

In run-up to Democratic Party primary

Western Pennsylvania workers speak on struggling economy

Alex Lantier
22 April 2008

Living conditions in small-town Pennsylvania have become the focus of national debate over the past week. A press scandal erupted after Democratic presidential hopeful Senator Barack Obama of Illinois described voters there as “bitter” and economically devastated.

As Obama’s rivals, Democratic Senator Hillary Clinton of New York and Republican Senator John McCain of Arizona, have attacked these comments, big-business politicians and the corporate media have been unable to avoid a brief discussion of the broader social problems facing millions of people in the small cities and towns of America’s Rust Belt.

Speaking at a closed-door fundraising event in the exclusive Pacific Heights neighborhood of San Francisco, Obama said: “You go into some of these small towns in Pennsylvania, and [...] the jobs have been gone now for 25 years and nothing’s replaced them. And they fell through the Clinton administration and the Bush administration, and each successive administration has said that somehow these communities are going to regenerate and they have not. And it’s not surprising they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren’t like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their problems.”

Obama subsequently backed down from his comments, describing them as poorly phrased. However, correspondents for the *World Socialist Web Site* who traveled to small towns in western Pennsylvania found unanimous agreement that deindustrialization carried out under Democratic and Republican administrations alike had indeed left behind bitter, struggling communities.

Sharon is a small manufacturing town on Pennsylvania’s western border, near the steel and automotive manufacturing center of Youngstown, Ohio. Its steel, machining, and automobile components industries were progressively shut down during the late 1970s and 1980s, with the Westinghouse Transformer Plant ceasing operations in 1984 and Sharon Steel reducing production until its owners finally

shut it down in 1992.

As of the 2000 Census, Sharon had about 16,300 inhabitants and a median household income of \$26,945—just over half the 2000 national median income of \$50,046—and a poverty rate of 17.6 percent. The town’s population voted 51 percent for George Bush against 48 percent for Democratic candidate John Kerry in the 2004 US presidential elections.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Larry, a worker at Duferco Steel, which bought and now operates a portion of the former Sharon Steel mill. Larry said:

“There are about 500 salaried and maybe 150-200 hourly workers. When I started in 1978, it was Sharon Steel then, there were 2,500 people working there. We had steelmaking then. Now we import steel from different countries and we just process and finish it. When Sharon closed in 1992, I was out of work for a while. I took a job in Grove City, then that plant closed down.

“When Sharon went bankrupt I lost over \$20,000 in an employee stock ownership plan. Then union was trying to save the mill. Each week we would get paid, but they would take so much out of it to buy stock. We only got pennies on the dollar for what we put in.”

Asked about other jobs in Sharon, Larry said: “There are not many good-paying jobs in Sharon. If you don’t work in the steel mill or the tube mill, the most you can make is maybe \$10 or \$12 an hour, and very few benefits. You cannot do anything on that. I have seen a lot of people leave here. I went to work in Cincinnati for a while, but I had to move back. [...] Families break up when you move around so much. It is hard on a family.

“I feel our politicians have been sitting on their hands. The House and Senate, they have not been doing anything to help the American people, they only help themselves and the rich. It is their system, the people have no say.”

Kathy, a gas station cashier, told the WWS: “The local economy is very bad. It used to be booming, now it’s dead.

The businesses died, the Bavarian festival, the steel companies folded, even the food strips. People are bitter about the world in general. Gas prices are high because of the war—we shouldn't be there."

Darlene said: "Yes, people are bitter in Sharon. You can find a job, but is it going to be enough to pay the bills, to put food on your table, to clothe and take care of your kids? That's the problem. The way the economy is now, food prices are going up, gas prices are going up and it's going to get a lot worse before it gets better. Politicians don't care about us. They get their money from the rich people and that is all they care about."

Donna, a nursing home worker, told us: "I am bitter. I take care of my daughter and grandson. All I do is work, eat, and sleep. After you pay the bills, there is nothing left. There is a lot of crime and drugs in Sharon. People have no jobs and that is what happens. There is nothing for the kids to do, they just hang out on the streets.

"I used to take my grandson fishing, but I can't even do that anymore because the price of a license has gone up. Jobs are real hard to come by in Sharon, the mills have cut back and all there is are McDonalds and those kinds of places. Maybe that is a job for kids, but a man is not going to be able to support a family on minimum wage."

She added: "I do housekeeping. It is hard work. I only get paid \$8.00 an hour. This winter, my gas bill was between \$500 and \$800. I can't pay that; I do what I can. I will pay it after a while, but there are families that have to decide not to heat their homes so they can afford to eat.

"The politicians don't care about the working people and the poor. They will make promises to get elected, but they never keep them. I am against the war in Iraq. We should leave those people alone. Bush is causing more trouble than he is solving. He is causing more people to hate us. They should bring our troops home now. That money should be used to help people, not to kill people. I was for Obama at first. He says it is time for a change—but what kind of a change, that is what I am asking."

The *World Socialist Web Site* also spoke to Heather, her husband Gene and her father Glennhull. Heather works at a convenience store, Gene works at a local furniture factory, and Glennhull went on disability after being laid off from National Casting as it closed in 1982.

Heather said: "They need a lot of jobs here. [...] My husband gets \$7.15 an hour, just minimum wage. He makes barstools. We could only make money with overtime."

Gene said: "After 90 days they fire you to not have to pay medical insurance. The company's making millions and you can't get insurance! A lot of people are bitter. The factory pays minimum wage and it's a big company, making parts all over the world. Especially if you have kids, a family, or

you're buying a car on this income, you're stuck losing everything because they're going to fire you after 90 days."

Meadville, whose population hit 13,700 in the 2000 US Census, has seen several industries cut back production in the 1970s and then shut down in the 1980s, notably textiles and railroad freight.

In 1985 zipper-maker Talon Corporation ceased operations at its Meadville plant and laid off 2,200 workers; Avtex Synthetic fibers shut down and laid off 900 workers in 1986; and in 1989 Conrail Freight shut down its operations laying off 700 workers. Other industries, such as plate glass and tool and die—which originally serviced Talon—have reduced operations.

Meadville's median household income was \$24,502 in 2000 and it had a poverty rate of 22.7 percent. It voted 57 percent for George Bush versus 42 percent for John Kerry in the 2004 elections.

Mark, a groundskeeper whose son works in tool and die, told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "The economy here never recovered since the early 1980s. We've lost too much manufacturing in this country. In the early 1980s there were over 17,000 people living in Meadville, now we're down to 12,000. There are not enough manufacturing jobs—there are tool and die jobs, hospital and school work, and service work. In tool and die, wages used to be \$25-26 an hour, now they are down to \$17-18 an hour.

"There are over 4,000 tool and die jobs in Crawford County [the area around Meadville, with a population of 90,000]. Now tool and die is doing better, a lot of companies went out of business in the 1980s and 1990s. [...] Probably employment is down roughly one third from what it used to be."

Karen, a school teacher, commented: "For new people coming in things don't look too good. There are fewer retirements, because baby boomers are hanging on for longer. [...] More young people leave than stay."

She added: "It used to be that the more you made, the more you paid to help others—why isn't it like that any more? I'll send a letter to Oprah—if you want to give money away, why don't you pay for my son's education?"



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