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THINNED OUT BY DECADES OF OUTSOURCING, THE AMERICAN FACTORY WORKER IS ON THE BRINK OF EXTINCTION. BUT HE STILL THRIVES IN ONE PLACE: THE IMAGINATIONS OF LEVI'S ADMEN

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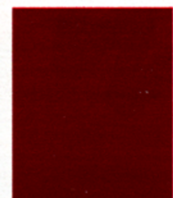
WE ARE ALL WORKERS



Clockwise from top: The U.S. Steel plant in Braddock, Pennsylvania; Braddock mayor John Fetterman; Levi's interpretation of Braddock.

On Tuesday, July 10, 1934, Harry Pearson, my great-grandfather, reported for work at the U.S. Steel mill in Homestead, Pennsylvania. At about 10:40 A.M., Harry, an emigrant from the industrial town of Workington, in northern England, began to cross a walkway 14 feet above the shop floor. A pipe burst next to him, engulfing him in a scalding cloud of steam and knocking him to the ground. His head and back took the brunt of the fall. His skull was badly broken. Twelve hours later, having never regained consciousness, he died. He was 54.

Not long afterward, my grandfather, Allan Pearson, dropped out of high school to start at the Homestead mill as an apprentice on an open-hearth furnace—a 400-ton brick abyss that instantly liquefies metal. The company gave him the job as compensation for his father's death. After serving in the Navy during World War II, Allan transferred to the newly opened U.S. Steel Fairless Works facility in suburban Philadelphia, 300 miles east of Homestead. He remained employed there until his retirement 30 years later. Most of the men in my family worked at the same mill—including my other grandfather and three of my uncles. I am the first male Pearson to make a living doing something other than hard physical labor. This makes me both grateful (steelwork is hell) and ashamed (I have it easy). Not that I could be a steelworker today anyway. The Fairless Works facility—a plant that once employed tens of thousands of people—now employs roughly 80 men. And a shopping mall currently sits where the Homestead mill once was.

Imagine the contemporary American steel industry as a mortally wounded giant that stretches the length of the rust belt. It's the colossus of Pittsburgh, greater Philadelphia and Baltimore. It's not quite dead, but it's doomed. The automobile and garment industries lie alongside it. But as manufacturing work disappears, the worker does not—as the country's high rate of unemployment can attest. Blue-collar towns such as Fairless Hills, my birthplace, originally developed to house Fairless Works employees, have transformed into villages with closed-circuit economies: Work at Target to eat at Chili's; work at Chili's to shop at Target.

Today the American industrial worker seems to exist primarily as an abstraction. And so he is manipulated in abstract ways. Case in point: Levi's "Ready to Work" ad campaign. Announced in June 2010, its mission, per corporate press release, is to "empower and inspire workers everywhere." I first noticed the campaign last summer when I spotted a billboard bearing a photo shot in the deep, crisp aesthetic of Depression-era photographer Walker Evans. In it attractive young men wear Levi's apparel and stand in a field. A Levi's logo sits in the lower left-hand corner. On the right side of the image, in an old-timey font, is the encomium "Everybody's work is equally important." Below that, cryptically, is the name of a town: Braddock, Pennsylvania—a downtrodden Pittsburgh suburb.

Other ads in the campaign played on the same theme and look—black-and-white photographs of stylish young people in Braddock, diffidently performing work-ish tasks. One featured a tattooed, carefully coiffed man in a jean jacket with the sleeves rolled up, digging in the ground with a shovel at night. The taglines were vaguely unionist platitudes (e.g., "We are all workers" and "Everybody's work is equally important"). The TV spots, lushly shot by John Hillcoat, director of *The Road*, and photographer Melodie McDaniel, offered more of the same.

