

Closing of Monroe, Michigan, factory marks the end of a way of life

Charles Bogle
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Headlines in a recent edition of the *Monroe Evening News* announced “1,200 jobs leaving Monroe.” As bad as that is for the southeastern Michigan city of just over 22,000 residents, the closing of the Ford Motor Co. subsidiary Automotive Components Holdings (ACH) is even more ominous when one considers Monroe’s current mortgage crisis and loss of thousands of good-paying jobs during the past 30 years.

A community that once offered hope for generations of immigrants and transplants from the South is being gutted by the lethal combination of financial profiteering and a complicit, impotent union bureaucracy.

The conditions surrounding the announced closing are all too familiar. Ford Motor Co. never intended the plant to be anything more than a source of quick profit before selling it. Established in late 2005 as a “temporary business entity...to prepare 23 former Visteon Corp. [a Ford Motor Co. spin-off] facilities for sale to other parties” (*Monroe Evening News*, 5/11/07), ACH is being closed sometime in 2008 because, according to ACH spokesperson Della DiPietro, “there were other competitive suppliers available and no buyer interest in the plant” (*Monroe Evening News*, A11, 8/25/07).

The United Auto Workers union (UAW) also played its usual despicable role. Robert Cebina, president of UAW Local 723 admits to having helped ACH gain tax abatement in return for a broken promise that it would not shed employees (*Monroe Evening News*, 5/11/07); and while DiPietro claims that the decision to close the plant “was made not behind closed doors but over a two-year period with a lot of involvement with the UAW and with the work force,” members of that workforce certainly sound as if the plant closing came as a complete surprise to them.

Dennis Vanthomme, a 55-year-old skilled trades worker with 35 years’ seniority at the factory (going back to when the plant was known as Monroe Ford Motor

Stamping), claims that the Monroe facility was one of only two of the ACH plants that was making money and that “they made us jump through hoops for nothing. It’s very unbelievable.”

Twenty-one-year-old Justin Graham, who began working at the plant only last November, describes a work environment in which ACH and the UAW act in concert to keep the workforce in the dark, for he relates that most of his information doesn’t come from the union or the company, but from fellow workers. Another worker echoed Graham’s sentiments when he stated, “We know the plant’s going to close and we know that there’s going to be a new contract. That’s all we know” (*Monroe Evening News*, A11, 8/25/07).

The loss of 1,200 jobs is sure to worsen the problems caused by the expanding number of unsold homes in Monroe. According to Mark Vinciguerra, vice president of Ohio Investment Co., which maintains an office in Monroe, “the housing glut is having a large effect” in the community. This glut comes at a time when unemployment and job insecurity have resulted in more people trying to sell their homes (*Toledo Blade*, 9/07/07). How many of the 1,200 due to lose their jobs in 2008 will join those unable to sell their homes?

The closure of ACH also marks the end of a century-long era of better-paying manufacturing jobs in Monroe. The history of the facility now called ACH is itself indicative of Monroe’s strong tradition of working class struggle. The plant was constructed in 1929 by the Newton Steel Corp., and it was the site of the famous Newton Steel Strike of 1937, which was part of a national strike against the so-called “Little Steel” plants. Before the strike was broken and the employees forced to return to work, 11 workers were injured by the Monroe police force and 383 deputized thugs.

Alcoa bought the facility in 1942 and made cylinder heads for airplane engines until 1947, when Kelsey-Hayes

purchased the plant. Ford Motor Co. bought the plant in 1949, and it was spun off as a Visteon Corp. (a manufacturer of vehicle parts) plant in 2000 before becoming ACH in 2005.

Monroe was also once a thriving center for the manufacture of paper and paper-related products. River Raisin Paper Co. (est. 1911), Monroe Corrugated Box Co. (1917), Monroe Paper Products Co. (1921) and Consolidated Paper Co. (1921) provided good-paying jobs to generations of Monroe citizens, but all of these plants and jobs are now gone.

Furniture-maker La-Z-Boy once manufactured its products in Monroe, but only the headquarters remain in the Michigan city, as its furniture is now made largely in China.

The last remaining manufacturing site in Monroe with relatively good-paying jobs, a second ACH plant located in Milan (near the northern border of Monroe County), is due to be either sold or closed in the near future.

Manufacturing jobs attracted first immigrants and then southerners to Monroe. In the early twentieth Century, immigrant Europeans found work in the paper mills; during the Great Depression and after WWII, both black and white workers migrated from the South, particularly Appalachia, to work in the steel and automobile factories.

As is the case in other American cities, these jobs are rapidly approaching extinction. It is no accident that the loss of manufacturing jobs is occurring at the same time that more houses remain unsold. Capitalism is increasingly becoming parasitic—as exemplified by the predatory loaning schemes responsible for the housing glut—and profits are being made not through the production of goods but by creating and selling debt. Unions no longer exist to protect the jobs and benefits for their rank and file, as was the case in the Newton Steel strike, but to line the pockets of their corrupt officials while making sure that corporate management turns a profit.



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