

Syracuse, New York ravaged by unemployment, poverty and low wages

Steve Filips
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Despite a decline in the official unemployment rate, thousands of people in and around Syracuse, New York, are struggling to find jobs and earn a living. Many have given up looking for work and thus no longer figured into official statistics.

In May, New York state reported that unemployment in the city declined to 6.7 percent from the recent high of 11.1 percent in July 2012. However, if those that are not looking for work are added into the current unemployment rate than the unemployment rate for Syracuse would rise significantly to over 13 percent.

Since 2005, Syracuse's population has remained relatively steady at 145,000 people, but the number of people in the labor force, those working or looking for work, has dropped by 5,300 from 65,000 to 59,700 today, nearly a 10 percent decline.

Syracuse, like many of the cities in upstate New York and throughout the so-called Rust Belt of the Midwest, has lost thousands of manufacturing jobs over the past 30 years in a process of deindustrialization which accelerated after the financial collapse of 2008.

Manufacturers in categories such as steel, auto parts, electronics and chemicals operated in Syracuse and throughout New York State. Tens of thousands of other workers who were employed in industries and services supporting these manufacturers are now out of work.

A short list of the companies that have closed plants in the Syracuse area in the last three decades includes Allied Chemical, Miller Brewery, General Motors and General Electric. These all closed during in the 1980s and 1990s, putting thousands of people out of work.

Since the 2008 financial crisis and ensuing recession, a new round of plant closings and mass layoffs has occurred.

New Process Gear, an auto parts plant which employed nearly 4,000 people at its height, was

shuttered in 2012. Oberdorfer, an aluminum castings manufacturer that made aircraft engine parts, shut down in 2013. Crucible Industries, makers of specialty steels for the automotive and tool industries, cut its work force from 675 in 2009 to fewer than 250 today. In each case, the trade unions worked with management to enforce the shutdowns and layoffs.

Many companies that were once considered stable have future prospects that are now in question. Privately-held medical device manufacturer Welch Allyn in Skaneateles, a suburb of Syracuse, was sold to Hill-Rom, a medical equipment maker headquartered in Chicago, for \$2.1 billion this past June. The buyout portends the possibility of a large number of layoffs at the company which currently has 1,300 employees.

Mass layoffs have been reflected in a dramatic rise in poverty in the city. The US Census Bureau reported that the poverty rate was 34.6 percent in 2013, up from 27.3 percent in 2000. For children, those under the age of 18, the poverty rate was approximately 50 percent in 2013.

The minimum wage for New York state is \$8.75 an hour and at year's end will rise to a paltry \$9. Once considered a wage only for high school and entry-level workers, many find themselves trying to support their families on this wage.

The WSWs recently spoke to Syracuse residents about the difficulties in finding steady employment in the area which pays a decent wage.

"You can barely find a jobs anywhere," Quantisha East, a young mother said. "No matter where you go, it is the same story, there are no jobs.

"It is hard to get by, most single moms have to depend on welfare because there are no jobs and there are a lot of people who are homeless or families living with their parents and it's overcrowded and unsafe."

Stefon Pinkston agreed, “I have worked many different jobs, in dollar stores, in restaurants but now as I get older it is very hard to find a job. You can’t make a living on the minimum wage; it’s not enough to pay your rent and bills.

Mimi Garcia spoke of the difficulties finding full time work, “I have been living in Syracuse for the past 14 years, I have been working steady until 2 years ago, now I am moving from job to job. I worked in the service industry, sales, I was a server in a restaurant, I would move from job to job trying to get a little better. We were working just to put food on the table, pay our bills, the rent, phone and heat. Everything keeps going higher and higher but the wages stay down.

“I would get paid every two weeks and the pay is gone long before the next check arrived and is barely enough for anything else for us. My son is 17 and he eats a lot, he needs things for school and activities and those cost a lot.”

Stacey Conkwright, who has three children said, “There are jobs, but they don’t pay well and that is very discouraging. I have been working since I was 16 and been unemployed since March. It was a medical coding job but they didn’t pay very much.

“I’m lucky that my husband works. There are a lot of single parents who work just to pay for daycare, it is a vicious cycle. My husband works at Lowe’s warehouse, he has training in computers and has been interviewing for other jobs but no one wants to hire him. Hiring is a really drawn out process, so he puts in an application and is just waiting and waiting.

“It is hard on our family. With three girls we have bills and have to buy them clothes and things. I will probably stay off over the summer so we don’t have to hire anyone to watch them, but that makes it hard to just pay our basic bills.”

Lisa, a certified nurses assistant (CNA) who lives on the north side of Syracuse related her experience: “I have worked as a CNA for 10 years and make \$14 and it’s nothing. To try and pay my bills I’m working a lot of overtime. I have three children and spend more time at work trying pay my bills than being with them.”

Gloria and Aaron Smith spoke of the difficulties facing young people in finding work. Aaron, a recent college graduate said, “If you apply for work here at say Walmart, Lowes or any small business that only requires a high school diploma they say we can’t pay

you enough because of your degree. I also feel that many companies won’t hire me because of my degree. They feel that there is no point in training me because I might leave soon when something better comes along.”

Gloria added, “I’m working for a non-profit getting paid \$13 an hour and still not making it. When I hear about raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour in California, I think you still can’t raise a family on that. On top of that we are struggling to get the minimum hours so that we can get health insurance for our family. We have two children and are both working and still have to use Medicaid health insurance and public assistance.”



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