

“If something doesn’t happen, Boone County will cease to exist”

Resident of West Virginia coal mining community speaks on economic crisis

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Boone County, West Virginia, once the largest exporter of coal in the United States, has become the center of the economic crisis in the Appalachian coalfields. Between 2001 and 2015, coal production plunged in the county from nearly 21 million tons to just over 7 million tons. The county has lost more coal mining jobs than any other in the country.

The collapse in coal has devastated county budgets and those of the school district. The Boone County assessor projected a \$2.4 million decline in tax revenues for the 2015-16 fiscal year, but the shortfall metastasized into a \$9.3 million deficit, representing a nearly 17 percent drop in the county’s operating budget. Many residents are compelled to leave the area, further depressing the tax base.

Schools, parks, and other social infrastructure, once recipients of the largesse of coal companies like Massey Energy, are now at the mercy of individual donations. Parents and teachers are left to cobble together money for extracurricular activities for the children.

Stacy is a mother of two Boone County schoolchildren and wife to an underground coal miner. She spoke with WSWs reporters in the city of Madison as she helped wash cars to raise money for a youth football league. Her younger son, who is entering the fourth grade this year, attended the recently closed Jeffrey-Spencer Elementary. The county school district voted to close the school in February, even though its students performed well on standardized tests.

“My son’s class had a 13:1 child-teacher ratio,” Stacy explained. “When he tested at the end of third grade, he tested on a fifth grade math level, and almost a sixth grade reading level. Now he’s going into a school where that teacher can’t give him the harder work to keep him occupied.”

Her son will now go to Ramage Elementary, where classes will have 28 to 29 students. “That’s entirely too many kids for one teacher to be able to give every child the one-on-one attention they need,” Stacy said. “And now with the county cuts, she can’t even have the money to have an aide come in

to give the extra help so she can move on. So he’s going to be stuck on a level that he already knows, and he’s going to get bored.”

“We’re not even allowed to play football games on Saturday nights, because we’re not allowed to use the lights at the high school field. They want us to pay for the lights. We’re a non-profit organization. We don’t have multi-million dollar companies coming in and sponsoring us. This is how we make our money,” she said, gesturing to the children washing cars.

“The county itself is broke. But if we were to pay for lights, these kids would not get trophies at the end of the year, the pizza parties we do for them... just the little bit that we do for them, you can tell by some kids’ eyes that this is more than they’ve ever had done.

“If something doesn’t happen,” she added, “Boone County will cease to exist.”

WSWS reporters asked what she thought needed to happen. “We need leaders in here that will bring new jobs. We don’t need a fast food job that will not pay my vehicle payment, my house payment, my power bill. It won’t do it. We need good paying jobs. We have a strip mine that is abandoned, and anything could be put on there. Any industrial site, anything can be put on there and bring in jobs. They won’t do it.

“These people are starving. These people are resorting to theft, to selling drugs. And then you’ve got people like me, who want to raise their child in the small town community,” she added.

“We’re good people. We don’t want handouts; we don’t want to live off the system. We don’t want welfare, we want jobs. But we want jobs that we can maintain our standard of living. We want jobs where we don’t have to look at our kids and say, ‘Well do I feed you this month or do I pay my power bill?’ We don’t want that. We’re being pushed to the back burner. We’re being forgotten about.

“We can’t even afford to put on a Boone County fair.

They had three or four venders. That was our fair. We have nothing in this town for our kids to do. Nothing for our kids to look forward to. It is a washed up, depressing town. Knowing what this was when I was growing up, and seeing what they have, it's depressing. It's not going to get any better."

"It all stems back to the closing of the coal mines," she noted. "My husband got laid off three times last year. He's now at a coal mine, underground. He's a mine foreman. The thought of leaving crossed our minds more than once. But this is where we were born and raised, and this is where we wanted to raise our kids."

"Patriot went bankrupt. Alpha went bankrupt. Then it was, 'Well, you can work for a few weeks, and then we don't need you.'"

"My son's school was partnered with a coal company. So whatever they needed, they would give so much a year. When the coal companies started shutting down, coal prices dropped, my son's school stopped receiving items. They stopped."

"That to me is just simply saying, 'Sorry! Your education is not that important to us. We get our payday, so whatever on you.' And with the state not helping, it's just a slap in their face."

Stacy told the WSWs that if they were forced to move, they would leave the state altogether, but that they were holding out hope that the economy would improve. "I don't want my kids to say, 'When I grew up, all that was around us were depressed, drug-addicted people.' And that's what's here. They're depressed. We're tired. We're broke. And if you can't find a job—which you 9 out of 10 times can't—people resort to selling drugs."

She reported that others resorted to canning vegetables, doing odd jobs, and selling their belongings to make ends meet. Around town, WSWs reporters noted multiple charity car washes, bake sales, and tables set up along the roadside selling produce, used clothing, and other items.

Stacy said she had seen the economy in Boone County grow markedly worse in the past eight years. Her husband's employment situation has become more insecure. "First it started with pay cuts, gradually, here and there," Stacy said. "Then we went from 90-10 insurance to 80-20 insurance. And when you take a pay cut on top of 80-20 insurance, you're already tightening that belt. Then it went to 'We gotta idle this month.' So you have to draw low-earnings income. You draw that until you max that out, and then they give you a pink slip and you have to sign up on unemployment."

"When my husband and I went and signed up for assistance when he was laid off the first time, I was denied SNAP benefits," she added. "Then they went back and said

they could give us \$100 a month."

Stacy said while pay was down, the prices of groceries and other necessities were up. "I used to spend \$200 every two weeks. Now when I go, it's \$400. When payday comes, I know \$400 of that is automatically gone. I can't not buy food. I have to feed my children." She is currently enrolled in online courses at night to become a teacher, hopeful that an additional income will help the family.

Her husband works two weeks day, two weeks evening, six days a week, 10-12 hours a day. "So we never really see each other," she commented.

WSWS reporters asked about the impact of the changing shifts on safety. Stacy said it was a source of concern for him. "But he is a headstrong guy. He tells anybody, 'I've got a family, I'm coming out.'"

The grind of the work has also affected his health. "It does wear him out," she explained. "There are Sundays where he doesn't get up until 12, 1, or 2. We want to go do something and we're like, 'Please, come on, daddy,' and he's just, 'Please, let me just sit here'. It's exhausting on him. He's 40, and you can tell that it has worn on him. We've been together for 10 years, and he still works great, still gets up, but he has aged dramatically. It's taken a wear and tear on him, same as it did my father."

At 67, Stacy's father is suffering multiple, serious conditions. "He now has congestive heart failure, COPD, rheumatoid and osteoarthritis, kidney failure, degenerative disc disease," she explained. "He's got two discs that have already completely went away in the back of his neck and they won't do surgery, so anymore and he'll be in a brace. But what do you do?"

"My father was in the UMW but his pension is not great. He has insurance, but it's not the best. The medicine he has to take for his arthritis is outrageous. If he had to pay for it out of pocket, he couldn't do it. He lives literally month to month. If it wasn't for Medicare and Medicaid, he would not be able to afford it."



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