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# Strikes on Central Ave.

*The closure of Brockway Motor Trucks and the end of Huskietown, USA.*

Lucas Kaczynski

On a cold January day in 1977, factory men in flannel shop coats and boots joined bundled up women from the office staff and marched out of work at Brockway Motor Trucks in Cortland, New York. As they paced the length of Central Ave, their signs, voices, and actions demanded respect and cooperation from their parent company, Mack Trucks. Cortland had come to be called “Huskietown, USA” because of the Brockway company and its famous huskie dog logo. Brockway called their trucks “living legends of the highway,” and the workers on strike that day, from welders to secretaries, were fighting to keep the iconic Brockway name alive. As they stood in the snow that day, few could have predicted that Brockway was reaching the end of the line, and that in a few short months, the doors of the factory on Central Ave. in Cortland would be closed forever, and the company that had employed hundreds and given Cortland the world famous title of “Huskietown, USA” would disappear in a storm of anger and controversy.

The closure of Brockway Motor Trucks in 1977 has been a source of great discussion, confusion, and speculation both within the Cortland community and those within the trucking industry. The question of how a company that produced “the most rugged truck in the world” (according to Overdrive Magazine) could end so abruptly has been the fuel for intense debate over truck stop coffee cups and mugs of beer in Cortland taverns. This essay argues that the closure of Brockway was as complicated as it was swift, and that factors from both Mack and Brockway combined to close the doors on Cortland’s most famous industry. Brockway Motor Trucks was forced to close as a result of Mack viewing Brockway as an expensive, low volume, competitive subsidiary, and Brockway workers going out on strike because they felt underpaid, underappreciated, and unheard by Mack.

Historians in both Cortland County and in the trucking industry at large have speculated about the reasons behind Brockway's closure for decades. Industry historians who have viewed the Brockway strikes as the root cause of the company's demise have clashed with Cortland locals who remain bitter 40 years later for Mack abandoning them and forcing Brockway to die. The reality is far more complex, and instead resulted from actions by both Mack and Brockway. Using newspaper articles from the *Cortland Standard* and the *Independent Villager* from the 1960s through the 1980s, and books that describe larger industry trends in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this essay looks to answer the question of why Brockway closed, and is organized chronologically through the events that shaped the end of Brockway. Deindustrialization caused American factories and industries to close from labor unrest, international competition, and economic uncertainty in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. These trends forced Mack to increasingly view their Brockway subsidiary as an expensive, low volume burden on Mack. In turn, Brockway workers went on strike over a contract they felt was unfair, and they demanded more respect and appreciation from their parent company, Mack. The end of the company was inevitable, but the worker strikes of early 1977 were the tipping point for Brockway, and Mack decided to close the doors and sell the assets of Brockway Trucks. The story of the end for Brockway is not a story of trucks and tires, but of people whose livelihood suddenly vanished and whose confidence in their community and their future was shaken. It serves as a reminder of how the closure of a factory can impact a town's sense of identity and direction for the future.

### **The Nation Knocks on Cortland's Door**

When Brockway Motor Trucks shutdown in 1977, increased expenses, decreased sales, worker discontent, and the eventual closing of a local industry were not isolated events in Cortland. Across America, the effects of deindustrialization were reaching every industry from coast to coast. Long standing businesses were finding it impossible to operate in a climate of economic uncertainty and

global competition, leading to worker unrest that caused further shop floor tension. In her book *Farewell to the Factory*, Ruth Milkman describes the conditions at General Motors auto assembly plant in Linden, New Jersey. She explains that many workers felt unheard and unappreciated by both management and their union representatives. Workers at GM Linden were encouraged to leave by being offered a buy-out of their job, so that GM could reduce the workforce. Milkman asserts that a down-sized economy, erosion of real wages and benefits, and the decline of organized labor's power were industry wide trends.<sup>1</sup> In his book *Capital Moves*, Jefferson Cowie examines how the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) continually moved its manufacturing facilities during the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, consistently in search of cheaper labor.<sup>2</sup> Across American manufacturing, companies were looking for cheaper ways to make their products. Profits were in trouble because of increased foreign competition, and wages and job security for American workers were the price of this development. The situation at Brockway was not unique or unusual. Mack knew that Brockway was becoming too expensive and began considering relieving themselves of the burden that Brockway presented to them. Industry trends played a role in Brockway's demise, but it was in the heart of Cortland, New York that the real battle for Brockway's survival was fought.

