

Alabama Schools Might Not Even Open Next Year

Eddie Tucker is a City Councilman of Talladega, Alabama. He gave this report on the current crisis, and the last 40 years' shifts in the economy of his city, county and state, in an interview with Marcia Merry Baker of EIR on Feb. 14, 2004.

EIR: We are all hearing the Big Lie, that nationally, new jobs are “just around the corner.” And the other Big Lie, that consumer prices are “under control.” But in fact, the problem is not just someone without a job, or someone facing a bit of inflation—people are expending their whole lives, trying to get medical treatment, or travel to a job, and so on.

Let's talk about your own Alabama situation in those terms.

Tucker: Yes. In Talladega, we are facing very high unemployment; and in the state of Alabama, you know, it's very high unemployment. And not only that, the state is bankrupt, and we don't really have money to operate.

The Governor tried to pass a big tax plan, and it failed, because the people wouldn't buy into it. And so, we're at a point, we don't know what we're going to do for next year. Teachers have to be paid. Buses have to run. Roads have to be built. There a lot of things that have to be done, and there's no real solution in sight. So the only other thing that we're going to have to do, is to raise taxes; but if the people are out of work, and they can't pay it, it's a vicious cycle.

EIR: Your state was in the news last Fall, because you are one of the few in the country whose financial year ends Sept. 30, and without new taxes—which no one could pay anyway, you made all these drastic cuts in state and local government functions.

Tucker: Yes. We've had a lot of cuts. Everybody is cutting everything to the bone. We've closed schools.

EIR: For certain days?

Tucker: No. We closed buildings.

EIR: Shut them down?

Tucker: Shut the whole school down. Fired teachers. In other words, we didn't let them come back for the next school year, because of not having enough money. We cut programs. There's even talk about cutting athletics next.

EIR: How many buildings did the school district have, be-

fore they shut down some?

Tucker: We had eight buildings, and we shut down two, so now we only have six.

EIR: Just in the last eight months?

Tucker: Yes.

EIR: Let's look at this problem—since we get the Big Lie nationally, and since thinking about the problem is part of understanding what's involved in the solution. You're not one who has been in office for decades—you're not an older man. But could you characterize the downslide over recent decades? Compared to the 1960s, say, and the hope at the time of Dr. Martin Luther King?

Tucker: Yeah. Sure. In Talladega, and all throughout Alabama, we had the greatest textile mill operations going, anywhere. We stayed with the textiles. When all the other states stopped having textile mills, we kept on with them, because we didn't know anything else. As a result, we stayed in the textile business too long. And even as far as the 1998-99 period, still we had the textile mills as the major employers. But now, they shipped all the jobs overseas, and textiles are no more in America. And they're closing down.

We had Palm Beach; we had Crown; we had Weehakkee. We had just a whole bunch of factories—Mohawk.

EIR: Cloth, garments?

Tucker: Yes. We made the garment; we made the thread. We did the whole operation. We had everything going on in Talladega.

EIR: So, just in the last five years, it shut?

Tucker: Yes. Shut everything down. There are no more textile mills, except one, in Talladega now. And that one is about to close. They closed half of the operation; and we feel like, in the next two or three years, they're going to close the other half.

EIR: So, in thousands of jobs, what was the change?

Tucker: We had over 6,000 jobs in textiles. Now we have about 300. That's it.

EIR: Now, looking at the necessities of life. Naturally, you need a paycheck. So some of these 6,000 people might have got a job a county away or—

Tucker: Oh, yeah. They moved. In fact, our City population has gone down about 2,000 people, in somewhere between three to five years. And so this had a big economic impact on us, as far as tax revenues, and money and retail business. It's just had a real bad economic effect on us. And so we're scrambling trying to find tax dollars to meet our budget needs for the City.

EIR: Just to keep the services.

Talladega City and County

Of Alabama's 67 counties, Talladega, located in the northeast quadrant of the state, had a population in 2002 of 81,440, rising only very slowly over the past few years, as the textile mills and other major workplaces shut down. In 1995, the County population was in the range of 76,300. Over the past decade, over 20% of its residents ranked below the official poverty level.

