

A Stirring National Debate Over Trade: Michigan Tooling Association Changes Its Name And Broadens Its Reach To Take On NAM

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The 670-member Michigan Tooling Association is taking a great leap forward and is planting itself on the national landscape. Driven by growing resentment among manufacturing business owners over the escalating trade deficit and the perceived unwillingness of the federal government and national trade associations to represent the interests of domestic manufacturers, the 74-year-old tooling group has changed its name to the Tooling, Manufacturing & Technologies Association (TMTA). It is seeking members from outside Michigan and will conduct an aggressive campaign to wrestle control of the trade agenda in Washington away from multinational corporations.

"The multinationals have way, way, way too much influence in Washington and that has got to change," says Rob Dumont, president and CEO of the re-named group. "Right now, trade policy is not dictated by Congress. It's dictated by the multinationals based on making a quick buck in the short term. You cannot have the trade deficits we have with total and absolute disregard for people. It is destined to fail."

The Michigan Tooling Association changed its name to eliminate geographic boundaries and it expanded the name to include any domestic manufacturer or technology company being challenged from unfair offshore competition. Says Brian Sullivan, TMTA's director of sales and marketing: "We've decided to draw a line in the sand and demonstrate resolve not to fade into economic and political irrelevance."

Dumont says the association is passionate about the proposition that manufacturing is fundamental to the future of the United States. "We're going to come out of the gate fairly quickly," he told Manufacturing & Technology News. "We're going to aggressively invite people to join us. We're going to ruffle feathers. We're going to meet with resistance. But we've got a determination that isn't paralleled by any association I'm aware of. And we're not going to get ourselves into a trap where we have multinationals as members. We respect their right to do what they want to do, but we're going to protect our right to do it differently."

Ninety-six percent of the Michigan Tooling Association's membership approved the name change during a special membership meeting on December 21; ninety-five percent approved expanding the scope of the organization.

"One of the debates we had with our board of directors who considered this very, very carefully and at length had to do with our roots being in Michigan," Dumont explains. "The reality is we can work all day in Lansing, Michigan, but Lansing doesn't have the jurisdiction to make the changes."

It's the federal government that enters into and enforces trade agreements. These agreements are not benefiting American industry nor its workers, the group argues. "You can't disregard your own people and you can't just turn your back on the American worker," Dumont says. "You're talking about losing 3.2 million manufacturing jobs. Lord, stone the crows. How bright do you have to be to figure that one out?"

The National Association of Manufacturers has also opened the door to a new national organization, says Dumont. The NAM Executive Committee's decision to overturn a previously approved NAM policy committee resolution to support legislation aimed at confronting China over the manipulation of its currency (HR-1498) is in direct opposition to the interests of domestic manufacturers, says Dumont. "As an association president, I would never presume to over-rule my membership, I just wouldn't do it," he says. "It's not an appropriate way for an association leader to function."

"Many members of NAM are beyond frustrated," adds Sullivan. "They feel that they have been betrayed by [NAM president] John Engler and his Executive Committee's decision not to support HR-1498. Go to the NAM Web site and click on their Board of Directors. You'll see a Who's Who of principals of multinational companies who comprise the great majority of NAM's Board members. Clearly, NAM is not representing the interests of domestic manufacturers who happen to be NAM's core constituency." These domestic manufacturers "have become angry about the situation and have become aware that since NAM is not representing their best interests they need to look elsewhere for representation. The TMTA is now inviting dissatisfied and disenfranchised members of other manufacturing and technologies associations to join us....It's time to get noisy.

TMTA hopes to boost its membership so that it can pack a political punch. "The foremost requirement is numbers," says Dumont. "If you don't have the numbers, you don't get the audience - you get polite permission to say what you have to say and then it's almost as if the thought process goes out the door right behind you. If you have numbers, that is more meaningful."

It will be difficult to force control of the agenda away from powerful and wealthy multinationals that will vigorously defend free trade. These companies are profitably producing in countries that undervalue their currency, allow them to pollute and provide them with untold numbers of subsidies, says Dumont. "There are people in corporate America who are taking advantage of virtual slavery and they are doing it with impunity, and if anybody has anything to say that is contrary to that, they respond by saying, 'Well, you know, we can't make changes over there. That's the way it is. You cannot dictate policy to China.' Well, you don't want to make any changes over there because you are profiting from it. There isn't any reason why people don't react to what's going on. If somebody stops his car immediately in front of you your reaction is to try to stop. You don't just plow into them. It's time for people to take a serious look at this, but the multinationals immediately take refuge in the suggestion that everyone else is protectionist when they are in fact the ones being protectionist."

Many of the multinationals and those who benefit from their dues and political donations may not understand the depth of the grass-roots movement that is building against them, says Dumont. "We'll sure do our best to make it bite them soon. The reality is, the guy who is in charge of the largest multinational corporation in the world gets exactly the same number of votes as the guy who works for him sweeping the floor. And those are the people who are going to make a difference. That is the backbone of America, and it's high time that democracy went back to work."

For more information, the group can be reached on the Internet at www.thetmta.com.