### **Mack's Perspective**

For Brockway Motor Trucks, harbingers of the end came 20 years before the doors were locked for the final time on Central Ave. Brockway was purchased by Mack Trucks of Allentown, Pennsylvania in 1956, but was allowed to operate as their own autonomous division. Brockway needed financial help badly in the mid 1950s, based on the very nature of the truck they were building. Brockway trucks were custom built, and no two were alike. All of the parts were purchased from other companies, and Brockway assembled them to models the company made and specifications a customer requested.

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth Milkman, *Farewell to the Factory* (Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Moves* (New York, NY, The New Press, 2001).

Engines came in multiple sizes and were furnished by Detroit Diesel, Caterpillar, or Cummins. The whole truck, from the axles to the paint job, was custom ordered to the buyer. Consequently, Brockway trucks were the highest quality heavy duty trucks on the road, but also the most expensive to build or to purchase. Mack's ownership of Brockway promised to give the company the financial stability it needed. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the partnership between Mack and Brockway seemed stable, and Brockway sold more trucks than it ever had before. However, trouble was brewing.

As the 1970s progressed and a severe national recession combined with rising parts costs, Mack began to tire of funding such an expensive project. An April 1977 issue of the *Cortland Standard* recounted how in 1975, "the weak national economy combined with a year of extreme parts shortages and inventory imbalance, plus declining truck sales due to new federal regulated mandatory safety items and environmental requirements, caused several temporary shutdowns of the truck factory."<sup>3</sup> The article continues by describing further shutdowns and layoffs in the following year as parts were harder to find and more expensive to purchase, and profits failed to compensate for rising operating costs. In their final statement to the community, Mack explained that "the high cost factor and low volume compounded by the problem created by ever increasing government regulations mitigated against the sale (of Brockway to another buyer). All avenues to sell Brockway as a going business have been explored without success and there is no alternative but to cease operations."<sup>4</sup> For Mack, closing Brockway was a question of profitability, and Brockway's huskie dog was quickly going into the red.

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<sup>3</sup> Kaufman, Joan. "Shut Down Brings A Sad End to A Famed Industry." *Cortland Standard*, April 1977.

<sup>4</sup> "Brockway Will Cease Operations." *Cortland Standard*. March 29, 1977.

Many employees of Brockway also felt that Mack closed the company because Brockway was a very serious competitor to Mack. Mack trucks were assembly line built and were far more affordable compared to Brockway's hand crafted, custom built trucks. Despite the price difference, for many truck drivers and trucking companies, Brockway's quality won out. The *Independent Villager* asserted that "Even though Brockway has been owned by Mack, the two companies were still in competition and Brockway has, especially in over-seas sales, been cutting into Mack sales. This was another factor in the decision to close."<sup>5</sup> In a 1982 newspaper article, union steward Fred Cutia claimed Brockway had over 2000 back-orders at the time they closed, and that Mack wanted a third of those orders for itself.<sup>6</sup> Mack had bought Brockway to control one of its main competitors, but in the economic climate of the 1970s, fewer truck orders meant that Mack felt even further competition from Brockway, and many in Cortland believed that closing the company was Mack's solution to this sense of pressure from their higher quality subsidiary.

