

Steubenville, Ohio: Portrait of a rust belt city

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Steubenville, Ohio recently gained notoriety because of a tragedy last August that resulted in the conviction of two teenage boys, players on the local high school football team, for sexually assaulting a 16-year-old girl. The trial was held in an inflamed atmosphere, with the town's population and the football team in particular painted as aiders and abettors of rape.

Various liberal and pseudo-left organizations, along with affluent feminists, have joined the fray, blaming a so-called "rape culture" for the episode and ignoring the desperate social conditions that help give rise to backwardness and violent behavior, especially among young people. In this way, the upper middle class left lets the American corporate elite off the hook.

Steubenville is a small former steel town located on the west bank of the Ohio River, about 40 miles from Pittsburgh. The latter is often cited as an example of a city that has rebuilt itself after industrial collapse. This is hardly the full picture, since most of the new jobs in health care and the service industry are lower paid and offer fewer benefits than previously. Even these, however, are not available in Steubenville and numerous other towns in the region, such as Uniontown and McKeesport, Pennsylvania and Weirton and Wheeling, West Virginia.

Steubenville was once a thriving community, one of many located along a 30-mile stretch of the Ohio River from Weirton in the north to Wheeling in the south. Towns such as Mingo Junction, Yorkville and Martins Ferry, Ohio and Follansbee, Wellsburg and Warwood, West Virginia all had operations that were part of Wheeling-Pittsburgh Steel. Weirton had the Weirton Steel Corporation, which employed 12,000 workers at its peak.

Steelmaking began as early as 1817 in Steubenville (the birthplace in 1814 of Abraham Lincoln's Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton). According to a history of Wheeling-Pittsburgh, the company's roots "go back to the middle of the last century when Wheeling, West Virginia, which lies on the banks of the Ohio River, was the center of a flourishing nail manufacturing industry. In 1851, LaBelle Iron Works was established and soon became a leading nail factory. By the end of the Civil War, the nail market had begun a serious decline, and LaBelle began searching for new products to manufacture, eventually entering into the creation of steel sheets, tin plates, and galvanized roofing. This expansion was propelled by LaBelle's purchase of a three-year-old nail factory in Steubenville, Ohio, and their installation of two blast furnaces at the plant. Eventually, the Steubenville plant became the site for open-hearth steelwork, plate mills, sheet mills, and tube works."

From 1875 to 1920 the US steel industry experienced explosive growth, making it a world leader, as production expanded from 380,000 to 60 million tons annually. The industry's average *annual* growth rate over this period was a remarkable seven percent.

Iron ore was shipped by barge and rail through the Great Lakes region from the iron ranges in the northern Midwest. Steel mills in the Steubenville area employed tens of thousands of workers. Thousands of others went underground in the mines that dotted the hills to the east, south and west to dig out coal that ultimately powered the blast furnaces.

Once the nation's eighth largest steel producer, Wheeling-Pittsburgh Steel (the product of a merger in 1968) went through a series of bankruptcies and reorganizations in which its facilities were closed down

piece by piece, job by job. Retired workers have seen their pensions devastated. All that remains are about 200 workers at the Follansbee coke works, now run by Mountain State Carbon. The Steubenville mill was finally closed in 2005.

Weirton Steel's massive works once produced primary cans and other tin products. In 1983, the mill—then owned by National Steel—was purchased as part of the world's largest Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP), which turned out to be another trick to fleece the workers.

Weirton workers were granted worthless stock and forced to take pay and benefit cuts of 32 percent one year and 20 percent another—and still the mill was gradually shut down. Today there are fewer than 1,200 people employed at the Weirton operation. Driving to Steubenville from Pittsburgh along Route 22, one sees the portion of the mill that has been torn down and turned into scrap, awaiting rail cars to carry it off to be sold and melted down.

Almost all the mills and mines in the area have shut down, many in the 1970s and 1980s. Steel company executives and large shareholders walked away with millions of dollars, but the ruthless process destroyed entire communities, created widespread social misery and left little hope for young people in the area.

The industrial collapse led to Steubenville's sharp decline. Its population peaked in the 1940s at nearly 40,000, but had already fallen to 31,000 by 1970. The fall since then has been truly precipitous. Steubenville lost a higher percentage of its population between 1980 and 2000 than any other urban area in America. The censuses of 1980, 1990 and 2000 showed drops of 14, 16 and 14 percent in population, respectively. Today the population of Steubenville is just over 17,000.

Weirton, West Virginia, where the victimized 16-year-old girl comes from, saw a similar decline, losing 30 percent of its population from 1960 to the present. Weirton now has fewer than 20,000 people. The neighboring towns along the Ohio River have all experienced population loss and social decay.

The blame for the disastrous poverty, high levels of illiteracy, alcoholism and drug use and the existence of social backwardness lies squarely with the American corporate-financial aristocracy. Tragedies such as the sexual assault last August, along with other forms of anti-social behavior, are the almost inevitable product of the bleak and desperate circumstances.

WSWS reporters recently spoke to Steubenville, Ohio residents about conditions in the decaying town.

Jean has lived in Steubenville all her life. She described how the city was once nicknamed "little Chicago" because of its steel industry and how busy the downtown area was when she was young.

"I remember when the mills were working, this was a very lively place. There were two movie theaters downtown, the Paramount and the Grand. Me and my friends were able to go to the shows, nobody was afraid to walk around at any time day or night. Now everything is going downhill. You can't find any work. I clean churches, but you don't make enough to live well. Things have changed and everyone is moving out of the city. Now there is so much drugs and crime."

