

Lordstown GM plant closing: Another blow to northeastern Ohio

Samuel Davidson
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The threatened closure of the General Motors (GM) Lordstown Assembly Plant, scheduled for March of this year, will be a devastating blow to the Warren-Youngstown, Ohio, area, a community that has been ravaged by decades of deindustrialization.

Located about halfway between Cleveland and Pittsburgh along Interstate 80, the plant is one of only a few industrial sites remaining in the Warren-Youngstown area. The other targeted GM plants include two in Michigan (the Detroit-Hamtramck Assembly and Warren transmission), one in Oshawa, Ontario, and another near Baltimore, Maryland.

The plant closures and layoffs have evoked widespread opposition. However, the United Auto Workers (UAW) is working closely with General Motors to prevent a struggle in defense of jobs, including those of thousands of salaried workers.

Instead, the UAW is seeking to divert workers' anger against their class brothers and sisters in Mexico, blaming Mexican workers for taking American jobs. At the same time, it is telling workers to keep quiet and hope to be one of the few who may get offered a transfer to other GM plants.

Frank, an electrician at Lordstown Assembly, said, "We have to fight this. I can't move. I've been living here too long. Nobody is going to hire someone my age, and I can't blame them. They want someone young who is going to be able to put time in with the company."

"We gave all the concessions, and the company got all this money, and now they are closing the plants. Everybody knows the union is working with the company. They don't fight for us."

The closing of Lordstown Assembly will have a devastating impact on a region that has long been depressed. At one point, the facility was listed as the second largest employer in the region, after the Diocese of Youngstown. It is larger than the city and county governments, the regional health care systems and the state university.

Over the past two years, GM has eliminated the second and third shifts, cutting 3,000 jobs. Another 1,500 workers will be laid off next month when the plant is mothballed.

Jeffrey Baymo, who has worked 24 years at the Lordstown plant, said that the closure will leave a long trail. "This is going to be just a devastating situation for the people, for the families, for the communities, everything. This is going to have a long-range effect on the communities. I'm not even from Ohio; I'm from Pennsylvania. It is going to leave a trail that far and impact a lot of towns and communities."

"It's just bad, a bad situation. And the union has not fought hard enough in this situation. We are all one, and something has to be done."

"We gave up a lot, a lot. And the promises they made have not been fulfilled. We are a big part of all the money they are making."

The region already has one of the highest poverty rates in the country. Over one third of the population and over half of all children live below the already absurdly low official poverty level—about \$1,000 a month for a single person and just over \$2,000 a month for a family of four.

That totally inadequate number is before taxes are taken out, meaning families have even less to buy food, clothes and medicine, pay rent and take care of utility bills.

Well over half the population can't find affordable housing or are forced to live in substandard homes that are prone to the events like the tragic house fire that killed five children on December 9 in Youngstown.

"This all comes back to a lack of good jobs," says Whitney Washington-Saber, a young social worker. "The average income for a household is a lot less than what you need for decent housing. I see a lot of housing that is substandard because people can't afford better. It all comes back to a lack of good jobs."

Officially, the unemployment rate in the Warren-Youngstown area is around 6 percent, above the national average but not as high as might be expected from the conditions one encounters. However, fewer than half the population are officially considered in the workforce, meaning many people have simply given up looking for work.

One in every six people in the three-county Mahoning

Valley area faces hunger, according to Second Harvest, a food bank that collects and distributes more than 10.5 million pounds of food each year to the 13,000 people who typically seek food assistance each week.

The economic decline of the Youngstown-Warren area is directly connected to the collapse of steel and other manufacturing there over the past 40 years.

On September, 19, 1977—known locally as “Black Monday”—Youngstown Sheet and Tube laid off 5,000 workers at its Campbell works. Over the next decade, 40,000 workers would lose their jobs, including thousands at United States Steel, which closed its Ohio Works, demolishing its four blast furnaces. The Jones and Laughlin mill that also sat alongside the Mahoning River was soon closed.

These numbers don’t include the thousands of other workers who lost their jobs at support industries, stores and restaurants, which also closed.

Youngstown Sheet and Tube and Jones and Laughlin, which became part of LTV and Republic, used bankruptcy to eliminate health care for their laid-off and retired workers as well as to drastically cut pensions.

The steel industry closed mills and other industrial sites all along the Mahoning River for a distance of 25 miles. Many have been torn down, others left to rust. Of the gigantic Youngstown Sheet and Tube mills, all that is left is a recycling center employing fewer than 20 people. Combined with the steelmaking of the Pittsburgh region, this area was once the largest steel-producing region in the world.

James Franklyn works selling food from a barbeque stand on the weekend.

“My dad worked at Republic Steel first. When they went down, he worked for LTV, and when they went down, he finished up at Warren Consolidated.

“That doesn’t exist for young people today. My son is 19 and he’s been looking for a job, and it is very hard for him. You have to work two or three jobs to have enough to take care of your family. Most of the jobs don’t pay very well.

“All the young people are leaving Youngstown,” Whitney added. “The minimum wage is too little, and people never get enough hours. You have to work several jobs. People have to buy food, pay their bills, take care of their kids—it is very hard.

“This all started with the closure of the steel mills, and now there is nothing left for people.”

Underscoring the impact that the loss of manufacturing has had on the wage base in the area, a recent study found that the average wage of a steelworker 40 years ago, despite a huge rise in the cost of living since then, is about the same as the current median household income today.

Kimberly Mack worked at the Packard Electric plant in Warren for 18 years, which at its peak employed more than

10,000 people making parts for GM. The plant was closed, and many workers lost their pensions.

“I was raised here. It is very sad. Jobs are the biggest problem in Youngstown. A lot of people can’t get jobs, and there is not enough help for people. The economy is real bad. The jobs that exist don’t pay enough for a person to support their family.”

Notably, the region has become the hub for several major call centers that typically employ people at poverty-level wages with few benefits who are forced to work all kinds of shifts and don’t last very long.

Montrell Simms, a diesel mechanic, explained that people need jobs that pay a living wage. “All these people are able to get is a job working in a warehouse. These people don’t want to just work in a warehouse for all of their lives. They work you like a dog for \$8.50 or \$9.50 an hour without benefits. People want a job with benefits.

“If you don’t have jobs, you get drugs and guns. We don’t want that. The government is already pushing that on us. The system just wants to push people down.

“There needs to be something for the young men. There is nothing to help them, they want to support their children.

“It is hard for people who are renting. The landlords know that, and they take advantage of people. They are pushing the rents up and don’t care about fixing the houses. They just let them run down.

“Many people own their homes, but they don’t have the money to keep them up. It costs a lot to paint your house or fix the roof. You see houses falling down and then people just abandon them, and they then get used by drug addicts or dealers.”



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