The population of the county seat, Talladega City, has fallen outright, dropping by more than 13% from 1990, when the census showed 17,432, down to 15,143 as of 2000, and falling even more since then, as people moved out looking for jobs.

In Talladega, these declines reflect the local impact of the shift of textile manufacturing abroad and shut-down of U.S.-based plants, under the past decades of so-called free trade. Other industries have been hit similarly in Alabama, from steel-making in Birmingham, to pulp and paper.

The graph shows the drastic fall in numbers of production workers nationwide employed in textile mills, from just 1998—when employment was in the range of 540,000—down to barely 350,000 last fall.

Tucker: Just to keep the services going. We can't afford sidewalks, or anything like that. We just have to do the bare necessities, like run our buildings, you know, pick up the garbage and the paper, and just keep the streets clean. We have recreation and all that.

EIR: What about the water system?

Tucker: The water system sort of pays for itself, because the people who use the water have to pay it, so we have water bills.

EIR: How have those bills gone up?

Tucker: Oh yes, they've gone up. They used to be—our systems are very old. You know, our infrastructure is real old there. We don't have sidewalks. We have big, open ditches that the water runs through. We don't have, you know, pipes covered, and a good drainage system. We don't have those. You know, in most places—we have very few.

But if you see Talladega, it looks like Rome. We have paved streets, we have some sidewalks, but in all cases, we don't have sidewalks. We don't have curbs and gutters and all that—things you take for granted when you come to a city.

EIR: Compared to 30 or 40 years ago, when the mills were running and people had jobs, they may have lived in walking



distance from the mill. Or they may have had a bus? What about transportation?

Tucker: We don't have any kind of mass transportation. We do have one cab company. About 10 years ago, we had six cab companies. Now we only have one. And that's it. That's the only kind of transportation. If you don't have your own car, then you don't go anywhere.

EIR: And if you're older, you're elderly, and you can't move, then?

Tucker: We do have a few things in place for that. If the person is elderly, or handicapped, or they are otherwise poor, they could call up a day in advance. They'll have a van come out from the city to take them to the grocery store or somewhere they need to go.

EIR: So, you're trying to help; meantime, what's happened in the way of the "Wal-Mart" effect in your part of the country?

Tucker: Oh, yeah, we had a lot of businesses close when Wal-Mart came, because the mom-and-pop operations

couldn't sustain Wal-Mart's low prices. See, Wal-Mart actually runs people out of business, in the sense that they have the prices real low for a long time, and then when the businesses close up, they'll raise prices back up a little bit.

EIR: When did Wal-Mart come into Alabama?

Tucker: Wal-Mart has been there for about 20 years now. They came in there early on.

EIR: So any kind of local stores that someone might have been able to walk to, that's gone?

Tucker: Yes, that's gone. We don't really have a lot of mom-and-pop stores. We do have gas stations—you know, those quick-stops where you can buy items. But, most people go to Wal-Mart to buy their major items—toilet tissue, bread, or whatever, they go to a super Wal-Mart. We have grocery stores too.

EIR: Some 30 years ago, as you described it, households would have a job, they would have transportation—not even having to keep a car—

Tucker: They lived in communities where they could just walk to work, if they wanted to.

EIR: Did you grow up there?

Tucker: No. I've been there for 20 years. I talk to people in the community all the time. And I remember, even in my hometown as a boy, everybody could walk to work, or they had a bus. That was in Roanoke, Virginia. They had the trains. But they don't have any trains anymore. They had a bus system, and it used to run every 15 minutes. You could catch a bus on any corner, every 15 minutes.

EIR: So you didn't have to pay for the gas and the car, and all.

Tucker: No. Because you could walk. And now, you have to pay for the gas, the car maintenance, the inspections on your car, you got to have all these tags, you have to have insurance. All of this is a tax.

EIR: And what about the hours it takes, if you are "lucky" enough to have a job that you have to drive far to keep?

Tucker: It takes a long time. They are driving farther to work to keep a job. In my city, people work in Birmingham, and they work in Atlanta.

EIR: How much driving is that, over and back?

Tucker: In Atlanta, it's about an hour and a half—maybe about 120 miles one way, and 120 miles back. They have to. And they work in Birmingham; some people might work in Montgomery.

