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## Downsizing deals - Teessiders mourn end of an era

*Sunday, 21 Feb, 2010*

February 19, 2010, is a date that will forever be etched on to Teesside's collective conscience. More than a century and a half of the industry on which Teesside was built came to an end as the last of molten metal trickled out of Corus's blast furnace at Redcar.

On a freezing cold, bleak Friday, a flood of supporters and well-wishers united at the gates of Corus to show dignified support and reflect on the mothballing of the last of 100 blast furnaces which once lined the Tees. They came to stand together, workers, children and their grandparents, bearing witness to the death of steel production in a community that was once the industry's beating heart.

Little wonder then that everyone was united in sombre mood, displaying black armbands as the Marske and District Silver Prize Band sounded *The Last Post*. As the accomplished musician's final note faded, multi union chairman Mr Geoff Waterfield's call for "three cheers for Teesside" was met with loud and proud "hip hip hoorays" through tears.

Watching the proceedings with sad eyes was Mr Peter Fulton, 73, who worked at the Redcar plant for 46 years, retiring in 2000 said "I've never felt as emotional in my life as I did when I heard that they were going to mothball the blast furnace. When it was opened in 1979, 26,000 people worked here. What's left now? "I wanted to be here today to show solidarity with these lads. In the old days, the people who made the decisions lived in this community. Now it's all gone global and decisions about Teessiders' lives are taken in Mumbai. Without the blast furnace, you have nothing."

Steelworker Mr Darren Stapleton, 37, and wife Ms Sally, 39, sported Save Our Steel T shirts and black armbands as men of steel came out from the site, still wearing their overalls and hard hats. He said: "It's been very hard. We are still in a bit of shock. The redundancy payment won't last very long. It will have such a knock on effect on the area that it will become a ghost town."

Mr Peter Hobson, 47, from Middlesbrough has worked in the steel industry for 31 years. His job in the Beam Mill is safe for now, but the married dad of four, from Middlesbrough, said "It's like going to a funeral. These are all my pals. It's just a nightmare. This is bigger than just the steel industry. It's about the effect on the whole area. All the shops, cafes and people with other businesses. It's massive."

Mr Tony Bunn, 49, from Eston, said "I left school on a Friday and started in the steel industry on a Monday so did my father, uncles and brothers. I'm looking round and I know a lot of the lads and their families. It's absolutely devastating. It should never have come to this. The Government should have got here more quickly. They have waited until the last day. I don't see what the burning desire to get rid of Teesside Cast Products is. We know there are orders out there we've even got people phoning up today requiring the steel we make."

Mr Chris Williamson, a local authority worker, said: "The steel industry on Teesside has very much been a community industry like the coal industry was in Durham. It's sad this country is hurting its industries that are built so much on local community."

Mr John Wakelin, 54, a mechanical fitter and trade union rep, from South Bank, vowed: "The furnace is being mothballed but we are not going to go out without a fight."

Retired Mr Johnson, 65, from Middlesbrough, held a placard which read: "This Government helped the banks, the car makers, themselves to public money why not help Corus? The Government should have supported them. It must be cheaper to keep them working than on the dole."

Mr Steve Mitchell, 47, a blast furnace worker from Linthorpe, said "I've been here since I was 16 years old. I've worked here 31 years and I've done nothing else. It hasn't really hit me yet and I haven't really thought about what I'll do next. Hopefully, we've got a future and it will be my job to put this furnace back on. I would want to be part of that team."

He added "I would like the Government to come in and hopefully they still can to give us some money to keep the place going. We had Mandelson and Gordon Brown, the full Cabinet sat on their backsides in Durham yesterday, why weren't they here to help us?"

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