At first glance it may have seemed as though the ads were celebrating the fact that Levi's had started producing jeans in Braddock, Homestead's next-door neighbor and home of a still-functioning U.S. Steel plant. I thought so, at least. But that's far from the case. Save for some items, including an expensive line made in conjunction with Brooks Brothers, Levi's manufactures the majority of its products in foreign countries. The "Ready to Work" campaign stems not from Levi's solidarity with the working class but from a partnership with Braddock's current mayor, John Fetterman, a tattooed iconoclast who has been featured everywhere from *Rolling Stone* to *The Colbert Report*.

When manufacturing "work" becomes a marketing ploy, the blue-collar worker truly is fucked. For generations, American industry created—and devoured—the lives of steelworkers, automakers and garment makers. If manufacturing had been a war, these people were the cannon fodder. And now Levi's has colonized their struggle. I recently went to Braddock to see it without the filter of Levi's deceptively nostalgic imagery. When stripped of the sepia haze of the print ads and the saccharine music of the television commercials, it's a different place. Then I went home to Fairless Hills and talked to two of my uncles about their service to the steel industry. I wanted to revisit the foundations on which Levi's has built its campaign—the real American worker.

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At my grandmother's house in Fairless Hills, I wave (continued on page 106)

JOBS

(continued from page 84)

a black refrigerator magnet around the outside edge of my uncle Jeff's left eye. I'm trying to find a scrap of steel that was embedded in his face in an accident at the Fairless Works mill in the 1980s. "Up a little more, closer to the eye," he advises.

"Found it!" I exclaim.

The skin above Jeff's cheekbone reaches out and touches the magnet. During his 30 years at the mill, Jeff suffered a series of mishaps that beat up his body. He once took a steel spall, a fine piece of feathered shrapnel, to the throat. "They got me to the hospital and took it out," he tells me. "I had six weeks of recovery time, and they gave me $6,000 for the scar. The neck doesn't pay as much as the face, and you need a scar to get paid. I think your family got $10,000 if you died."

The phone rings. Jeff picks it up, speaks quietly, waits, speaks again and hangs up. A 59-year-old divorced father of two, he is currently living at my grandmother's under house arrest for drunk driving. The county-run house-arrest enforcement machine was calling to confirm that he hasn't absconded. It robo-dials him at random times throughout the day. "They make me repeat a phrase back to them—either 'The eagle has landed,' 'Bell invented the telephone' or 'The sun rises in the east.'" He tells me how his son recently called and fooled him with a computer-generated voice that said, "This is Bucks County. Repeat this sentence after me…." It then read out the entire Gettysburg Address.

Jeff himself is a master of the practical joke. When I was six, he subjected me to an elaborate prank that preyed on my fear of Max von Sydow as Ming the Merciless in the movie *Flash Gordon*. He plugged a microphone into his suitcase-size VCR, and at the end of the film, when Ming may or may not be dead, he overdubbed his own voice, doing an uncanny Von Sydow: "I'm not dead, Jesse. I'm coming to get you." Jeff also kept a ceramic cobra from Pier 1 Imports inside a wicker basket next to his front door and collected gag toys—foam rocks and obnoxious laugh boxes—from Spencer's Gifts.

He was 16 when he took his first job at the Fairless Works canteen, the on-site cafeteria where he would sometimes serve cheeseburgers to my grandfather at lunchtime. Four years later, he started doing real mill work. "The first time I went to the open hearths, they sent a gang of about 20 of us. Half the guys quit the first day. It was a violent place. You've got all kinds of explosions from when they tap a furnace with dynamite. There's molten steel shooting everywhere. One of my first days a mold blew up while it was getting capped and took a guy named Danny's head off. He was 19."

"Did you ever think about quitting?" I ask.

"No. I thought, Here's a job I can have right now. And at that point it looked like the industry had a future. Taking it seemed like the smart thing to do."

