 50,000 jobs just in West Virginia, good paying union jobs, working to revitalize our country, to be able to work on our roads, our bridges, to be able to green our economy, to create an economy that works for all of us. And also, in a moment when all of our systems collapsed, building new systems that are resilient. This is also an opportunity for us to figure out how we could use grassroots power to draw attention to what's happening, to figure out what we could do with that plant with those workers and how we can ensure that that plant and those workers stay in the community, those union jobs stay in the community, and that plant continues to service everybody in the community in a way that that supports all of the wonderful sort of people and communities and folks that I think you talked to who have been here, who wanna stay here and raise their kids here.

THADDAUS BRECKENRIDGE: This right here is a resourceful revolution, and you coming out here right now today, the revolution has already happened. It happened in your mind first, and then you came out here to take action after. You came to have a bite with another one, you came to have a conversation with another one, and it only transforms into more policy. So when we talk about not just the Working Families Party, we talk about Working Families Party, right?

So if I could just get you just for a second to just look right to your right and say I'm here with you. I'm working on my community, and most importantly, we're working on the legislators.

MAURICE MITCHELL: I think we all agree now after all of these intersecting crises that the agenda of multinational corporations are at odds with working people's agenda. And this is deeper than the politics of the left and the right. This is the politics of the folks on the bottom versus the folks on the top. We've been knocking doors in every single city in West Virginia, folks who identify as progressive, folks who don't identify politically at all, and they want jobs, they want a government that works for them, they want a government that invests in infrastructure. It couldn't be clearer. They want a government that ensures that our democracy is

protected. And the reason why organizations and parties like the Working Families Party exist is to remind folks in office that if they don't deliver, that the people will always hold them accountable to deliver.

IXYA VEGA: We need to make sure that we're not prioritizing money over people. And people run their campaign saying I'll protect you, I'll make sure that you're taken care of, West Virginia is going to grow and be better. But where is that? Where's the support for that? So I definitely think that we need to really look at the way that we are electing our officials and making sure that we know where their values lie.

JENNY CRAIG: We truly need a ground level overhaul of our tax structure, of our priorities and of our focuses, and this truly highlights all of that, right? It's not unique to West Virginia. We need to move away from states who are resource colonies, who allow companies to come in to exploit their people, their land, their resources, take lucrative federal money and leave their people high and dry, which is certainly what happened in this case with Viatrix. We need to make sure that doesn't happen. And that's gonna take all of us working together. That's gonna take a total overhaul of our political system. And it starts with educating, talking to each other, mobilizing grassroots, organizing, talking to our friends and neighbors about why elections are so important, why electoral politics are so important. And then moving beyond that, how we can really make good lasting change in our communities. And that's the way to change things.

IXYA VEGA: There's a lot of conversations that need to happen and a lot of uncomfortable conversations that need to happen, but one thing that I have noticed about the people of West Virginia is that they're always willing to have it, which to me is a light at the end of this really weird tunnel that we're in because people are willing to listen to me and my views and my opinions about things, and not just argue with me, but to actually listen and try to come up with solutions.

LAURA FLANDERS: This company, formerly Mylan, now Viatrix, has been run in different ways at different times, but the public interest here hasn't changed. And as people call for public sector intervention, it's worth remembering it wouldn't be the first time. This university behind me was founded because of federal action and a law that Lincoln signed in the 1860s so that this community could have a teaching place for the skills this economy needed at that time. So it wouldn't be the first and it wouldn't probably be the last time. Is this closure a done deal here in Morgantown? What else could happen here? What would be your plan?

JOE GOUZD: Up until July 31st of this year, I will fight like hell. I will reach out to the likes of you all. I will reach out to people nationally. I will tell our story. I'm not sitting here disclosing anything in confidentiality or trading secrets or any proprietary information. I'm crying out to the

administration and the politicians to say where are you at? I don't believe it's too late ever. Every day holds the possibility of a miracle, so too late doesn't register with me.

CARLA SHULTZ: We've got 15 days, so it's not too late for people to call their elected officials. We can always hope. We're not gonna give up hope.

JENNY CRAIG: I see a West Virginia and an America that works for everyone where companies pay their fair share, where everyone works together, and we truly have a working class, I guess, revolution, it's a weird word that people are kinda scared of, but that's truly what we need. Working people have been forgotten for so long, again, under both political parties. It's a tough fight, and we have to continually know that it's a just fight and it's a right fight, and we need to just encourage each other to stand up against what we know is wrong, which is exploitation of the middle-class.

LAURA FLANDERS: For The Laura Flanders Show, I'm Laura in Morgantown, West Virginia. Till the next time, stay kind, stay curious, and thanks for joining us.

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