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Lost job is familiar story in key state of Ohio

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SALEM, Ohio - Knocking on doors in northeastern Ohio, the political newcomer running for state representative used the same line on every porch: "Hi, I'm Frank Rayl. I worked over at Eljer until they moved my job to China."

The story of Rayl, a Democrat running an uphill campaign, is a familiar one in a state that has lost 237,000 jobs since 2001. He and 250 workers were let go last spring when Eljer PlumbingWare shuttered its tub and sink plant in Salem and started making some of those products in China.

So familiar is Rayl's story that when he visited one home while campaigning, a young man opened the door and exclaimed, "Good to meet you. I'm Scott Seelye, and I worked over at the steel company until they moved my job to Mexico."

The loss of jobs looms as an issue that could prove pivotal in a presidential election that is likely to be close in Ohio. The state has received more attention this political season from presidential candidates and the news media than any other, and there's a reason.

No Republican aspirant has captured the White House without winning Ohio, which has 20 electoral votes. George W. Bush secured the Buckeye State for the GOP in 2000 after Democrat Al Gore all but folded his tent here in early October to focus on winning Florida.

The most recent reputable Ohio poll, sponsored by the Columbus Dispatch, showed the president with 51 percent, Democrat John Kerry with 44 percent and independent Ralph Nader with 4 percent. But that poll was taken largely before the first presidential debate and the encounter between vice presidential candidates in Cleveland on Tuesday night.

Economic issues such as outsourcing of jobs are widely discussed in Ohio even though they were on the back burner in both debates amid discussion of war and terrorism.

But an airing of issues about jobs and the strength of the economic recovery is certain to sound prominently during the second presidential debate Friday night in St. Louis, a 90-minute encounter between Bush and Kerry devoted to domestic issues.

On Wednesday, both candidates previewed some of the themes they are likely to sound at Washington University.

Campaigning in Wilkes-Barre, Pa., Bush reiterated how the nation's employment pictured darkened three years ago, when 1 million jobs were lost after the Sept. 11 attacks. Some people even warned that the nation could plummet into depression, the president said. Instead, the nation added 1.7 million jobs in the last year, he said before taking aim at Kerry, a Massachusetts senator.

"The senator is proposing higher taxes on more than 900,000 small-business owners," Bush said. "My opponent is one of the few candidates in history to campaign on a pledge to raise taxes. And that's the kind of promise a politician from Massachusetts usually keeps."

The St. Louis audience is likely to hear the claim from Kerry that until now,

no administration since Herbert Hoover's will have ended a four-year term without adding jobs.

Former Deputy Treasury Secretary Roger Altman, speaking to reporters on Kerry's behalf Wednesday, minimized the additional 1.7 million jobs, which includes 90,000 added in the last three months.

The 9/11 attacks have "nothing to do with the last three months," he said. "That's a poor record. That's not enough to keep up with the growing population."

On Wednesday evening, the Kerry campaign began airing a 30-second television ad in Ohio accusing the Bush administration of encouraging the export of jobs.

"The president has made a choice of a policy that actually uses your tax money to reward the company that goes overseas. You explain the common sense of that to me, ladies and gentlemen," Kerry says, promising in the ad to close tax loopholes.

While the issue of jobs has been largely absent from the debates, it has remained a white-hot political issue in Ohio and other Midwestern battlegrounds.

Nonetheless, Ohio analysts say candidates and the media have often treated the issue superficially.

"I think the debate on these issues has been poor. These issues will remain for us no matter who is elected," said John Colm, who heads WIRE-Net, a nonpartisan organization formed to support manufacturing in Cleveland.

Colm said neither Bush nor Kerry has been explicit in telling voters how he would enforce trade deals so as to protect factory jobs.

Ed Morrison, director of the Center for Regional Economic Issues at Case Western Reserve University, said he is troubled by the candidates' preference to debate job loss and trade largely in 30-second television ads.

"We are in a very tough game here, and the fact that our congressional and presidential leadership seems to be clueless is startling to me," he said.

The "Honda vote"

The complexity of Ohio's job situation, particularly when it comes to foreign companies, may be one reason the issue is not debated fully. Roughly 20 percent of manufacturing job losses in the state are certified by the government to be trade-related, according to a report released this week by Policy Matters, a nonprofit research institute in Cleveland.

But Ohio also has benefited from foreign investment, particularly in the auto industry. About 16,000 workers are employed by Honda at plants in central and western Ohio, among them a facility building engines for General Motors. Analysts say these nonunion employees, referred to as the "Honda vote," are less likely than workers in other manufacturing sectors to cast votes against the Bush administration next month.

Ned Hill, a professor of economic development at Cleveland State University, also said both sides in the political debate dealt irresponsibly with the issue of job dislocation.

"People on the right have been mean and stupid and people on the left and have been mean and stupid," he said.

The GOP, he said, has generally failed to enforce trade agreements while being insensitive to people who have lost their jobs. Democrats, he said, have used faulty statistics to make their case while being blind to the bigger picture.

In that picture as he sees it, most of the lost jobs are traceable to an

increase in manufacturing productivity, which is healthy. And most typically move elsewhere in the United States rather than out of the country.

Rayl, the fledgling candidate for the Ohio General Assembly, says the analysts who make such assessments don't understand what it's like to lose a job. He recounted horror stories of workers when his plumbing works factory closed five months ago: houses lost, bankruptcies, health problems and one suicide.

Yet Rayl encountered conflicted voters like George Charesne while campaigning along the city streets of Salem this week.

Charesne, 61, a retired autoworker, said he'll support Rayl but is undecided whether to vote for Bush or Kerry.

"The economy is not really in trouble. There are always jobs out there if you're willing to look for them," said Charesne, who is supplementing his pension with a \$7.50-an-hour job repairing furniture.

Sarah Nelson, too, was won over by Rayl but is torn about the presidential election. On one hand, she said, Bush deserves support for steadying the nation after 9/11. But she is dismayed about what she sees as the administration's nonchalant attitude as Ohio jobs like Rayl's leave for China.

How Nelson, 50, and undecided voters like her solve their dilemma may well make the difference in the presidential race, not just in Ohio, but nationally.

"I just don't know what I'm going to do. All I know that this is going to be the most important election for my family and friends," she said.

Battleground: Ohio

Population: 11.4 million

Electoral votes: 20

2000 presidential winner: George W. Bush

Issue: Disappearing factory jobs

No state is commanding more attention from both parties this political season. The state has turned more Republican in recent years, but unemployment here has jumped to 5.9 percent from 3.9 percent when Bush took office, and Democrats hope voters will respond by voting for a change.

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