**Headline:** The Federal Program That Can Protect Workers When Foreign Trade Kills Their Jobs

By Tom Conway

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**[Article Body:]**

James Boutcher seized control of his future several years ago when foreign dumping cost him his entry-level position [amid a series of job cuts](https://www.wkms.org/business-economy/2015-11-03/century-aluminum-laying-off-150-workers) at Century Aluminum in Hawesville, Kentucky.

He enrolled in the federal government’s [Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA)](https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/tradeact) program, went back to school to become an electrician and graduated with high-demand skills affording lasting protection in an evolving economy.

Now, on the heels of yet [another wave of layoffs](https://www.14news.com/2022/06/22/letter-century-aluminum-stopping-operations-9-12-months/) at Century Aluminum, Boutcher wants Republicans in Congress to join Democrats in quickly reestablishing TAA so hundreds of other workers have the same opportunity he did to start over.

Century Aluminum began idling the smelter in June, citing rising energy costs sparked by [Russia’s war](https://www.hancockclarion.com/2022/06/22/century-aluminum-will-layoff-628-curtail-operations-up-to-a-year/) on Ukraine. TAA expired at the very same time amid the lack of Republican support, leaving about 500 members of USW Local 9423 at the Hawesville plant—and a growing number of other Americans harmed by globalization—to fend for themselves.

“It needs to be there,” Boutcher said of TAA, which Congress created decades ago to assist workers who lose their livelihoods because of the adverse effects of world trade. “If anyone has any doubts, I’m living proof.”

The importance of the program only continues to grow because of the war in Ukraine, foreign competitors’ efforts to subvert fair trade laws and other factors outside workers’ control. In the 2021 fiscal year alone, the program enrolled 107,000 additional workers, up 12 percent from 2020, with many of the new participants living in states like [Texas, Nebraska and Wisconsin](https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ETA/tradeact/pdfs/AnnualReport21.pdf) where [Republicans](https://www.politico.com/newsletters/weekly-trade/2022/10/24/congress-draws-their-lame-duck-red-lines-00063085) so far [refuse to support](https://rollcall.com/2021/07/02/democrats-republicans-take-recess-as-workers-trade-aid-shrinks/) the program.

TAA covered tuition, books, mileage, supplies and other expenses for displaced workers who opted to go to college or trade school so they could upskill, as Boutcher did, or change career paths.

The program provided case management, career counseling and job search services. And it provided [relocation assistance](https://www.dli.pa.gov/Individuals/Workforce-Development/resources/Pages/Trade-Act.aspx%2523:~:text=The%252520benefits%252520for%252520workers%252520under,certain%252520deadlines%252520and%252520eligibility%252520requirements.) to workers who had to move for new employment and [temporary wage support](https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ETA/tradeact/pdfs/DOL-Trade-Process-Infographic.pdf?) to eligible workers whose new jobs paid less than their previous ones.

“I was not out a penny,” said Boutcher, recalling how a counselor at Owensboro Community and Technical College regularly reviewed his grades to ensure his compliance with TAA requirements and keep him on the path to graduation.

The program bought tools he needed for hands-on learning and enabled him to take extra classes so that, on top of his associate degree focusing on industrial electricity, he graduated with knowledge of residential and commercial work.

After two years of study, he said, he “hit the ground running” and worked at a couple of companies before rejoining Century Aluminum in an electrician’s role a couple of years ago.

When Century idled the entire smelter and laid him off again last summer, he quickly found a new job using the skills TAA helped him attain.

“My bills are paid,” he said. “My kids aren’t hungry. We’ve not had to scale our lives down. I get to pick where I want to work now.”

TAA’s annual reports to Congress tell many similar stories of displaced workers [successfully transitioning to new careers](https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ETA/tradeact/pdfs/AnnualReport21.pdf) and more resilient futures, with the overwhelming majority of participants finding jobs soon after exiting the program.

It’s been so successful that unions and Democrats pushed not only for renewing the program but expanding and strengthening it this year.

Among other improvements, supporters advocated [covering child care](https://waysandmeans.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/ways-and-means-democrats-introduce-legislation-reform-and-renew-key-us) expenses to ensure participants can both support their families and go to school. They proposed expanding participation to workers who lose their jobs because of the kinds of [supply chain shortages](https://www.stabenow.senate.gov/news/senators-stabenow-peters-introduce-bill-to-support-workers-impacted-by-trade) experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

And they pushed for extending financial assistance and other support to communities when trade-related plant closures and job losses gut local tax bases.

That’s the situation now facing the Hawesville area. Century Aluminum [employed more people than live in Hawesville](https://www.14news.com/2022/06/23/hawesville-mayor-expresses-concern-after-century-aluminum-plant-shutdown/), and the smelter was the [second-largest employer](https://www.hancockclarion.com/2022/06/22/century-aluminum-will-layoff-628-curtail-operations-up-to-a-year/) in Hancock County.

“I don’t know how you put a price on it,” Local 9423 President Andy Meserve said of TAA, recalling that the layoffs caught workers out of the blue. He noted that he and his co-workers celebrated a major milestone—completing work on a potline—just about a week before the company announced it was idling the plant.

Century Aluminum hopes to restart the facility—the company’s largest smelter and the biggest producer of high-purity primary aluminum on the continent—within a year.

But Meserve’s colleagues need incomes now. Without the comprehensive counseling and services provided by TAA, Meserve said, his former co-workers hunt for work as best they can.

They’re among thousands of workers across the country who lost the opportunity even to apply for TAA after June 30. But Republicans’ refusal to extend the program also devastated [thousands of other workers](https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ETA/tradeact/pdfs/TAA_Termination_Fact_Sheet.pdf) who had already filed petitions but received no further consideration once the program expired.

“It’s frustrating,” said Jeff Ogg, one of about 50 members of USW Local 1017 who lost their jobs when GE Lighting shut its Logan, Ohio, plant several months ago because of foreign competition in the [lighting components](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/20/business/economy/trade-adjustment-assistance-jobs.html) industry.

The Labor Department improperly denied the group’s petition for TAA even though workers met eligibility requirements. Then the program expired before the workers could file their appeal, casting them adrift.

Members of Congress failing to support TAA need to take a closer look at it, contends Boutcher, noting the program not only helps individual workers and keeps communities strong but protects the overall economy by retraining workers for in-demand jobs.

Boutcher, for example, helps to meet the nation’s [soaring need](https://www.ketv.com/article/fading-trades-skilled-labor-workers-needed-as-the-workload-increases-but-the-workforce-decreases/42166563) for skilled tradespeople.

“It’s paid off,” he said of TAA.