### **Brockway's Perspective**

As Mack began losing interest in funding Brockway and considered selling the company, Brockway workers felt that they were being treated as second-class employees compared to the rest of the Mack family. Severe grievances existed over wages, benefits, and treatment of the Brockway organization by Mack. The biggest issue to Brockway employees was their contract, and how it compared to others in the auto and truck building industry. One employee at Brockway described their reasons to strike and walkout when he said that employees of Mack at other plants "got their best ever contract in the current negotiations, a three year pact, while the best offer made to Brockway workers was a one year contract with wages frozen at the old contract rates. Brockway foremen got a \$25-a-

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<sup>5</sup> McNerney, Diantha. "Brockway- A Struggle for Jobs." *The Independent Villager*, April 1977.

<sup>6</sup> "Former Employees Look Back at Brockway." *Cortland Standard*, April 12, 1982.

week raise this month while other workers did not even get a cost-of-living increase.”<sup>7</sup> Brockway employees increasingly believed that Mack was mistreating its Brockway division by not giving them the same wages and benefits as workers at other Mack facilities. Many Brockway workers knew that Mack was considering selling the company to an outside buyer and was consequently unwilling to raise wages because it might limit potential buyers for the Brockway firm. The same above-mentioned employee also stated that “A prospective buyer of the Brockway operation surveyed wages in Cortland County and refused to negotiate further unless Brockway agreed to take a \$3-an-hour pay cut.”<sup>8</sup> For Brockway workers, the decision to strike was based heavily on dollars and cents. But the environment and lack of communication within the workplace also played a role.

Strained relationships among workers, the union, and management also contributed to Brockway’s closure. Higher wages than the Cortland County average were one of the few reasons that employees stayed with Brockway. Workers were proud of their skills and proud of the quality truck they built, but relations between union members of United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 68 and executives were consistently strained. According to Brockway employee John Daniels, labor and management could not get along as a result of constant union disputes, describing it as “a cat and mouse game.”<sup>9</sup> He went on to say that “I hated it from day one. The atmosphere there wasn’t good... it wasn’t conducive to good labor”. Brockway employees were frustrated that their workplace environment had developed into a constant battle with management to retain the wages, benefits, and privileges that they had.

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<sup>7</sup> “‘Bad Feelings’ Cited in Decision to Strike.” *Cortland Standard*. January 21, 1977

<sup>8</sup> IBID

<sup>9</sup> Kennedy, Marlene. “Two Brockway Families Talk About the Shut-Down.” *Cortland Standard*, April 18, 1977.

Tension grew increasingly evident between employees and management at Brockway. Workers who enjoyed their jobs and their co-workers were soon soured to the workplace when it came to communication and relationships between their union and their company leadership. At the time of Brockway's closure, many workers did not know if they still had jobs or not because they could not receive word from either the union or Mack. Confidence in the workplace and in management suffered because of the severe lack of communication.<sup>10</sup> This inability to communicate prolonged the strikes of early 1977 and combined with undercurrents of disgruntlement to keep workers of strike longer. The stalemate between the employees of Brockway and Mack eventually lead to Mack's final verdict to liquidate the company.

### **Brockway Blames the Union**

Many former Brockway employees also blamed both the UAW and its local chapter for Brockway's closure. Local UAW 68 had been battling the Mack organization since the 1950s, and since much of the management at Brockway had roles in management at Mack, many workers felt that company bosses' loyalties lay not in Cortland, but with Mack in Allentown. Employees also felt that the Union itself did not help relations between workers and management or do much to curb Brockway's closure. In a newspaper article 5 years after Brockway closed, former Brockway employee John Foote said that "the union sold us down the tubes for one of the best contracts Mack got in their life."<sup>11</sup> According to the article "He claimed that UAW representatives knew the plant's closing was irreversible and should have insured that union local members had transfer rights and severance pay."<sup>12</sup> The opinion that the UAW had betrayed Brockway was not an isolated one. Former Brockway employee Geno

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<sup>10</sup> Camarano, R N. "Local Meeting Held to Assess Brockway Situation." *Cortland Standard*. April 7, 1977

<sup>11</sup> "Former Employees Look Back at Brockway." *Cortland Standard*, April 12, 1982.

