

Tariffs are Trump tax attack on American workers

By Michael Frerichs

President Trump once again is promising to enact broad tariffs on our key trading partners. He should do the right thing, call it off and avoid slapping a tax on American families and hurting our workers. The early signs are not promising. Consumer sentiment in February nose-dived to its lowest rate since the inflation mania in 2021. Business expansion is slowing due to uncertainty. The stock market is wobbly.

Trump won almost 2.5 million votes in Illinois last fall by promising to fight for working people. But for so many men and women in our state who put their trust in Trump, these tariffs are coming straight for their wallets. It's a Trump tax, plain and simple. We import more from Canada than does any other state. And we export more to Canada than any other market. Illinois' economic success, and many of the jobs that help our families put food on the table are tied to Canada. Why is he going after one of our closest allies?

I grew up and lived in central Illinois until recently, so I like to remind people that agriculture is still Illinois' No. 1 industry. Illinois exports billions of dollars in soybeans, corn, pork and specialty crops.

Farmers and rural voters across Illinois backed Trump by lopsided margins. If tariffs spark a trade war, they will be among the first victims. Canadian buyers will simply shift to competitors like Brazil. The Trump tax will mean lower prices for our farmers across downstate and will hurt agriculture-dependent industries from ADM in Decatur to Libby's canned pumpkins in Morton. ADM already announced layoffs amid "regulatory policy uncertainty and (global) market challenges."

How many post-election analyses noted the growing support for Trump among blue-collar manufacturing workers? Illinois workers build John Deere combines in East Moline, Caterpillar mining equipment in Decatur and Continental tires in Mt. Vernon.

Nearly one in 10 non-farm jobs in Illinois is in manufacturing. And the Canadian market accounts for almost a third of manufacturing exports from Illinois. The Trump tax won't reopen the Maytag plant in Galesburg. The Trump tax will push Canadian buyers to our competitors, like China.

Ford has an assembly plant on the city's Southeast Side, and the Trump tax could mean layoffs. Ford's CEO has warned

that the Trump tariffs “will blow a hole in the U.S. industry that we have never seen. It gives free rein to South Korean and Japanese and European companies.”

Did you know that Illinois imports more energy products from Canada than any other state does? Five oil refineries in Illinois, including the Joliet Refinery, use crude oil from Canada to fuel the Midwest. That explains why oil and gas were nearly three-quarters of Illinois’ imports from Canada.

Chanting “drill, baby, drill” will not protect the workers at those refineries from the Trump tax. And Illinois families — no matter how they voted — will see the Trump tax every time they fill up a tank of gas.

New homes already are out of reach for many in the city and suburbs. Illinois imports lumber from Canada, and a Trump tax-inspired trade war means prices will go up. And the Trump tax on Mexico will hurt our families at the kitchen table, increasing the price of chocolate, avocados, tomatoes and other foods.

Illinois businesses depend on stability and certainty. Trump's tariff tactics are part of his overall strategy of sowing chaos and creating fear. Tariffs are a tool that have a use, but not the way Trump is using them. Illinois Manufacturers' Association CEO Mark Denzler is concerned.

“While it’s important the United States stand up to bad actors that are dumping products into our country, stealing intellectual property and illegally subsidizing industries,

tariffs should be focused and used as a scalpel, not a sledgehammer,” he posted on social media.

Trump already broke his word on a tariff pause, quickly announcing new tariffs on steel and aluminum. While that might help steel makers like the Granite City Works near St. Louis, prices for automobiles could go up. Also looming is Trump’s reciprocal tariff tax plan that could spark a broader trade war and increase prices for our families even more.

Targeted tariffs are sometimes needed to fight back when countries like China don’t play by the rules. Presidents of both parties have used them. But steep across-the-board tariffs on our allies is not a trade policy — it’s a Trump tax.

- *Democrat Michael Frerichs is Illinois state treasurer.*