Jeff recalls the proliferation of Japanese steel as an early omen of the industry's

demise. "The Japanese steel industry was subsidized by the Japanese government, so they made more steel than they could use. They'd sell it to American companies for way less than U.S. Steel could afford to charge." Layoffs began in the late 1970s, and Jeff's life throughout the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s became a mix of irregular plant stints, unemployment checks and second jobs. Currently he has been out of work since December 2008. He keeps his résumé up on CareerBuilder anyway. On the day of my visit, he is contemplating a job offer from a minimill in South Carolina. "If I take it," he says, "I'm going to have to get an apartment close to the mill and make a deal for a ride with somebody I work with because my license is suspended. Either way, I know I won't be drinking scotch anymore. Strictly beer."

After a while, he stands up from my grandmother's couch and paces around her small living room. "I miss the work. I was talking to an old friend from the mill about it this morning. If they didn't shut down, we'd still be there. I'd have 40 years now. I thought I had a job forever; a whole town of people did. You wonder what might have happened if they hadn't closed. I would have a job and a family and be able to go on vacation. You know, normal stuff."

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It takes me five minutes to drive from the folksy mosaic welcome sign at one end of Braddock to the Edgar Thomson U.S. Steel facility at the other end. The Edgar Thomson plant was Andrew Carnegie's first steel mill. Carnegie, a Scottish immigrant, started as a messenger at a telegraph company, but he died as one of America's richest men. He built the network of mills and factories that ushered in the age of steel, and he started it all in Braddock in 1875. At its height, in the 1920s, Braddock was home to 20,000 people. Today its population tops out around 3,000. But it wasn't the death of the steel industry that depopulated Braddock; it was success. As mill workers made livable wages, they moved to neighboring towns rather than live in the shadow of their workplace. Without the worker population, all the attendant businesses—cafés, groceries, boutiques—withered away.

I find Braddock desolate. Vacant lots outnumber standing buildings. On my first day in town, the local University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, Braddock's hospital, is being demolished. The handful of businesses that continue to operate on Braddock Avenue—a meat market, a tire shop, a Family Dollar store—have the feel of wilderness outposts.

After J.P. Morgan bought Carnegie's empire from him at the start of the 20th century, Carnegie devoted his life to philanthropy. A good hunk of his money went to building more than 1,600 public libraries throughout the country. Naturally, the first such Carnegie library was built in Braddock, just down the street from the Edgar Thomson plant. I park my car alongside it. Across the street and down an alley, I locate the home of Mayor John Fetterman—a tastefully renovated, warmly lit warehouse space. His wife greets me and ushers me upstairs. Fetterman is sitting on a brown leather couch with his toddler son, Karl, on his lap. He is six feet eight inches tall and clad in a black T-shirt, blue sweatpants and mud boots. Braddock's zip code is tattooed down one of his arms, and the dates of the murders that have occurred in Braddock on his watch—five altogether—are tattooed on the other, along with the Nine Inch Nails lyric "I will make you hurt."

Fetterman already knows that I'm mainly interested in the Levi's ads. Without much prompting, we begin talking about them. I ask him why no steelworkers appear in the campaign. "I have a good contact at the steelworkers' union, but he politely declined [to take part]." (His contact, Wayne Donato, with whom Fetterman had previously collaborated on a noble yet stillborn effort to use American steel to build wind turbines, will later tell me, "Levi's doesn't make a stitch of jeans in the United States, so I was apprehensive.") Fetterman readily admits that both he and the self-styled mavericks at Levi's ad agency, Wieden + Kennedy, acknowledged at the start that Levi's outsourcing could be an issue. "It was like, is it insurmountable? Obviously we decided that we wanted to continue."

Now that the partnership has ripened, Fetterman doesn't suffer its critics gladly. When the blog Boring Pittsburgh scolded, "Braddock doesn't need misleading ads about them. They need jobs," Fetterman accused the site of laziness and cowardice. "These bloggers seem to lose the irony that they're typing these critiques on foreign-made computers, sitting on foreign-made chairs," Fetterman tells me. "I don't get the contradiction. Anybody who wants to be critical of the campaign should answer the question, 'What have you done for Braddock?' Levi's came at it from a completely honorable perspective."

