

Unemployment soars in small Florida cities

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The mass closure of Sears and Kmart stores scheduled over the next several months stands to severely impact the state of Florida, where 11 of targeted stores are located.

Many of the Florida stores placed on the condemned list are located in smaller Florida towns such as Crystal River. Each store, according to a spokeswoman for Sears, employs between 40 and 80 people, bringing the total number of Florida employees losing their jobs to between 440 and 880.

For a small town like Crystal River, which has a population of about 3,500, the loss of 80 paid jobs becomes magnified. Unfortunately, Sears is not the only retail store in Crystal River closing its doors for business in the near future.

Within the Crystal River Mall, where the Sears store is located, four other smaller retail stores are also closing: Spencer's Gifts, Claire's, Kay Jewelers, and Jenene's Gourmet Coffee. This raises the number of Crystal River residents losing retail jobs to well over 100.

On Sunday, January 8, as Kay Jewelers closed, workers inside were cleaning and removing jewelry from display cases. Outside of the Spencer's and Claire's were signs advertising 50-75 percent price markdowns, bringing in mobs of people willing to stand in long lines for big savings.

One employee, who will be losing her supervisor job before the end of January, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that she does not know how she will be supporting her 2-year-old daughter now that her workplace is closing. "The only options that are open to me are other retail jobs and restaurant work, but no one is hiring," she said.

Another woman in her early fifties said that while she has submitted applications to other retail stores in Crystal River, much age bias still exists, and she has little hope of regaining employment in the near future.

One young man still employed by a store in Crystal River Mall explained the situation that he and all working class residents face in town: "For me, all I can do is go to work at the power plant like my father or work here." However, the aforementioned mother is skeptical: "People might be able to get jobs at the power plant, but once they are laid off, which most inevitably are, they are screwed."

According to residents, Crystal River exists only because of tourism. Crystal River is situated around spring water Kings Bay which maintains a consistent temperature year round. This brings manatees to the warmer waters of the spring during the winter months of the year, when the ocean waters grow colder. "If the manatees were gone, we'd be gone," said one young man.

Snowbirds, a name locally applied to those who only live in cities like Crystal River during the winter months of the year, own houses in the few upscale neighborhoods that exist. The majority of the neighborhoods where power plant, retail, and restaurant workers reside are more reflective of what Florida really looks like. Many locals who were born and raised in Florida have a strong distaste for these upper class visitors.

The number of locals staying in communities like Crystal River is dwindling. According to Census records, the population of this particular city decreased from 4,000 in 1990 to less than 3,500 in 2005. This 12 percent decrease has had an impact on many of the young people who have remained. "Half of my graduating class has moved to places like Tallahassee, Orlando, or Tampa," one young resident explained. "There are few job opportunities here, and even fewer opportunities to have fun. Many of us drive to the bigger cities on the weekends because we have nothing to do."

With the closing of so many retail stores in the

Crystal River Mall, some fear that the mall itself will follow suit, decreasing the business and social appeal of Crystal River even further.



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