

“The jobs don’t pay enough to get out of poverty”

Waynesburg, Pennsylvania: Poverty in the coal fields

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Located about 50 miles south of Pittsburgh, near the West Virginia border, Waynesburg, Pennsylvania is a former coalmining center. Today it suffers from many of the problems—low wages, chronic joblessness, poverty, underfunded social programs and a lack of opportunities for the younger generation—that are typical of many areas throughout America’s so-called Rust Belt.

With a population of 4,000, Waynesburg is the county seat for Greene County and continues to feel the effects of the decades-long deindustrialization of western Pennsylvania. The short-lived boom in coal and natural gas drilling on the Marcellus Shale over the last decade has basically come to an end. While gas drilling has picked up slightly in the past year, residents say they expect it to drop off again soon.

Twenty miles northwest of Waynesburg, some 2,000 miners work at the Bailey Run complex, the largest underground mine in the US. Thousands of other miners have lost their jobs throughout Greene County. In late 2015, Alpha Resources shut its Emerald Mine, just outside of Waynesburg, wiping out 500 jobs.

Another 200 were laid off at the Bailey mine earlier this year by CNX Coal Resources, a spinoff from Consol Energy. Once the largest coal producer in the US, Consol (formerly known as Consolidated Coal) has largely gotten rid of its coal assets and shifted to natural gas. The company wants to cut health benefits for its former unionized miners and retirees. It has already done so for managers and supervisors.

Powerful labor struggles by the miners allowed many workers to attain a relatively decent standard of living. The United Mine Workers union, however, abandoned any struggle to defend miners’ jobs and living standards decades ago. The UMW now operates Career Centers, Inc., a union-run business that shuffles displaced miners into jobs at a fraction of their former pay.

Poverty is high and wages are low in Waynesburg, where most of the remaining jobs are in the service industry, which pays the minimum or close to the minimum wage. The average household income in the city is just \$38,255, more than \$15,000 a year below the state average. Per capita income is a

meager \$18,500 and young workers can expect to earn just over \$14,000 a year.

James Ballard makes \$10.50 an hour working at the nearby Walmart supercenter. He told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “There was the coal mine, the oil fields. There’s the college, but there aren’t many jobs there. Other than that, it’s pretty much minimum wage. A lot of people that work in the oil fields don’t realize that in a few years it’s going to be gone again.

“Oil drilling just came back. It was gone for about a year, but in the past few months it came back. It’ll disappear again, then people will be out of work again. A lot of people were blaming Obama for the mines closing down, but really it’s just the companies that did it themselves.”

“Walmart is probably the best right now because it pays slightly more than minimum wage, but they still don’t treat their workers right. They lay off a lot of people and expect other employees to work two or three times harder. They don’t get overtime.”

Asked if his salary is enough to live on, James responded, “Not really. I have a roommate. It’s kind of hard sometimes to get by.”

Like most workers in the service industry, James has no job protection and can be fired for the smallest pretext.

“I’ve heard that once they pay you so much, they find a way to fire you. Just recently I heard about a guy who was a homeless veteran. He was trying to get his life sorted out and he got a job at Walmart. He was cleaning the parking lot, and to make extra cash he was taking the soda cans to make money from recycling. Walmart found out about it, and they said he was stealing company property and fired him. They would have just thrown the stuff out anyway, and it would have gone to a landfill. That was just a way to get rid of him. They find the smallest things to get rid of people.”

Even when working full-time it is hard to make ends meet.

Danielle Morris works at a local bank but is concerned about the job prospects in the area and health care. “It’s pretty sad. There aren’t a lot of jobs here. Most of the jobs are low paying. Even if you have a degree you are not really getting the

opportunities you could in a larger city.

“My husband and I, we have good jobs. We make decent money and it is still difficult for us to make ends meet. I can’t imagine how difficult it is for people who make less than that to avoid being in poverty. Most are either on welfare or living in low-income housing and it seems it is nearly impossible to get out of that. The jobs around here don’t pay enough to get out of poverty.”