"The difference," I point out, "is that not every domestic company that manufactures overseas is making ads that laud the American worker."

"I know for a fact that Levi's would like to have its production based in the United States, but it gets difficult," he responds.

"Did the idea of manufacturing jeans in Braddock ever come up?"

"It's come up numerous times," Fetterman says. (Levi's will later tell me unequivocally that the company never considered making jeans in Braddock.) "I joke with Levi's that we want to be the Jared to their Subway. To me, this collaboration felt like the first salvo in a huge conversation about how we can begin to move production back to the United States. There's the simplistic critique, 'Don't they get the glaring irony in talking about the American worker when all of their products are made overseas?' Of course that's a consideration. But when you add up the fact that they're a tiny voice in the overall mass exodus of American jobs, and you also consider what they've done for this community...." He gestures toward the windows at the far side of the room and finishes his thought, "Should I have said no and had that building collapse on my head?"

He is referring to the former First Presbyterian Church, which sits between his home and the library. The building has just undergone an extensive renovation thanks in part to the $1.5 million Levi's gave to the people of Braddock, via the mayor, for their participation in the "Ready to Work" campaign. Fetterman plans to use the church as a gathering place for local kids and for art shows and concerts.

(He also allocated Levi's funds to the library and an urban garden. He saw no personal gain for his participation in the ads.)

Because the mayor is due to appear live on CNBC soon, we head downstairs to his truck. After a stop for lunch at the only functioning restaurant in town, we drive to a parking lot that sits directly uphill from the wreckage of the hospital. A local videography outfit, contracted to film the interview with Fetterman, sets up in the cold drizzle. An old woman sitting on the porch of her house watches suspiciously as the mayor is outfitted with a headset mike. The broadcast begins. I hear only Fetterman's side of the conversation. "They've been nothing but ethical and decent and generous with the community," he says about Levi's. There's a pause as the anchor asks another question.

"Braddock has been in perpetual twilight for decades," Fetterman answers. "I think we're starting to emerge from that, but by no means are we healthy or secure—financially or otherwise."

At Fetterman's invitation I spend the night at a local convent that has been converted into a hostel. It sits directly across the street from the Edgar Thomson steel mill. I watch through my room's window as trucks bring cargoes of red, sparking steel out into the night. A venting tower shoots pure flame into the sky. I think about Levi's, Braddock and money. Levi's reported net revenue of $4.4 billion last year, which was a seven percent increase over the previous year. In its 2010 annual report, Levi's claims an advertising and promotional budget of $328 million. Braddock received less than one percent—$1.5 million—of that pie.

I realize it would be impossible for John Fetterman to provide a measured opinion of Levi's intentions. He will do anything to help his town. On and off the record, he's going to remain loyal because he's the captain of a sunken ship. He's at the bottom of the sea trying to winch his enterprise, bit by bit, toward the surface again. If Levi's is a means to get closer to sunlight, so be it. Braddock has nothing else to offer and no reason not to sell it for cheap. And what good was authenticity—whatever that is—doing for the town anyway?

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Later that week I return to Fairless Hills and take a ride out to the Fairless Works plant with my uncle Joe, the 56-year-old husband of my mom's sister. It's a route he can complete with his eyes closed, a 15-minute drive he undertook every day, barring layoffs, for more than four decades. We get as far as the front gate, where a guard dozily sits in a booth. The former mill site has more or less given way to different independent firms, and access to the grounds is limited. While circling the plant on pitted roads bordered with orange detour signs, Joe tells me about his start in steel.

