

Autoworker speaks out: Life for young workers in America's rustbelt

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Kokomo, a town of 60,000 located on the prairies of North Central Indiana, is home to two major auto plants—a General Motors Components Holding plant and a Chrysler transmission plant. Roughly 4,000 of the town's residents work in one of these two plants, with many more residents working in nearby auto plants in Tipton, Marion and elsewhere.

In a recent visit to Kokomo, the *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed a young Kokomo autoworker who reads and follows the *Autoworker Newsletter*. This worker was born at the time of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, when the ideologists of capitalism proclaimed the “end of history,” i.e., the supposed end of the class struggle.

In fact, young workers are growing up in a period of permanent economic insecurity, unending war and levels of social inequality not seen since before the Great Depression. The experiences of this autoworker reflect those of an entire generation. These are his comments.

I only started getting political in the last year or so. I voted in 2008 for Obama because he said he was for change, but I feel I got duped in 2008 and again in 2012. I feel this time I need to take it seriously and know what I'm actually going for rather than putting an “x” up there for whoever. I started reading pretty much everything I see on Facebook. I got the *Autoworker Newsletter* when I found it online. The first article I read was about the union becoming corrupt—someone posted it on a local page on Facebook.

Right now, its six a.m. and I just got off shift. I don't feel like a human half the time. All I feel is sleep, work, sleep, work, and then it gets you depressed. I used to work Tuesday through Friday nights from 7 p.m. to 5 a.m., and possibly a fifth night—all at \$17.80 an hour—and I'll tell you what, I was way more depressed then, but now I work during the day too. The swing shift that I'm on now might suck because I work nights one day and days the next and it messes up my sleep schedule, but at least I can be up during the day sometimes. I haven't seen the sunlight in six months. To be able to enjoy being outside, these shifts are rough on you.

Clocking in you get to your machine, but they're so shorthanded on special trades, they might not have the part. But since they don't want to spend the money, they won't fix broken parts, and they'll have a lot of people doing unsafe things. They don't know it's unsafe because management doesn't tell them that it's unsafe. The only union person you see is your steward—so there's not really anyone from the union to tell you it's not safe, and so you do it.

Then you've got leaks all over the ground in areas that they don't clean up. One machine leaked out the back so bad that we would have to mop it up every hour, and they refused to fix it for six months.

They haven't had a skilled trades apprenticeship in two to three years. They're hoping that when the older workers retire the younger workers come in at a lower rate.

Some places also don't have proper personal protective equipment. The last two years I've been luckier, but before then I had management be on me from the time I clocked in to when I left, hounding me, sitting at my operation watching me. Stuff like that. Some management get a high off of it. They take it to the extreme.

We had a supervisor who literally did that every day. My best friend would go home crying at the end of the shift. This is a grown man, 35 years old, and he would go home crying because of this supervisor. They suspended him twice. Once was a day before Christmas on overtime. They accused him of lying even when the proper paperwork was there. He still got suspended indefinitely right before Christmas. He called me up crying, saying he just didn't know what to do. He got his job back, but then he was always afraid of that supervisor. Then three or four months down the road that same supervisor suspended him again for something ridiculous.

I feel bad for the people in assembly—they run them bare. They have to be on the line all night. If they have to go anywhere like to the bathroom you have to wait for relief, and if there's not one you have to wait.

More chances than not, when you have a complaint the

union will say, “I told them not to but there’s not a whole lot you can do.” Some stewards are better than others, but I’ve had grievances not even be filed. The union hall had no record of my grievance, nothing.

Most of the people I know about from high school are up at the auto plants and they’re pretty much in the same position as I am. They’re tier-two, but they make less money than me. Some have kids, and it’s hard for them. And our job is considered “good,” but I still live paycheck to paycheck. I might have \$100 extra at one time, but I’m paycheck to paycheck.

If you don’t work at the plant, you work at McDonalds. I’ve worked in fast food my whole life. My first job when I was 12 years old cleaning golf carts. Then I got a job at Dairy Queen, Olive Garden, I worked at Dominoes twice, then I was unemployed and then the company called. There are a lot of Walmart jobs, too, and retail jobs. A lot of the people I work with now also come from the fast food industry or retail. That’s basically all there is.

We have one of the cheapest costs of housing [in Kokomo], but for someone that works at McDonalds, I know people who work two or three jobs and are barely scraping by. People are busting their backs here to be able to get by for their kids. It’s hard for everybody everywhere. Honestly, we’ve got it easier in Kokomo, but I couldn’t imagine having a McDonalds job in a big city. You couldn’t do anything.

I know a lot of people who have gone to college, but I don’t know many who have graduated. They might go for a couple of semesters. I’ve seen success stories, but one of my best friends just spent a year looking for a job and he’s got an engineering degree. He’s smart, but he’s got about \$75,000 or \$80,000 in debt.

What I’m most opposed to is the inequality that goes with wealth and the decline in overall living standards. Our government is corrupt, it’s not for us anymore, and I think if we’re going to have someone governing us, they should be for us. They should be for what the people want.

Obama, he just flat out lied about the stuff he supported before he got elected and after he was elected. He’ll say that he’s brought unemployment down when that’s not really the case, real unemployment has actually gone up. They just screw up the numbers.

And I’ve been against the wars since the very beginning. I think it’s just for money. War is money—that’s what it comes down to. Anywhere they can get power they’re going go invade. They’ve gone into several countries and they’ll continue to do it until they own the world.

I think Edward Snowden is an American hero. Honestly, he did the right thing giving that knowledge to the American people [about NSA spying programs], and our government

hates him for that.

This police violence—it isn’t just against blacks, its against everyone. Blacks do get the short end of the stick more often, but its not just against them its against everyone.

As for Obamacare, I don’t know much about it because I’m not on it. But I do know that a lot of people I talk to pay more now on health care than they did before.

I think that if young people can open their eyes now we can make change, but if they get conditioned to the BS, then we’re screwed. When I was growing up my dad didn’t have to worry as much. He worked at Delco [now GM Components Holding]. We never really had to worry, but now I’m worried that when I have kids, are they going to be taken care of like I was? I don’t think so. I will have to struggle.

My message to young people is to educate yourself and let your voice be heard. Don’t let someone silence you or make you feel dumb, because without your voice no change can be made. I think our generation is the generation that’s going to actually open their eyes and be willing to make that change. We’re tired of the nonsense. I think young people are finally realizing that we’re going to see change in our lifetimes. I think something is going to happen.

This is why I like the *World Socialist Web Site*. The media talks about lions dying in Africa, but what about kids dying of poverty in our streets? You guys talk about issues impacting working people. You don’t censor things like the mass media.

The sad thing I’m realizing about our government is that it’s supposed to be a democracy, but they’re against people like you and me who want change.

They’ll even try and kill us, but real change takes sacrifice and it might take your life. But in the fight against inequality, it’s going to take sacrifice. If we don’t have social revolution, we’re screwed. What we have is nothing compared to the hell our kids will have to go through, and its only going to get worse and worse if nothing is done.



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