

# Backdrop to Trump's speech: The social disaster in Kenosha, Wisconsin

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President Trump chose Kenosha, Wisconsin for the location Tuesday to sign his “Buy American, Hire American” executive order, which restricts temporary visas for workers from other countries and mandates the use of US-made goods in federal projects. As he has done in similar stage-managed affairs, Trump promoted economic nationalism, the mass deportation of immigrants and the lifting of virtually all limitations on corporate profitmaking as a boon to American workers.

But the city of Kenosha and the entire southeastern corner of Wisconsin, like so many other regions in America's Rust Belt, proves the exact opposite. The city of close to 100,000 residents, on the coast of Lake Michigan between Chicago and Milwaukee, has been devastated by decades of deindustrialization, the closure of automobile and other manufacturing plants, and mass layoffs.

Signifying its transformation over the last four decades, Kenosha's largest employer is now Amazon, with 3,000 warehouse workers earning barely enough to live.

This was the result, not of immigrants or “unfair trade deals” with China and Mexico, but the ruthless operations of the capitalist profit system overseen by Democrats and Republicans alike. This assault on the working class was aided and abetted by trade unions like the United Auto Workers and Teamsters, which promoted “Buy American” campaigns even as they colluded with the corporate bosses to slash jobs and wages.

It is symbolic that Trump chose the headquarters of Snap-On Tools to deliver his nationalist rant. In 2003, Snap-On closed its tool manufacturing plant in Kenosha, laying off 290 workers as part of a two-year companywide layoff of nearly 2,000 employees.

The auto industry in Kenosha employed 16,000

workers during the 1950s and 1960s. The city was the location of a massive auto and engine manufacturing plant owned by American Motors Corporation, which was sold to Chrysler in 1987. Auto assembly ended in 1988, but engine production staggered on, with 1,300 workers or fewer, until the Chrysler bankruptcy in 2009.

The UAW staged a rally that year, complete with nationalist slogans, urging workers to look to Obama to save their jobs. But Obama's auto task force of Wall Street “turnaround” specialists insisted on its closure, along with GM's Janesville, Wisconsin plant, wiping out 2,400 jobs. The final 575 workers in the Kenosha engine plant lost their jobs when it closed in October 2010.

Durable-goods manufacturing in Racine County, just north of Kenosha, peaked in 1979, with 60 percent of the jobs in the area. In the early 1990s and 2000s, Young Radiator, motor and gear-maker Dumore Corporation, electronic and hydraulic manufacturer Sauer-Danfoss and agricultural and construction equipment multinational CNH Global also closed plants in Racine County.

According to US Census data, 22.4 percent of residents of Racine, or nearly one in four, lived in poverty in 2014. Racine also has the highest jobless rate among Wisconsin cities at 7.2 percent, according to the Department of Workforce Development's report in March 2016.

That figure that does not include workers who are underemployed or those who have dropped out of the labor force.

The social devastation caused from the loss of manufacturing jobs and the bursting of the housing bubble and financial crash in 2008-09 has been coupled with sweeping cuts to social services. The ending of the

temporary boost to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) food stamps in November 2013 affected nearly 47,000 individuals in Racine County, or about 24 percent of county residents and 43 percent of all children.

According to the University of Wisconsin-Madison December 2015 Report “Significant Changes in Wisconsin Poverty,” statewide poverty rose to its highest level in 30 years between 2010 and 2014.

Trump won the 2016 presidential contest in Wisconsin by fewer than 23,000 votes, or less than one percentage point. Obama won the state in 2008 by 14 percent, the largest margin in Wisconsin history, and again in 2012 albeit by a smaller margin. The radicalization of the state’s workers and youth was reflected in Bernie Sanders’ victory during the Democratic presidential primaries, including a thrashing of Hillary Clinton by a 15-point margin in Kenosha County.

Sanders then turned around and supported Clinton, who was widely despised for her ties to Wall Street and warmongering. This allowed Trump to posture as the antiestablishment candidate and win the state.



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