

Set for Life: The effects of recession on an older generation

Nick Barrickman
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Set for Life, a documentary by directors Susan Sippelle and Samuel Newman, focuses on the effects that the economic crisis of 2007-2008 has had on the generation of Americans 50 years and older. The film is compiled from dozens of interviews obtained across the country, often gotten on the spot at unemployment offices. These videos are stored for viewing at the multimedia web site www.overfiftyandoutofwork.com. *Set for Life* has won multiple awards since first appearing in January at the New Jersey Film Festival and is currently being screened in limited viewings around the country.

The documentary focuses mainly on the lives of three workers, selected probably to represent various sectors of the economy, from private and public sector “blue-collar” workers to an information technology specialist, all trying to survive after having lost their jobs during the collapse of the US economy in 2007-2008.

The film is interspersed with images of family videos from an earlier period, picturing the happier times that existed in American society at this time, contrasted with up-to-date shots of idled factories in the American heartland. One individual describes the “feeling of calm” he experienced in his younger years, believing that working for AT&T was a guaranteed ticket to a secure life, “like having a government job,” he says. This is contrasted with a clip of a woman saying that even the “most loyal, paternalistic companies are not like that anymore,” recalling the cold and impersonal way in which she and many others have been laid off.

The film shows Joe Price, a third generation steel worker from Weirton, West Virginia. Particularly proud of his 30-plus-year career, Joe at one point revisits his long-idled former job site, holding up a steel rod while asking the camera, “What is wrong with a man making a living by working with his hands?” The scene

captures the feeling of loss many have experienced. Now, Joe and many others like him face the prospect of searching for work from employers who view older age as a detriment to hiring.

In this, the film delivers some of its most striking moments, as one gets a sense that the vast shift in society has left a substantial portion of the population simply unable to cope in today’s economic situation. Many interviewees recall the dreadful experience of putting out hundreds of resumes to receive no reply from job providers. Holding onto the hope of achieving the “American dream,” many of the workers evince a sense of determination to get back on their feet, though many have given up on the prospect of ever retiring.

The tragedy of George Ross, Jr., an IT worker fallen victim to California’s misfortune, is compounded when he is informed that his son, a Marine, has been left crippled by an improvised explosive device while serving in Afghanistan. Owing nearly \$200,000 on a mortgage he had refinanced before losing his job in 2008, George is forced to put his job search on hold in order to care for his son.

In one scene, George and his wife Linda attend a debt-consolidation workshop while driving a *Wounded Warrior* charity van in hopes of persuading the hosting firm to take up their case. The attempt fails. Linda, in tears while speaking to the camera, says that to her, the “American dream” has been simply “erased.” In these scenes, one can’t help but note a parallel between the condition of the Ross’s war-damaged son and the images of the once-great industrial heartland, now an idled and rusting shell of its former self.

Somewhat scant, statistically speaking, the film relies heavily on the anecdotal experiences of its subjects. Those figures it does provide, however, are staggering.

Since the onset of the recession, the level of

individuals above age 50 and out of work has more than doubled, with the average unemployment period skyrocketing to over 17 months. The percentage of individuals able to return to work at equal or higher wages since being laid off is in the single-digits. The film calculates that roughly one-in-five individuals over the age of 50 currently remains out of work in the US.

A theme visited throughout the documentary is the issue of home mortgages. The film provides statistics showing that since 2007 nearly 5 million homes have been lost to foreclosure, with market analysts expecting between 3 million and 8 million more to come in the ensuing period. According to a study by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York City, nearly \$6 trillion in property value has simply been erased due to the mortgage crisis. The film is dotted with scenes of abandoned neighborhoods and homes, some with signs hanging outside looking to sell for as cheaply as \$350.

One former GM employee, Stan Bednarczyk, informs the interviewer of his incurring a \$40,000 loss on a home due to having to relocate from Ohio to Michigan, only to later wind up with a mortgage that was nearly \$150,000 underwater in Detroit. Including the total taxes owed between the two homes, Bednarczyk informs the audience that it cost him nearly \$400,000 simply to break even, “and there’s no write-off in our income system for that,” he adds.

The film concentrates on age, dedicating a certain amount of its time to the idea of “ageism,” in which workers feel they are being discriminated against strictly on that basis. This is perhaps due to the director’s own perceptions, as Sipprelle, a baby-boomer herself who sought to switch careers in mid-life, felt this issue in particular needed covering. The result is somewhat narrow, tending to fuel the filmmakers’ perception that the “Great Recession” is simply a generational issue.

Other limitations emerge. In a Q&A session at the Economic Policy Institute in Washington DC, Sipprelle, when questioned about the film’s general lack of a political focus, expressed her preference to see political divisions “left out” of the documentary, wanting to obtain the “widest appeal possible” because the issue was so pressing.

In this, one sees the director pulling her punches at just the point where she should begin exploring. Sipprelle herself admits that due to budget cuts enacted

under the administration of President Obama, many of the federal and state programs upon which these workers rely are now being phased out. The reality is that both political parties at federal, state and municipal levels of government are pursuing austerity policies and are responsible for the deepening social misery being inflicted on the working class as a whole.

The power of *Set for Life* lies in its drawing on the real lives of workers. Despite its weaknesses, the film deserves a wide audience.



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