EIR: So they might drive 3 hours in a day, 15 hours a week. Now, 30 years ago—

Tucker: That was unheard of. And back then, even if they



Talladega City Councilman Eddie Tucker talks with Lyndon LaRouche during LaRouche's visit to Talladega on Martin Luther King Day, 2004, where LaRouche spoke on "The Immortality of Martin Luther King."

had to work in another city, they could take a train. In the past they could get there in a matter of a few minutes, and get right back. No traffic lights, no traffic. Trains had to stop at a certain point sometimes, but they could be there pretty easily and pretty quickly. But now, it's not that way. And it was economical for them to do that. But not now.

EIR: So they might have taken a train as far as where, in the past?

Tucker: They had a train station, that you could go to—we still have a train station. It's still there, but we turned it into the Chamber of Commerce building. (Laughs). They took out the train about 30 years ago.

EIR: On the health care situation, likewise—whereas things were being built up, into the 1970s—with problems—but they were being built up, what's happened over the last 30 years? With hospitals, clinics and emergency rooms?

Tucker: We only have one hospital in the City of Talladega, and we have one in another city, called Sylacauga. So we have two hospitals. But at the same time, they cut their staff drastically. You know, the nurses are cut way down, and they are asked to do more and more.

Where they used to have a lot of help in hospitals, they don't have it anymore. And they're asking, not RNs, but LPNs to do things they used to ask the RNs to do. So they cut way down on the RNs to make sure that they don't have to pay them that much. And they make them work long hours. They do get some overtime, but they try to cut down to save money. Where they would let somebody work overtime, they don't have to pay those fringe benefits, so they kind of save money.

So they have nurses working too long, and they're too short-handed, and the hospitals are not as effective as they used to be.

And I think that health care, as a whole, a lot of people don't have insurance. They have to go to the emergency room, but they can't pay for it. Where they used to help them with the health care costs—you know, the hospitals would let them come in, a lot of them are being rejected now.

EIR: In both hospitals, they're being turned away?

Tucker: They're being turned away, because they don't have any kind of medical insurance.

EIR: Whereas, they used to be cared for?

Tucker: Yeah, right. I think it was called the Hill-Burton Bill, where they would let them be cared for. But they are cutting out all of that now. The hospitals themselves are saying, "Well, we don't care about that. We just don't want to deal with it," because it's going to cost them more than what the Hill-Burton Act is going to pay them.

There are so many doctors now that won't take Medicare, you know, or Medicaid. The dentists won't take them. And then the HMOs tell the doctors what they can treat you for, and what they can't. I have Blue Cross/Blue Shield, which is probably the best you can buy, and I told them I wanted to be checked for prostate cancer, because it's affecting blacks at an alarming rate; and I'm at the age of 50 now, and I should be checked. But I went there, and the doctor said, "Well, you don't want to do that right now, because they won't pay for it." This is my life, you know!

That's why so many African-Americans and poor people are dying from diseases that can be prevented.

EIR: We've talked about travel, food, health care, what about energy itself? Heating and cooling?

Tucker: Oh, yes, heating and lights have gone up drastically. You know, natural gas has really gone up.

I remember in Alabama, my light bill used to be about \$45, and sometimes, if it was a bad Winter, then it would go up to about \$75 or something. Two years ago, for one month, I had a \$600 bill, because it got extremely cold—

EIR: That's deregulation.

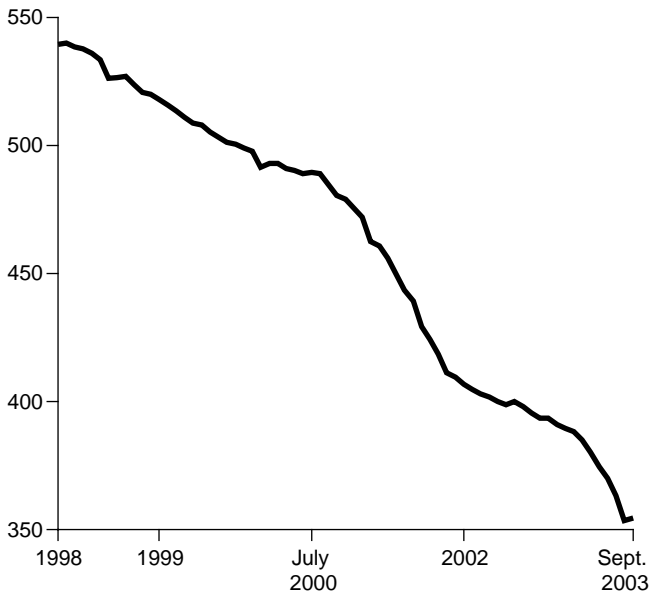
Tucker: That's exactly right. The demand for the gas went up, because California needed so much. And when we tried to buy gas—because of "demand" they said, it had to go up.