<sup>12</sup>IBID



Patriarco said, "The union people played really and truly into the hands of everybody except their own.' They played into the company's hands when they went on strike, he said, and they should have accepted the contract as the UAW advised, not rejected it."<sup>13</sup> At the time of the strikes, most Brockway workers felt that the union was on their side and best knew how to mediate the situation. As years passed, many began to feel that UAW Local 68 representatives had mishandled strategies for negotiation, and in fact contributed to Mack's decision to end Brockway.

### **The Strike That Broke the Huskie's Back**

The events that lead to the Brockway worker strikes in 1977 were varied and consisted of grievances among members of both the Mack and Brockway organizations. However, it was the actual strike from January to March of 1977 that finally convinced Mack to close the Brockway factory for good. Because Brockway workers and their UAW representatives felt that the new contract was unfair to Brockway employees, the decision was made to go on strike. At noon on Thursday, January 20<sup>th</sup>, 1977, 370 Brockway union members walked off their jobs and onto the snowy sidewalks of Central Ave. This "Wildcat Strike," as it was termed, was itself a roadblock to negotiations between the union and Mack. Robert J Matthews, vice president of Mack and general manager of Brockway, said that the top International UAW Negotiator had told Brockway workers that any strike would be unauthorized. However, "The Brockway local committee went through the shop and urged employees to strike. Appropriate action will be taken."<sup>14</sup> On January 22<sup>nd</sup>, a vote was taken among UAW 68 members and the newest Mack-Brockway contract was rejected by a vote of 367-8.<sup>15</sup> As negotiations continued, Brockway employees agreed to return to work on January 24<sup>th</sup>, and went back to the factory at that time.

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<sup>13</sup> IBID

<sup>14</sup> "Wildcat Strike Won't Help Says Brockway Executive." *Cortland Standard*. January 22, 1977.

<sup>15</sup> "Brockway, Union Fail to Reach Agreement." *Cortland Standard*. March 22, 1977.

However, the end of Brockway had only just begun, and the strikes on Central Ave. would resume shortly.

When Brockway employees returned to work on January 24<sup>th</sup> and continued contract negotiations, few realized how short lived the peace would be. On February 1<sup>st</sup>, Robert J Matthews announced that a natural gas shortage was forcing the company to cease operations until further notice. Cortland County schools, hospitals, and businesses that used natural gas for heating their facilities were affected by the gas shortage and were forced to reduce gas usage through “thermostatic controls and scheduling.”<sup>16</sup> As a result, all Brockway employees were laid off until an adequate gas supply could resume to heat the factory. This involuntary layoff would also contribute to Brockway workers’ frustration and their desire to strike.

When Brockway announced its intentions to continue production a week later on February 8<sup>th</sup>, Brockway employees instead returned to the picket lines. The next 8 weeks proved to be a stalemate between Brockway and Mack. On March 14<sup>th</sup>, the *Cortland Standard* announced that the negotiating committee for Brockway (consisting of management) had met with members of UAW 68, and an acceptable contract still had not been reached.<sup>17</sup> Union members from the factory floor and the office staff continued to strike on Central Ave. for the remainder of February and into March. The situation at Brockway had become all but irreversible. As Brockway employees continued to strike for the second month in a row, Mack decided that this was their opportunity to resolve the struggles at Brockway by locking the doors for good.

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<sup>16</sup> “Brockway Shutdown to Continue Until Feb. 8<sup>th</sup> At Least.” *Cortland Standard*, February 4, 1977.

<sup>17</sup> “No Agreement Reached Between Brockway, Union.” *Cortland Standard*, March 14, 1977.

On March 29<sup>th</sup>, 1977, the Brockway huskie dog, a true “living legend of the highway,” took its final breath. The *Cortland Standard* reported that in the morning, Brockway employees had been informed at their departmental meetings that Brockway “would cease manufacturing operations and dispose of inventory within the next seven to ten days and would then start liquidation of the company.”<sup>18</sup> With that final statement, Mack closed the doors on Brockway and a proud chapter of Cortland County history. As March turned to April and winter faded into spring, 65 years of building “the most rugged truck in the world” had come to an end.