"I wasn't much of a student," he laughs. "My father was dead set on me going to Catholic school, but I got kicked out. Then I went to public school and got involved in the electric shop. My teacher had a connection at U.S. Steel and told us he could get us apprenticeships. I applied and they said, 'You're in!' I began as a mechanic in cold-reduction maintenance, which was the armpit of the plant. It was hot, greasy and dirty. Nobody wanted to work in that shop because the pickle lines were there—that's where the steel goes into an acidic bath to get the excess garbage off of it. The fumes were bad. Everyone told me, 'Don't sign up there!' But I was taught to sign anything. You can always say no later. Before that I had no idea what I wanted to do, so I took the first thing that was offered to me. A lot of my friends went to the steel mill too, right out of high school. This was 1973."

Thirteen years later, Joe temporarily quit the mill. The steelworkers' union and U.S. Steel were battling over wages and contracts, and a lockout seemed imminent. Joe said fuck it, put his pension money into a retirement fund and moved to North Carolina to work on his uncle's fishing boat. When I visited him there as a kid, we ate fried Spam in his dockside trailer, and he bought me a blue T-shirt with a drawing of the sun setting behind palm trees and the slogan LIFE'S A BEACH. He seemed calmer and more cheerful there. Eventually, however, the fishing work disappeared, and he returned to Fairless Hills.

"I found out the mill was hiring again. I figured, What have I got to lose? I put in an application and got hired back—right into the same department. I even had the same badge number. Nothing changed. I picked up right where I left off." But his second stint in steel was less a career and more a war of attrition. He bounced from department to department, kept on longer than other men

because his advanced skill as a millwright made him valuable to the few shops that were still open. By 1999, he says, "the writing was on the wall. There was nothing but empty buildings, one right after the other. You'd drive into work through acres of parking lots with less and less cars in them every day." With actual mill work almost nonexistent, Joe filled any other position that came up. If Fairless Works needed a tractor driver, he'd drive tractors. "All of the specialty shops were closing down, and it became anything to hold on to your job. Then they told us, 'Okay, guys, this is the end.'"

And it was, until it wasn't. "I was collecting unemployment when I heard that the only shop they'd kept open was looking for people. I had to work for U.S. Steel for three more years before I could collect my pension. I wanted it to be over, so I put my name in. And that's where I finished."

Currently Joe works doing maintenance on fitness equipment, traveling up and down the East Coast, fixing cardio machines at colleges and gyms. Although he likes the job, he hopes he can leave it soon to start a contracting business with a friend. In any event, he needs more money. He's the father of three, two of whom are college age, and he is about to become a grandfather. He has a mortgage, car payments and plenty of household expenses, which, he says, his U.S. Steel pension doesn't begin to cover.

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Thirty minutes after I leave Fetterman's side, he sends me an e-mail. "Levi's is pleased to speak with you," he writes. "You'll probably hear from them if you haven't already." Up until this point, my numerous requests to speak with Levi's representatives have been politely met with exhortations to speak with Fetterman instead. But now I have been granted a telephonic audience with Doug Sweeny, Levi's vice president of global marketing. Soon after returning home from Braddock, I reach him at Levi's corporate headquarters in San Francisco. (As this issue was going to press, Sweeny decided to leave Levi's to become president of a San Francisco–based ad agency.) As the interview begins, Sweeny's disembodied voice introduces me to "Kelly," a spectral presence that I assume is part of Levi's legal team. "Kelly," Sweeny says, "will be sitting in."

I begin by asking Sweeny to tell me about the ideas behind the Braddock campaign. "It's a marketing platform that we use for the brand in the Americas; it's about reconnecting Levi's to its authentic self and roots," he explains. "The Levi's Work Wear line was originally made for workers, miners and gold diggers more than 150 years ago. We re-created it as a line for the new work of today. We went to our advertising agency, Wieden + Kennedy, and said, 'Here's what we want to do for the year from a marketing standpoint, and here's the product line we want to talk about.' They came back to us with this idea of partnering with Braddock and John Fetterman and helping in some way to put this town back to work, which we thought was a powerful idea—and, frankly, a bit scary. So we jumped on a plane—myself, one of the guys from Wieden and our creative director—and met with John. We were incredibly inspired by the people, the town and the resiliency. We came off the plane feeling like, Wow! This could be a true and authentic partnership."

