

After GM Lordstown closure: *Vindicator* newspaper to shut down

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The Youngstown, Ohio-based *Vindicator* newspaper announced June 28 that it will cease publication on August 31, ending the newspaper's 150-year-old run. The move will leave the once-prosperous industrial center of Mahoning County a "news desert," without a daily newspaper. The newspaper's closure follows on the heels of this year's shutdown of the General Motors plant 15 miles away in Lordstown, Ohio. The loss of local news coverage is one more step toward the virtual erasure of what was once a major industrial metropolitan area as an economically and socially functioning unit.

General Manager Mark Brown, a member of the family that has owned the *Vindicator* for the past 132 years, made the decision after failing to find a buyer at any price for the newspaper, which has operated at a loss for 20 of the past 22 years.

According to an official Worker Adjustment and Retraining (WARN) notification, the paper's 144 employees, including 40 newsroom employees, along with 250 carriers, will be laid off, with 132 layoffs scheduled for the last two weeks before the paper's final issue on August 31. This includes the paper's nine reporters, who cover health, social services, education, local politics and the police. Representatives of the *Vindicator* could not be reached for comment.

The *Vindicator* has received numerous accolades, including six first-place awards in 2019's annual Ohio Associated Press Media Editors newspaper competition. This included first and second-place awards for coverage of the deportation of local resident Al Adi and for coverage of the closure of GM's Lordstown Assembly Complex, respectively.

Many important local stories will now go unreported in a region notorious for political corruption, organized crime, and, more recently, social devastation. The closest remaining daily newspaper will be the *Tribune Chronicle* in Warren, Ohio, 30 minutes away in neighboring Trumbull County, which has indicated that it may somewhat expand its coverage of Mahoning County.

Even the big-business press is acknowledging the significance of the newspaper's demise. Joel Kaplan, Associate Dean of Syracuse University's Newhouse School, told the *Washington Post*, "What this means is that no one in that community will be covering, on a regular basis, school board meetings, city council meetings, the cops and the courts. Democracy, as we know it, is about to die in Youngstown."

The closure of the *Vindicator* will mean a loss of access to local news for the 37 percent of Mahoning County residents, including 61 percent of children, who lack a fixed broadband connection at home.

Youngstown was once a major center of industrial production, primarily steel. The rise and fall of the *Vindicator* in many ways parallels the city's industrial history. As was noted by Karl Marx, United States' abolition of slavery through the Civil War, ending in 1865, laid the groundwork for a massive expansion of capitalist production. This is reflected in the rapid growth in Youngstown's population from 2,759 in 1860, growing nearly threefold to 8,075 in 1870 and ballooning to a peak of 170,000 in 1930. The Great Steel Strike of 1919 included over 50,000 steelworkers from the greater Youngstown area, according to strike leader William Z. Foster.

The *Vindicator*, also known as the Vindy, was founded in 1869 by James H. Odell, who sought to "vindicate" his defense of the pro-slavery Democratic Party in the aftermath of the US Civil War. However, the first page of the first issue was a call in defense of women's rights. The paper was bought by William F. Maag Sr. in 1887 and has remained in the same family for the past 132 years. In its early history in 1896, the *Vindicator* helped expose the anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant American Protective Association faction of the Republican Party, playing a role in thwarting the right-wing movement, which collapsed in the aftermath of the elections that year.

In the 1930s, Youngstown was fifth in the nation in home ownership, even suffering a housing shortage in the depths of the Great Depression. The city continued to prosper as

World War II and the Korean War raised demand for steel in the 1940s and 1950s.

The first strike in the *Vindicator*'s history began on August 18, 1964, after a dispute over contract terms for 42 outside circulation employees. The paper's 350-strong staff ultimately stayed out for eight months. From September onward, the striking members of the American Newspaper Guild produced the *Steel Valley News*, a 10-cent, 32-page paper, which won over many of the *Vindicator*'s advertisers. The paper's first run of 35,000 copies sold out and the paper ultimately achieved a circulation of 46,000 daily, rising to 61,000 on Sundays, roughly half of the *Vindicator*'s regular daily circulation of 101,000.

Although the *Vindicator* continued to produce a slim 2- to 8-page newspaper during the strike, workers from five other unions refused to cross the strikers' picket lines. As a result, the *Vindicator* could only sell its paper through newsboys and over-the-counter at the plant.

From 1960 onward, the city began to decline, reflected in population losses in excess of 14 percent in every decade since. The closure of Youngstown Sheet and Tube, announced on September 19, 1977, "Black Monday," was the first of the major steel shutdowns that decimated much of Ohio, Pennsylvania, and other so-called "Rust Belt" industrial US states. The shutdown cost the region 40,000-60,000 jobs. The population of Youngstown has since fallen below 65,000, less than 40 percent of its peak.

During this period of decline, Youngstown became a center of organized crime. Mafia murders were fairly common through the 1990s. From 1985-2002, the district was represented by then-Democratic Congressman James Traficant, who was caught on tape in 1980 admitting to taking over \$160,000 in campaign donations from the Cleveland and Pittsburgh mafias, yet was able to convince a jury to acquit by building a personalist following in the region.

Traficant was ultimately convicted of corruption in 2002 for taking campaign funds for personal use but still ran for re-election from prison in 2002, winning 15 percent of the vote as an independent candidate. Traficant moved further to the right while in prison, where he received support from Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke. After his release from prison in 2009 he became active in the far-right Tea Party before dying in what was reported as a tractor accident in 2014.

Although Youngstown remains home to the 13,000-student Youngstown State University, established in 1908, the city remains economically depressed. Median income is \$28,800, roughly half the median income in Ohio of \$54,021. Almost 35 percent of residents live below the poverty level, rising to 55 percent among the city's children. Official unemployment stands at 5.9 percent, compared to 4

percent nationally.

However, the labor force participation rate, the fraction of working-age people who are employed or actively looking for work, is only 51 percent, more than 10 percentage points below the national level of 62.9 percent. Thus, even accounting for the slightly higher proportion of residents over the official retirement of age 65, true unemployment is roughly 10 percentage points higher than the official level, closer to 15 percent, once working-age people who have given up looking for work are included.

This economic devastation is exacting a grim human toll. As in many former industrial areas, the opioid epidemic has taken hold in Mahoning County. From 2013 to 2017, Mahoning County had 345 overdose deaths, leading to an overdose death rate of 49.6 per 100,000 population, slightly above the Ohio average and nearly twice the US average. This is more than a 50 percent increase from the 2008-2012 level of 29.7 per 100,000 population. The violent crime rate is 6.9 crimes per 1,000 residents, 70 percent above the national average of 4.0. House fires, such as the 2018 Youngstown fire that claimed the lives of America "Amy" Negron-Acevedo's five children, and other social catastrophes are an inevitable outcome of the economic destruction of the region.

The closure of the *Vindicator* is rightly being compared to the "Black Monday" shutdown of Youngstown Sheet and Tube. The leaders of the American Revolution recognized that an independent media, the fourth estate, is essential to the survival of a democratic society. With the shutdown of the Lordstown auto complex, the entire region is being left to wither, not only economically, but culturally as well.

Workers in the greater Youngstown-Warren-Boardman area must not allow their stories to be silenced. We cannot rely on wealthy benefactors such as the Maag/Jagnow/Brown family for the continued existence of journalism. The *World Socialist Web Site* continues to fight to expand its coverage of conditions facing the working class in Ohio and across the world. If there are stories in your area that you think should be covered, please contact us.



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