### **The Post-Brockway Years**

For Brockway employees, many of whom had worked for years at the company and had built their lives around the Brockway Huskie, the closure of Brockway meant not only unemployment and financial insecurity, but the loss of a community icon. Without a steady paycheck, former employees were forced to find work locally in other industries or move away for better job prospects. Former Brockway employees were also at a disadvantage because the Cortland community held deep resentment toward them because of the prolonged strikes. In an article published by the *Cortland Standard*, former employee John Daniels stated that the general feeling in the community was “vicious and vindictive,” and that the undercurrent in Cortland was that Brockway workers “got what they deserved... that they were greedy.”<sup>19</sup> Years later, Brockway clerk and typist Dorothy Nitti recounted that in the years following Brockway’s closure “there was a bitterness against workers because (they believed) you led the place to be closed. When you told people the story, they didn’t believe it. But they didn’t know-they didn’t work there.”<sup>20</sup> She followed by saying “You almost felt doomed to write

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<sup>18</sup> “Brockway Will Cease Operations.” *Cortland Standard*. March 29, 1977.

<sup>19</sup> Kennedy, Marlene. “Two Brockway Families Talk About the Shut-Down.” *Cortland Standard*, April 18, 1977.

<sup>20</sup> “Former Employees Look Back at Brockway.” *Cortland Standard*, April 12, 1982.

Brockway Trucks on a job application.” Former Brockway employees felt blacklisted within their own community, and many struggled to find work and maintain respect and dignity amongst community backlash.

As suddenly as Brockway’s story had ended, there was briefly optimism in Cortland. In April 1977, New York City attorney and investor Steven Romer announced that he planned to buy the former Brockway factory, rehire all its employees, and begin manufacturing Brockway trucks and electric cars there.<sup>21</sup> For several weeks, there was hope and excitement throughout Cortland that Brockway might return with the help of this newfound savior. Romer was a young, charismatic businessman who promised to bring Brockway back to the Cortland community and predicted that manufacturing would begin again by the summer of that year. However, negotiations between Romer and Mack Trucks soon fell through when Mack required Romer to purchase obsolete Brockway inventory at exorbitant prices. Even after Brockway’s closure, it still seemed that Mack controlled the fate of the Cortland community. Within several years, the Brockway factories were demolished, and the community looked back with sadness at the death of Brockway and its huskie dog. Many knew that the end of the company was inevitable, but it still came all too quickly.

### **A Community Still Healing**

When Brockway closed in 1977, the Cortland community was left in shock, saddened and angry that such a prominent industry and Cortland County employer had suddenly died amongst such controversy and struggle. The question of why Brockway closed has been the subject of debate for decades. Brockway Trucks was forced to close because Mack felt that it was a high cost, low volume subsidiary, and because prolonged worker strikes over an unfair contract lead Mack to finally cease

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<sup>21</sup> “A New Beginning for Brockway.” *The Independent Villager*, April 25, 1977.

Brockway operations. In a climate of deindustrialization and economic stagnation, Mack was growing tired of funding an expensive department such as Brockway, while decreasing sales and increasing competition furthered their desire to dispose of the company. Brockway employees felt cheated by Mack over an unfair contract and went on strike demanding better treatment. These strikes combined with Mack's desire to liquidate their unprofitable subsidiary, and Brockway's doors were shut. The story of Brockway's closure is the story of real people who depended upon Brockway's employment and were proud of the trucks they built. When Brockway closed, their livelihood and sense of identity were gone. This is representative of many small towns across America who have lost a major industry. The end of Brockway is a study on how the loss of a small-town industry can shape the economic and ideological future of the community. Today, Central Ave. in Cortland stands mostly silent, but the Brockway legacy lives on. Every time a vintage Brockway truck is driven onto the road, and its golden huskie hood ornament catches the wind, the story of Brockway trucks and Cortland, New York are reborn again.

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