

A portrait of life in America's Rust Belt

Part One

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Spread out across the prairies of north-central Indiana are dozens of towns and small cities whose streets and industrial parks once buzzed and hummed with the sound of automobile production. Over the highways and railroad tracks linking places like Muncie, Kokomo, and Marion to the industrial capitals of Detroit and Chicago there passed millions upon millions of loads of car bodies and parts to be processed and shipped to dealers around the world.

The auto towns of rural Indiana make up part of a constellation of production that was once a world center of industrial output—the area forms the geographical center of what was known as the “Factory Belt,” spanning westward into Illinois and Missouri and east to Ohio, Michigan, and Pennsylvania.

The history of the rise and fall of the towns that now lie between highway I-65 and I-69 is typical of many small towns and major cities all over the United States. For this reason, sociologists from the 1920s onward made Muncie the subject of numerous academic studies of working class life. Researchers developed a term to refer to towns like Muncie: “Middletown.”

The farmers and homesteaders of the early 20th century must have rubbed their eyes at the massive, hulking auto factories that sprang up among the cornfields and on the edges of the towns. Some of the farmhands went to work in the plants, where they stood on assembly lines next to the tens of thousands who migrated to the area from places like Kentucky and Tennessee. In came African-Americans from the South and Italians and Eastern Europeans from Europe and the East Coast.

With the development of the working class came organizers from the Socialist Party under the leadership of Indiana native Eugene V. Debs whose revolutionary ideas transformed political and cultural life in these once far-removed towns. Later came the first organizers—many of them socialists and communists—with the Congress of Industrial Organizations.

When strikes broke out, the capitalist plant owners dispatched the police and the Ku Klux Klan to attack meetings of workers while bringing-in African-American workers as strikebreakers. In the fervor they whipped up, there were lynchings. A rally of 200,000 members of the KKK took place in Kokomo in 1923. In 1930, a photo of black teenagers Tom Shipp and Abe Smith hanging from a tree outside Marion shook the world. Seven years later, black and white autoworkers followed the lead of the workers in Flint, Michigan and sat down together in factory occupations. The great sit-down strike wave of 1936-37 had come to town.

Much has changed since the whirlwind of social change caused by industrialization first swept the plains of central Indiana, but the heyday of production has long-since passed.

By the early 1980s, plant closures and mass layoffs in Indiana resulted in job losses totaling in the hundreds of thousands. One academic study of the region noted as early as 1982 that the process of deindustrialization amounted to a “widespread, systematic disinvestment in the nation’s basic productive capacity.” In Delaware County, where the town of Muncie is located, manufacturing jobs made up nearly half of the workforce in 1977. By 1996, that figure had dropped to less than one third.

The level of social devastation is such that an entire university department has been dedicated to studying its impact. James Connolly, the director of Ball State University’s Center for Middletown Studies, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that manufacturing employment has fallen to as low as ten percent in Muncie.

People in these towns speak of the Great Recession as an ongoing phenomenon, not a thing of the past. Ellen Zimmerman, a representative for the Logansport-based Area Five Agency on Aging and Community Service, told the *World Socialist Web Site*: “It has humbled people. One day you have the world on a string and the next day that world comes crashing down.”

The recession has exacerbated the decades-long restructuring of social life in what is now known as the “Rust Belt.” In the six years prior to the recession, high and mid-wage job figures (\$15-\$26 per hour) had already been on the decline, with 97 percent of new jobs added during that period paying less than \$13 an hour.

But Indiana lost 231,200 jobs in a span of 20 months from 2007-2009, with half of the “high paying” job losses (over \$26 an hour) coming from the auto industry. While 36,000 workers lost their jobs in the auto industry from 2007 to 2010, only half as many auto-related jobs have been added in the years that followed.

Behind these figures are the lives of millions of workers and their families, whose fates are bound by objective processes that reflect the crisis in the world capitalist economy. As multi-national corporations scour the world for resources and cheap labor, production chains are rearranged and factories abandoned without workers having had any say in the matter.

The politicians from the Democratic and Republican Parties sanction the companies’ diktats and the trade union bureaucrats enforce them. Sometimes the companies hand a small sum of hush money to workers who had toiled in their plants for ten, twenty, thirty years so that they don’t put up a fuss about their treatment. Over a period of several decades, trade unions like the United Auto Workers refused to wage any defense of jobs and living standards in the area and are to blame for the devastating conditions that exist today.

A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team recently visited north central Indiana and spoke with dozens of residents, including

autoworkers, journalists, historians, professors, high school students, non-profit representatives, and others. This report seeks to portray the reality of social life in small-town Indiana and to capture the contradictory and complex character of working class life in 2015.