What Danielle feels is confirmed by statistics. Nearly one third, 29.9 percent, of all Waynesburg residents live in poverty. “It is very hard to find a good job around here,” Danielle said. While officially the unemployment rate is only 5.4 percent, less than half (48.5 percent) of the working-age population are considered part of the labor force. Many people have simply given up looking for work and are no longer counted as unemployed.

Health care is also a great concern for both Danielle and James. Danielle has a daughter who is allergic to fats in her diet. “It is a serious condition,” Danielle explained. “We’re on a very restrictive diet. It’s expensive with the supplements and the kinds of food she needs to eat. Her doctor appointments are expensive. Fortunately, we have gotten down to one time a year. But it’s the co-pays, the supplements, the food, everything that gets expensive.”

Danielle said she feels lucky and grateful to have health insurance through her job. It doesn’t cover everything though. “There are co-pays, there are deductibles and that is a huge chunk out of my pocket. I don’t know a whole lot people who have that kind of money laying around.”

Speaking on the repeal of the Affordable Care Act, Danielle said, “I think people with preexisting medical conditions should be covered. It’s not like they chose to have these medical conditions. To disallow them coverage is just wrong. It’s terrible. Obamacare isn’t perfect, but repealing it isn’t going to solve the problem either.”

Danielle wants to take health care coverage further. “I kind of agree with some of these countries who have the universal health care. I’d pay more in taxes for everyone to have insurance. Why wouldn’t you want some little kid who has cancer to have insurance instead of him being denied because he has a preexisting condition?”

James is also worried about insurance. “We get health care, but you have to pay for it. I am in favor of a healthcare system. Almost every country in the world has their own health care, and we’re one of the only one that makes people pay for it.

Young workers have an especially difficult time with nearly a third of all 18-24 year-olds living in extreme poverty, or less than half of the official poverty rate. What little social support existed for them as children disappeared when they turned 18.

We spoke with Dusty Sampson and Cortland Roberts outside a job-training center. They are enrolled in a job readiness program, which teaches them typing, helps them get their driving licenses and basic computer skills.

“It’s horrible,” explained Cortland speaking of the job situation in the area. “Even with fast-food restaurants, McDonalds and such, unless you’re in the right friend circle, you don’t get hired. It’s like that at McDonalds, Burger King, 7-11, the Marathon, even Sunoco.”

“You’ll have an interview, but it doesn’t lead anywhere. I’ve been searching for the last year and a half to try to get a job. I’ve put in applications everywhere in Waynesburg, even some of the family businesses, and none of them will hire me.”

Dusty used to work for Walmart but was only making the minimum wage and needed to get a better job. “I quit in 2014 because I had a fiancé and two kids already. I looked for a job, but couldn’t find one that paid enough benefits.”

Cortland and Dusty both have family affected by recent layoffs in the coal industry. “I had three family members from Emerald mine get laid off,” Cortland explained.

Greene County, like many other areas of the state, voted for Trump in the 2016 elections. The *New York Times*, the *Nation* and other liberal publications have sought to blame this on the supposed racism of white working-class voters. An analysis of the election, however, shows that many of these same workers voted for Obama and helped him to carry Pennsylvania in 2008 and 2012. The past eight years of worsening social inequality led to a collapse in the vote for the Democrats, from both white and minority voters.

Bernie Sanders won popular support in Pennsylvania and other states and then told his supporters to back Clinton, allowing Trump to posture as the only “antiestablishment” candidate in the presidential elections.

James is one of those who are growing disillusioned in the Democratic Party. He said he supported Sanders in the primary and voted for Clinton in the election. When a WSWS reporter argued for a political break from the capitalist two-party system, James agreed, “I think it’s a good idea, because both parties work for the corporations, for the big companies. Democrat or Republican, they’re both part of the same two-headed dragon.”



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