A portrait of life in America's Rust Belt: Part Two

Part Two

Eric London
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For large sections of workers in central Indiana, life is a constant struggle to keep oneself and one's family fed, housed and clothed.

According to a 2015 report from the Indiana Institute for Working Families, Indiana has seen a 29.3 percent increase in the official poverty rate since 2007, higher than the 20 percent average increase throughout the US.

The federal Poverty Guidelines set the definition of "poverty" at an insultingly low level so as to mask the state of social reality in the US. According to the guidelines, a family of four with an income of above $23,850 would not be considered impoverished, despite the fact that it is impossible to care for two children on even double this amount.

Overall, 2,275,546 Indiana residents (or as they are popularly called, "Hoosiers") are in poverty or on the verge of poverty—that is, 35 percent of the state's 6.5 million people. Median household income has fallen from $55,182 in 2000 to $47,529 in 2013, a drop of nearly $10,000. Nearly one million Hoosiers rely on federal food stamps for nourishment.

The increase in poverty has been coupled by a government policy of removing people from social programs. As the Indiana Institute for Working Families report notes, "as poverty increases, Indiana's tradition of designing public programs that discourage participation continues. Examples include asset limits, strict lifetime limits for cash welfare, letting benefits erode with inflation, onerous work requirements and denying support to so-called 'able-bodied' adults."

As part of the state and federal assault on social programs, Indiana officials announced this week that 50,000 Indiana residents will lose access to food stamps due to the Obama administration's requirement that an individual work at least 20 hours per week to obtain food.

In Indiana, only 39.1 percent of families below 200 percent of the federal poverty level received federal food stamp benefits in 2013, well below the national average. Furthermore, 69,300 Hoosiers were slated to lose unemployment insurance in 2014 as a result of Congress and the Obama administration's decision to let extended benefits expire in December 2013.

Access to the federal Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program is heavily restricted in Indiana. According to the 2015 report, "to be eligible for TANF in Indiana, a family of three must not have an annual gross income above 36.3 percent FPL [Federal Poverty Level], or $7,104 annually, and may not possess more than $1,000 in assets. In 2008, it served just 10 percent of individuals in poverty, and as of 2013 it served less than 2 percent."

"Making matters worse," the report continues, "TANF's inadequate benefits have also been left to erode with inflation. For a single-parent family of three, the $288 monthly TANF benefits remains unchanged since 1996. This equals a decline of 32.7 percent of its value from 1996 to 2013…In 2012, 85 percent of all recipients in Indiana were children."

The WSWS spoke with Ellen Zimmerman, a representative of Area Five Agency on Aging and Community Services, a non-profit based in Logansport, Indiana. Zimmerman's organization provides, among other services, a utility assistance program to help people keep their heat on during Indiana's frigid Midwestern winters.

"After the fall of the automobile industry in 2008-09, which hit Kokomo very hard, we did see an increase in the number of clients coming to apply for service," she said.

"I would say life is different here than it was in the 1960s. When the area housed the large Chrysler factory and the GM Delco plant, the median income in the community was very high. A large number of the population worked at those companies and I'd say it was very prosperous. Since then, either people have made things work or they've had to find other means of employment.

"I know for retired people out of Delco, many of them found retirement programs reduced or eliminated, so that had an impact on people who had retired, but they've had to manage. They try to make things work and live within their means.

"I would say if you see any changes it's with people who had significant annual earnings, even as blue collar workers. Some of these folks made maybe six figures—albeit they worked long hours and seven days a week to earn that. But they've gone through a complete culture change. Now they need to do with less, with a job that isn't paying as well."

Zimmerman said people face many different types of problems on a daily basis: "If it's a single mom with children, she faces expenses of childcare, food for a family. If it's an individual who suffers from a mental illness, they have an entirely different problem set. We also serve elderly people who want to stay in their homes and find adequate services so they can stay. Family support is also a concern for them. Health insurance is a concern for individuals of all ages, being able to afford it or to afford the cost of prescriptions. It can be anything and everything."

There is a need for electrical and heat relief in cities like Kokomo. Zimmerman says their program offers "a one-time payment of an average of anywhere from $300 to $350 toward utility bills for winter months if they have a disconnect notice or if they have already been disconnected. If folks are approved for the program they're protected

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from disconnection from December through March 15.