There exists, as one would expect, misconceptions and political confusion. Decades of betrayed struggles by the trade unions and the virtual disappearance of strikes—in a country where the term “labor wars” described much of America’s history from the 1870s to the 1980s—have left their mark. The incessant promotion of economic nationalism by the unions, and the drumbeat of militarism and religious propaganda by the media, the politicians and what passes for popular culture have also taken its toll.

However, years of endless wars, bank bailouts and cynical lies from the Obama administration about an “economic recovery” have deeply discredited virtually every institution in America. Among workers and youth there is a deep hatred of social inequality and a political system that is widely recognized as a conspiracy of the banks and corporations.

Very few are resigned to their fate. There is a yearning for equality and a growing interest in a socialist alternative to a system that enriches the few at the expense of the vast majority of the population. While many complex problems remain, objective economic processes have also undermined nationalist and parochial views, and there is an increased awareness, despite the best efforts by the unions, the media and the politicians, that workers and young people around the world confront common problems.

The impact of plant closures

When the BorgWarner auto parts giant closed its Muncie plant in 2009, the company gave the 800 soon-to-be-laid-off workers a choice, said James Connolly of the Center for Middletown Studies in an interview with the WSWS. Option A: a “buyout” for all the workers; or Option B: extended health care for the plant’s more senior workers.

The United Auto Workers waged no opposition to the company’s efforts to pit senior workers against the rest of the workforce, let alone to fight the plant closures. Seeing no alternative, the workers voted to accept the cash.

A Facebook page called “Borg-Warner Muncie Workers Keeping in Touch” includes many comments from former workers and their relatives.

“My dad worked there for 25 plus years,” wrote Linda this past June. “I always remember my sister and I picking him up. He always talked about Warner gear, and it was a shame when he passed in 2014 because when the factory closed down years ago he didn’t get his health insurance even though he put in a lot of years. He didn’t get it because the place closed down. The company should have made sure that their employees got their life insurance that they paid into. Enough said!”

Donna wrote on the page in 2013: “This is a reminder to me of how fast a president can make your world come crashing down with the stroke of a pen.”

Another worker, Carla, said, “I still think about all the time spent there, sometimes I even dream that it is still in operation. Then I realize it is a real nightmare.”

“I worked there for 30+ years,” Carla wrote in another post. “I worked with some great people...I miss the place and it sickens me to drive by there. They tried for many years to shut it down and they finally got it done. Some people only needed less than a week to get their 30 years in [and receive retirement benefits], and they got a slap in the face.”

An autoworker from Marion GM stamping sat down with WSWS reporters and told them about life in the area. This worker wished to remain anonymous to avoid retribution from the UAW and the company.

“I see a lot of the homes that were formerly middle class or were owned by formerly well-paid factory workers. A lot of those are getting run down and even abandoned. A lot of the people who were working at Delco or Kokomo transmission thirty years ago have either passed or retired, and you can see the decay of their properties.

“The decline in wages plays into a lot of the declining and dilapidated real estate. Small businesses are doing poorly and give way to big box stores. As far as the people that work at the former Delphi plant, they used to be under the national labor agreement before the spin-off meant their wages got brought down. At GM component holding they don’t make the same kind of wages they used to.

“Twenty years ago when you got one of those jobs you would not have to ever worry about being in a situation where you couldn’t pay for housing, for example. You would never have to worry about living in your home or living in a motel or having to walk to work. Those jobs used to be the ticket to the upper-middle class, twenty years ago. Now, not so much.”

The economic decline has produced an up-tick in many indices of social misery, including drug use, he said.

The Marion autoworker noted that “in general you see a lot of underemployment and unemployment and that seems to segue into drug activity. And I’m not so sure that it isn’t allowed to happen because it seems to me that enforcement of drug laws are targeted against minorities and the working poor—it’s a huge system of revenue for governments via the prison-industrial complex. This is expressed very vividly in Grant County, Indiana.

“When you look around, you see a lot of young, underemployed people and they don’t have anywhere to go, anything to do. What else is there for them to do? A source of revenue is in the black market, and the most lucrative black market is the drug trade. The papers are filled with drug arrests, it’s so commonplace I can’t even name an example. We have a higher incarceration rate than in any other advanced economy. If you had adequate employment opportunities for young workers you wouldn’t have the incarceration rate we do now—that’s self-evident. Marion has always been kind of a tough town but it seems even more so now that factory jobs are gone.”

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