Sensing that "authenticity" will be a recurring theme, I decide to start counting the number of times Sweeny says "authentic" or other words that mean the same thing in context—e.g., "real" and "true." Thus prepared, I ask my next question: "One of the main taglines for the campaign is 'We are all workers.' Can you parse that for me?"

"A hallmark of Levi's is the democracy of the product. It's one of the most democratic brands. Presidents wear it, day laborers wear it and college kids wear it. The Work Wear line speaks to that idea. And also, this sort of civic-minded aspect is at the heart of the brand. Some of the first money Levi Strauss made from his business, he donated to a local charity in San Francisco that we still donate to today. So it's very much a core truth [*1*]."

"In press releases you've referred to a 'new generation of pioneers' and said that Braddock faces a 'new frontier.' What does that mean?"

"We want to be true [*2*] to what the Levi's brand is all about. Strauss himself was a pioneer, coming across the country to start a dry-goods company. I think John Fetterman is a new pioneer. It's a pretty formidable challenge that he's got in front of him. One of the first times I met him, he said, 'Success isn't guaranteed in Braddock.' That was a key part of the authenticity [*3*] and realness [*4*] we got out of John. Pioneers are all about forging into the unknown."

"Some of Braddock's residents might be offended by the idea that their town is a 'frontier,'" I respond. "Their families have lived there for generations."

"We mean it in a more forward-looking way. It's an urban frontier, but it's meant to evoke the future, not the past, and we spun it that way."

One of Levi's Braddock commercials borrows heavily from Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven* and John Ford's *The Searchers*. It was directed by Australian John Hillcoat, who also used parts of Braddock as a stand-in for the total devastation of society when he shot *The Road* there. In Hillcoat's ad, we see images meant to signify morning in Braddock. Over a soundtrack of Wagner, a child's voice delivers a bewildering monologue: "A long time ago, things got broken here. People got sad and left. Maybe the world breaks on purpose so we can have work to do." As a summary of deindustrialization, it leaves something to be desired.

"But the commercials have this pervasive Depression-era look," I tell Sweeny. "There are campfires by the train tracks and people sleeping outside. If it's about the future, why those references?"

"I think there's a realness [*5*] and an authenticity [*6*] to it. I think there was some inspiration taken from that, but ultimately we wanted to reflect truth [*7*] in what we were representing, which was out there in that community."

"But the real Braddock is nowhere near as beautiful as Levi's portrays it."

"What we wanted to capture was the town's hopefulness. All of the scenes feature real [*8*] people in their real [*9*] homes, bedrooms or kitchens."

This isn't quite true. When I was in town, Braddock native and documentary filmmaker Tony Buba showed me a video he took of a set that was constructed outside his mother's house. In his footage there's a fake front door and awning, artfully distressed for that weathered Braddock look, plopped in the middle of a local street. In multiple takes, a lanky young man, the likes of which I didn't see when I was in Braddock, strolls out from the facade and plaintively leans against the door frame, at which point a camera mounted on a dune buggy launches out from behind him, down the road and away. Levi's used this shot as the climax of the ad. The idea is, I suppose, that Braddockians are so full of hope that they are taking flight. To me it seemed to signify a desperate desire to escape Braddock. And though it's technically true that only citizens of Braddock were cast in the ads, it wasn't as egalitarian as it sounds. Levi's carefully cast from a small pool of locals and from a group of young artistic types who—inspired by the cheap rent and large spaces—have moved to town and form the most model-like of Braddock's native youth. So while they aren't with Ford or Elite, everyone in the campaign is still thin and beautiful.

"In a press release about the campaign," I say to Sweeny, "there's a quote from you about 'engaging in meaningful conversations around real work.' At another point you mention a new generation of 'real workers.' I'm wondering what 'real' means to you in these instances."