"Without electricity in the winter, first you would have your pipes in the home freeze so you'd have property damages. Also, we've had terrible winters but we've also had blistering summers where people have died from intense heat, especially the elderly. We can't give protection during the summer. But in the winter, you think you can always get warm. But this isn't just about adults, it's about children, and children shouldn't have to be cold. They should be able to live in a comfortable, safe environment. They should have ample food—I'm not talking steak every night—I'm saying they should be nourished. There are basic needs I think should be met and that's what we try to do—that's what we try to work with.

"There are instances where we're not able to help people. Sometimes there are more drastic results. Space heaters and house fires tend to go hand-in-hand in homes. Heating with your stove because your furnace is not operating properly can cause carbon monoxide poisoning, so it's a domino effect. Because of this, what we find is more families are going to other families' homes and it's cheaper to live as a group than to live alone. What we try to prevent in situations of no electricity are elderly folks who are on oxygen. In those situations, you have to protect those people that need it most."

Growing up in Kokomo under the shadow of permanent war

These facts and figures convey the type of obstacles that broad sections of working class youth and their families face. They portray a reality that flatly contradicts the deluge of lies coming from the official mouthpieces of the corporate ruling elite.

Speaking before the United Nations on September 14, 2014, Barack Obama said, "I often tell young people in the United States that despite the headlines, this is the best time in human history to be born…to be free to pursue your dreams."

In the face of the lies of the government and corporate media, the flag-waving of the military and police and the hollow, algorithm-generated songs and movies that make up official popular culture, there exists among youth in these areas a profound desire to break with the monotony and harshness of life under capitalism.

The WSWS spoke with two students at Kokomo High School, Abbey and Destiny, ages 16 and 17. Initially, the students were hesitant to speak to the WSWS, noting that life in Kokomo was "pretty boring," and that there "isn't much to do."

Destiny, an aspiring preschool teacher, said she would like to go to college but "it is expensive." She agreed when a WSWS reporter suggested that education is a social right and that college should be free. "I agree," she said. "I think it would be better if it were free because then there would be more jobs, which would be better for everyone."

Destiny described the fact that most young people have jobs in the fast food industry, and that "a lot of people are into drugs and there is a lot of fighting over drugs and money."

When WSWS reporters pointed to the economic and social causes of such problems, Destiny's friend Abbey spoke up.

"I think everyone should be equal and everyone should get along. My brother told me a while ago—he said, 'I'm not religious but I think everyone should get along and that makes me a socialist.' And I agree with him."

WSWS reporters asked Abbey and Destiny what it was like to live in a country whose government is always at war. It became clear during the course of the conversation that these young people were two years old when the Bush administration began bombing Afghanistan in November 2001. They have lived practically their entire lives under the shadow of the so-called war on terror.

Abbey said, "I don't think wars solve much. People are going over there and dying." She then related a personal story that revealed a good deal about working class life in America. "My brother is in the military and he was sent over there to fight in the war. When it started I was young and so my family wouldn't let me listen to their conversations about it, but I remember them saying that my brother was going over there for no reason and that people are dying for no reason."

She continued, "My dad has told me about how bad things are getting. He doesn't have a job. He goes to garage sales and buys things for cheap and tries to sell them for higher prices at other places. He told me we'd be alright if things ever got too bad."

Abbey brought up the importance of history. "I had a teacher in sixth grade who said he was in the army and they just brainwashed him, saying the army was doing something good when really they weren't. What you guys are talking about, this is the kind of stuff they should be teaching us in history. I'm into history—why is it important? So history doesn't repeat itself. It's time for us young people to change things, and how can we do that if we don't talk about how not to repeat history?"

The two expressed displeasure with the fact that many young people seem "more concerned about Kim Kardashian than these types of questions." The WSWS reporters responded that history has shown that the eruption of major social struggles lead to sharp shifts in consciousness, and that the big questions facing humanity as a whole would sweep aside petty concerns and prejudices.

The yearning for a better life and the frustration with empty official culture recalls the eponymous character "Mamie" from Carl Sandburg's 1916 poem:

Mamie beat her head against the bars of a little Indiana town and dreamed of romance and big things off somewhere the way the railroad trains all ran…

She got tired of the barbershop boys and the post office chatter and the church gossip and the old pieces the band played on the Fourth of July and Decoration Day…

More than a decade of unending wars, the immense growth of social inequality and police violence has discredited capitalism and all its institutions, from the Democrats and Republicans to the media and the trade unions, who offer youth nothing but lies and platitudes. These conditions are driving working class youth to search out the real source of their problems and, ultimately, toward revolutionary conclusions.

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