

Economic transformation of Welch, West Virginia: from mines to prisons

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3 August 2010

McDowell County, West Virginia's southernmost county, has seen a dramatic decline in population as a consequence of the collapse of the mining workforce. At its peak, McDowell was home to more than 100,000. Today's population is a quarter the size; since 2000, it has declined by 18 percent.

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For many years the county was the world's largest producer of coal, and Welch, the county seat, was christened, "The heart of the nation's coal bin." Smelter-bound coal exports fueled the US industrial revolution, the critical steel industry, and the explosive expansion of American capitalism in the 20th century—including providing the energy resources for production of war materiel. McDowell County coal mining and processing sites of the US Steel Corporation were for decades the largest operations of their kind in the world.

Struggles of miners in the coalfields region won substantial gains in living standards, including pensions, health insurance and safeguards that mitigated some of the worst dangers in the mines. The death toll each year from coal dust explosions, roof falls, and black lung shrank as a result of the militancy and solidarity of the mineworkers and their communities. Culture and commerce flourished, making coal towns such as Welch and Williamson—both strongholds of the United Mine Workers of America—centers of social life for the working class.

Gains that were fought for by the working class—both in strike actions and in the civil rights movement—won better nutrition, educational prospects for the poorest families, and needed modern goods such as telephones and automobiles.

Today, the area ranks among the poorest in the country. The levels of distress suffered by the population, alongside the vast wealth that continues to be extracted,

stand as testament to the string of betrayals of the miners by the UMWA, particularly in the 1980s.

In 1984, miners at A.T. Massey, now Massey Energy, went out on strike after the company refused to sign on to the industry-wide Bituminous Coal Operators Association (BCOA) agreement, which set uniform worker compensation from mine to mine. Massey instead demanded that the UMWA negotiate individually with more than a dozen of the company's sham subsidiary operators, which would splinter the workforce and subject miners to arbitrary variations in wages and benefits.

When the miners declared a strike, they were isolated by the UMWA leadership, headed by Richard Trumka—now the president of the AFL-CIO—which had abandoned both the demand for industry-wide standards and the principle of industry-wide solidarity in struggle. Militant miners in McDowell and Mingo counties were vilified, isolated and their efforts were crushed. The destruction of living and working conditions soon followed.

The miners were struggling, ultimately, against the impact of the decline of the United States as an industrial power. The mighty steel industry based in Pittsburgh, largely fueled by coal hauled up from southern West Virginia and eastern Kentucky, underwent one of the sharpest collapses.

In 1986, US Steel abruptly closed down operations in Gary, a company-founded town near Welch. Over 1,200 workers were immediately made jobless. The loss of so many better-paying jobs hit like a tidal wave across the regional economy. In the course of a single year, personal income in McDowell County plunged by two-thirds.

The coalfields region was convulsed by struggles over the next several years. In 1988, Pittston Coal followed Massey in rejecting the BCOA agreement. Miners, eager to fight, had their arms pinned by the UMWA, which waited a full year to call a strike, and then limited the rank and file to appealing to management and other futile

protest tactics. Finding the union an obstacle to the struggle to defend their wages, 50,000 miners launched a wildcat strike independent of the UMWA in 1989.

Fearful of this independent upsurge, the UMWA lied to miners, claiming that Pittston had backed off on its concession demands. After occupations and strikes had been quashed in 1990, the union leadership entered into backroom negotiations with Pittston management and the federal Department of Labor, crafting a contract that granted most of the company's demands.

The bitter outcome of these episodes broke the union in all but name. The most militant miners were exposed to violence from company-paid agents and legal frame-ups for their struggles. The mining workforce was subjected to increasingly brutal conditions, speed-ups, and major downsizing. Families were ruined; thousands packed their belongings, never to return.

The town now strikes one as the scene of a tragedy. Like Detroit, Welch was at one time a prosperous, working class city with an army of militant unionized workers, a shopping and entertainment center in the region with many commuter and commercial rail lines, multiple hospitals, theaters, and many other amenities for residents.

Today, with a current population of only 2,600, 27.7 percent of households live on less than \$10,000 per year. Forty percent of families with children in the city live below the poverty line; 75 percent of families with children under the age of five live in poverty.

The countywide per capita average income is \$10,174. The median home value is \$22,600. In 2008, 32.8 percent of the population lived below the official poverty threshold.

Some 16 percent of Welch residents over the age of 25 have received less than a ninth-grade education. Another 21.8 percent received some high school education but did not earn a diploma. A quarter of households have no vehicle. The vast majority of housing (70 percent) was built before 1960, with 30 percent built before 1940. Virtually no new housing construction has taken place in Welch since 1995. Many houses reflect both the period of boom in which they were built and the disastrous period of bust in which they have decayed.

The city's official unemployment rate is 9.5 percent, but more than 60 percent of the population is not counted in the labor force. An aging population suffers a major shortage of health care providers and assistance services.

The primary industry today is the prison system. Statewide, West Virginia claims six large federal prisons

and 13 state prisons, for which it has to thank the recently deceased Senator Robert Byrd, who, in his position as chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, propelled his home state to the forefront of the prison industry. Southwestern West Virginia is particularly attractive to the prison industry because of its dire economic state. Real estate is cheap and wages are among the lowest in the country.

Welch is home to two state prisons, and one federal prison is being constructed on a former mountaintop removal site above the town. One of the state prisons, Stevens Correctional, occupies what was previously Welch's hospital. Another, the former county jail, now known as the "Welch Facility," is operated under private ownership, the only privately owned facility for state prisoners in West Virginia.

The McDowell County Correctional Center is also located in Welch, in the old courthouse, which is not outfitted with adequate recreation or health facilities to care for prisoners. Reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* visited the courthouse and found scores of prisoners held in a small fenced-in area in the courtyard, rimmed with razor-wire, in the full sun. Armed guards patrolled the perimeter of the fence.

Prisons are invariably presented as "economic diversification" to the job-starved population, although a small proportion of employees are hired locally, and few economic returns are gained in the broader economy. Instead, the local community is subjected to the noxious influence of lockdown police measures around prisons, desperate regional applicants are hired on only because of grossly depressed local wages, and residents themselves are counted increasingly among the incarcerated.

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