

Bad times getting worse in Ohio

Chart from Policy Matters Ohio

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RIVERSIDE — Max Becraft was an assembly team leader with 10 years experience at Delphi's Moraine plant until he was pressured into a buyout in 2006. "They relocated all the best jobs to Mexico," the 46-year-old Riverside resident said.

Becraft was unemployed for nearly a year before finding a job remanufacturing printer cartridges in Vandalia. Ten days ago, he was laid off again. "All that work is going to China at half the cost, even with the shipping," he said.

Becraft believes free trade agreements "have destroyed the traditional job roles in this country."

Economists disagree on the impact of free trade, but they do know hundreds of thousands of Ohio workers like Becraft are hurting as manufacturing jobs disappear to other countries. Having never fully recovered from the previous recession, Ohio shows signs of slipping into another: unemployment reached a 15-year high of 7.2 percent in July, according to Policy Matters Ohio, a Cleveland-based think tank whose annual report on the widening gap between rich and poor was released today, Aug. 31.

As rising fuel, food and medical costs squeeze household budgets, median wages in Ohio are dropping — a decline of 4.3 percent since 2001, according to U.S. Census Bureau data. Through the 1980s, Ohio's workers made substantially more than the median U.S. worker. In 2007, they earned less — \$14.76 per hour compared to \$15.10 nationally, Policy Matters found. All but the top 30 percent of Ohio wage earners are making less in inflation-adjusted dollars than they did in 1979.

Ohio can't dig itself out of a deepening economic hole without changes in national policy, economists say. Many residents say amen. Many want to see universal health care coverage, fairer trade and tax policies, more opportunities for retraining and an end to corporate tax breaks for sending jobs overseas.