Chenetta George explained that she had to go out of Ohio and get a job

at the Embassy Suites Hotel in Moon Township, Pennsylvania, a 45-minute drive from Steubenville. “We definitely need more jobs. Both my grandfather and my mother worked at Weirton Steel. My grandfather got a pension. I think my mom just lost everything.

“I graduated in 2009, and moved right away to North Carolina to be with my husband who was in the Marines and stationed there. Things didn’t work out, so I moved back here in 2010. I looked for work. I got hired through a home health care agency in Wheeling, West Virginia. At one point I was working at the Embassy Suites, as a home health care aide and as a telemarketer all at the same time. Now I’m going to school for criminal justice.”

Rhonda, who was also born and raised in Steubenville, explained that she had to join the military because there were no jobs. Now she is out and “the job situation is very bad; there is nothing for people to do. Most families are on government assistance and that is no way to live. They claim that the oil industry is going to create all these jobs. They call people to come get training, but when they show up, they find out that they have to pay for it. It is just another trick to get people to spend their money.

“You should provide training to the young people, if you want them to have jobs and a future, not force them to pay for it.

“There used to be plenty of jobs around here. When the mills were working, even if you didn’t work in the mill, they created jobs in the shops and restaurants. You look at the downtown now and it is just deserted.”

While the downfall of the steel and mining industries played a major role in the growth of poverty and declining living standards, the area was also hard hit by the recession in 2008, from which it has not recovered. The official unemployment rate in the Steubenville area had shot up from 6 percent to 14 percent by January 2010. Today it has fallen to 10.4 percent, but it is still 3.4 percentage points above the rate for the rest of Ohio.

The slump has meant a big growth in poverty and hunger. Steubenville’s median household income for 2011 was \$33,000, well below the state and national median of \$48,000 and \$52,700, respectively. The city’s official poverty rate is over 27 percent compared to 14 percent for Ohio. Over the past three years, the real income of households in Ohio has fallen by over 8 percent. While the numbers for Steubenville alone are not available, they presumably match or surpass that figure.

Large numbers of Ohio residents face food insecurity. Nearly 1.7 million people in the state receive food stamps, which average only \$138 per person per month. Many parents routinely have to choose between paying utility bills, rent or mortgage, purchasing medicine or buying food for their families.

Steubenville’s Mary Jackson told us, “I think the whole society sucks. I can’t find a job anywhere. I have five kids that I have to care for. I have been off of work for nearly a year. I worked in a fast food restaurant, but I was told I had to leave when my husband who also worked there was promoted to management. That was a lie because even though he was called management, they treated him horribly. He was laid off about five months later and I went back to reapply for work, but they wouldn’t hire me.

“It has been very hard, but while he had unemployment benefits we were able to get by, but when they ran out, we were homeless for a while, moving from one house to another until we were able to get into the projects, but that has been hard too.”

Mary’s children range in age from six to thirteen. “My husband has been looking for work, but can’t find anything. I don’t think there is much of a future for young people. If my husband and I are unable to find work, what are things going to be like for younger people? We just live from day to day, which is sad, because you shouldn’t have to do that. The politicians don’t care about the poor, they just care for the rich.”

Many residents spoke about the pervasive social problems, such as drugs, prostitution and crime, that afflict every community where poverty is high and opportunities are few.

Ashley Greathouse, 27, with three children, told the WSWs: “They need to change a lot in this town. They need to clean the streets. I just saw a dozen needles on the ground down the street. There are killings and drugs. It used to be nice. Now there are so many homeless.

“I came here from Cleveland after the tenth grade. I did my share of garbage. Now it’s been four years and nine months that I have been clean from using crack. I haven’t touched drugs since my second child on June 26, 2008.

“There was a double homicide here recently. A 16-year-old killed two people over \$30. \$30! It was right here on Market Street. We knew the victims—Ryan, who was in his twenties, and had a baby on the way, and Artavius who was 18 or 19, and he’d just had a baby girl.

“I always said that the only things to do in Steubenville are what the girls and the guys do. The girls do sex and the guys do drugs. I’ve been trying to get a job and I cannot get one since I was plastered all over the TV in 2008 after I was arrested as part of a prostitution sting. So, even though I’m clean for four and a half years, and my kids are everything to me, I can’t get a job.”

A number of Steubenville residents also alleged that some of the youths involved in the 2012 sexual assault case may have been shielded by the police and prosecution, pointing out that teenagers with parents who had connections were not prosecuted while a poor black and white kid were.

Several interviewees pointed to the corruption in Steubenville and Jefferson County, and abuses committed by police.

Referring to the sexual assault case, one resident asserted, “If my two kids were involved, I would be thrown under the jail. In Steubenville, we have had the same sheriff and the same mayor for as long as I can remember, and that’s about 18 years. They run and nobody runs against them. I believe this is a very corrupt county. Ohio has 48 counties. The saying goes that there are 47 counties in Ohio ... and then there’s Jefferson County.”

The local police department has a long history of targeting minorities and working class residents with arrests and harassment. In 1997 Steubenville became the second city in the country to sign a consent decree with the federal government providing for the reorganization of the police force after a US Justice Department investigation found that it regularly used “excessive force, false arrests, charges and reports.” The Justice Department also found that Steubenville cops used threats and force against people who witnessed police abuse to intimidate them into not speaking out.

CNN noted in 1999, “Over a period of about 20 years, the city lost or settled 48 civil rights suits involving its police. In those cases, which often involved minorities, the city paid out more than \$800,000—\$400,000 between 1990 and 1996. At one point, the police department’s insurance policy was canceled.”

All in all, Steubenville presents a picture of corporate plundering, official violence and social devastation. Those who ignore this history and these conditions when examining the wider implications of the August 2012 sexual assault case are operating as apologists for the existing social order and facilitating its further oppression and exploitation.



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