"The idea was to highlight the workers who are making the future to their liking and to show people who are physically working on the town [as well as] more of the creative-oriented class who are artists or musicians, or people who are creating companies out of ideas. That was the spirit of it—to use Braddock as illustrative of what is going on across the country."

"Has the idea of manufacturing in Braddock come up?"

"It never did. The focus was how do we help in a small way. What made sense to us was this idea of a community center where people could gather. The idea of building a manufacturing facility there wasn't something that we thought was realistic for where Braddock is today. But we do manufacture clothing in the United States. Now, [those products] are at the more premium end of our line. American workers are paid good benefits and pretty nice salaries, so it's more expensive to manufacture jeans in America."

"Can you tell me the percentage of Levi's that are made in America?"

Sweeny stops to consult with Kelly. "Kelly was shaking her head," he responds. "The answer is no, we can't."

"I'm gathering it's small."

"It's a small percentage of our line."

"For me, there's a disconnect when you're celebrating the spirit of American work, but you've shut down your domestic factories and laid off your American workers and the majority of your jeans are made overseas."

Sweeny's voice takes on a tone of conciliatory regret. "I'm going to go back to what we were trying to do and not focus on that. We have a workwear line that's true [*10*] to what the brand has always created: trucker jackets, 501s and 505s. We thought it was a powerful marketing idea to partner with a town in a real [*11*] way that wasn't gratuitous or false."

"But when you have images of people in classic workwear in a town that still has a functioning steel mill in it, what's being evoked is blue-collar work, right?"

Sweeny's response: "We're defining work in a broad, broad way."

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My great-grandfather, who died for the steel industry, was a worker. My grandfathers were workers. My uncles are workers who saw their livelihoods disappear because their industry was outsourced, just as Levi's has outsourced its work. When it says, "We are all workers," does Levi's speak for the Americans whose work it took away? Does it speak for my uncles? It can't give a real-life American worker a job in a factory, but it can invoke the idea of the worker in its ads? Maybe it could pay my uncle Jeff to pose solemnly for a photo in front of a closed mill, slap a slogan on it and sell some jeans.

I call my uncle Joe and ask him what brand of jeans he wears. He consults with his wife, Pam, who buys them for him. "Lee," he says. He tells me that he and Pam struggle to buy American. They've been looking for American-made silverware for weeks now. "You have no idea how much trouble we're having trying to find anything made in the USA," he says. I ask my uncle Jeff who makes his jeans. His girlfriend picks them out, he answers, and they're Levi's. He's surprised. He tells me he's indifferent to brands; he'll wear whatever is easiest to find. "But I'm ready to buy myself some new jeans," he says, "and they won't be Levi's."

Multiple off-the-record sources had told me Levi's was planning a concert series in Braddock this summer at the site of an abandoned, rusting industrial furnace. I check in one last time with Mayor Fetterman to see where the project stands. It turns out Bruce Springsteen has declined to take part. "I got the [rejection] e-mail on my iPhone," Fetterman writes to me, "and then I immediately removed my entire catalog of Springsteen from it. I lost a hero. He made millions singing about towns and regions like ours, yet he couldn't find a single afternoon to play on the site of an abandoned steel mill with 100 percent of the proceeds going to a worthy philanthropic cause."

Fetterman forwards me the e-mail from Springsteen's people, and I see that the request came from Levi's, and the "no" came back via Levi's. I could have ventured a guess to Fetterman that Springsteen didn't want to get involved with Levi's, not Braddock. But I don't. He's got enough to be angry about. His town, once the epicenter of big American steel, is full of ruins, much like Rome. And as Rome's final indignity was to be sacked by the Visigoths, maybe Levi's is a horde invading Braddock—an army of marketers converting history into mythology. They want to rein in the ghost of the worker—the ghosts of my ancestors—and dress them in 501s and jean jackets. Today, it appears, the American working class is worth more to Levi's dead than alive.