EIR: Sure, that's what they said after deregulation.

Tucker: And it caused power to go up, because a lot of power plants are run by—water, of course, but they run on gas too. Because they have these turbine engines they run.

Production Workers in U.S. Mills for Textiles and Textile Products, 1998-2003

(Thousands)



Sources: U.S. Dept. of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics; *EIR*.

When you talk about gas, petroleum gas—gasoline—has gone up. Quite a bit, I mean too much. I remember when we used to pay—maybe in the last 15 years, we used to pay 75¢ a gallon. Now it's \$1.50, 1.60, 1.67; so it costs you a lot more.

So things have increased, but the jobs have gotten scarce. We don't have as many highway jobs as we used to. Because those textile mills, they paid a lot of money. They had pensions and health plans. You know, pay was a lot. Some of them paid people who didn't even graduate from high school, \$60,000 and \$70,000. Yeah, they took those jobs, and they paid a lot. But now, they are closing up. We have paper mills that are closing up too. All the jobs are being exported. We're seeing that those jobs that George Bush promised in his economic package did not come through. They said that last year, there weren't that many jobs created. And last month, they said there were only 100 jobs created.

America is going through a terrible time, and we can do better, but we have to have the right people in office to make it happen. We need somebody with ideas, like Mr. LaRouche. I think he has a great idea—we've already seen it work—his idea has already worked before with Roosevelt, and the Bretton Woods thing.

So, we know that putting people to work in the WWC, putting people to work, like in the TVA—all those things can work. We've seen it work. And it worked well, and we came out of our economic Depression. So, I'd like to see

somebody like Mr. LaRouche get in, and help turn this country around.

EIR: What you say is completely clear, but you still run into some people who block out that we need this?

Tucker: I found that.

Some people are still spending at the level they used to spend, and buy furniture for the house, and still have money in the bank. You know, people are not saving anymore. They are living from paycheck to paycheck. And everybody, just about, in America, is about three months from bankruptcy. If they didn't get paid for three months, they'd probably go broke.

EIR: And the money going to entertainment, the races and all?

Tucker: You know, at the track, you used to pay \$20, and go to a race. Now you have to pay \$65, or \$120, and sometimes they even have tickets for \$400 or 500 now. So, you can't go to the racetrack with \$20 anymore. Everything has gone up. And people are still spending at the level that they used to spend, 20 years ago, and you can't do that. Something's going to have to give.

EIR: So everything is breaking down.

Tucker: And all these governments, including Talladega, and the State of Alabama, are just basically bankrupt. We don't have the money to spend on infrastructure, you know, to build sidewalks, to build curbs, to build infrastructure, to do the kinds of things that cities do, to make the city attractive. We don't do those things, because we don't have the money.

We operate on a \$10 million budget in the City of Talladega, which is pathetic. Our school system—and they just have five little buildings, they operate on a \$30, or \$35 million budget.

So a City like ours ought to have more money, the state ought to have more money, and a lot of these big businesses that own a lot of land in Alabama, they don't pay any taxes, hardly. But the middle-income guys, and the slightly below-middle income folks, they're the ones who are paying all the taxes. And it's not right. And those big guys—they should be made to pay too, but they don't.

Nobody has the political clout to stand up to these guys, and make them pay. And if they do stand up to them, the Business Council of Alabama, and some of these other organizations, they'll get them run out of office, because they have that much power.

EIR: So that's what it's been like until now, at the breaking point.

Tucker: We're at a point now where we might not be able to deliver services next year. Schools might not even open next year.