

Holler: What deindustrialization has left behind

Genevieve Leigh
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Written and directed by Nicole Riegel

Every day, in towns and cities across the United States innumerable stories of sacrifice, burden, love, hope and hardship unfold in working class communities. One could drive across the US, take almost any exit into a residential neighborhood and come upon gripping and even heart-wrenching stories—any one of which would make for more fascinating filmmaking than most of what one finds streaming across the internet today.

Holler, written, directed and produced by Nicole Riegel, is a refreshing, newly released film, which seems to have been inspired by a feeling for such day-to-day drama. Set in Jackson, Ohio (Riegel’s hometown, population 6,200), in a region ravaged by decades of deindustrialization, *Holler* follows the story of a family and community as they struggle to make ends meet under harsh conditions.

The film opens with Ruth (Jessica Barden), a teenage girl, stealing bags of cans with her older brother Blaze (Gus Harper) to sell to a local scrap-metal dealer, Hark (Austin Amelio). Former President Donald Trump’s voice is heard on the radio touting his unfulfilled promise of “Jobs, jobs, jobs!” as the two drive through a town riddled with abandoned plants and warehouses.

The two siblings, Ruth and Blaze, live on their own. Their mother fell into addiction after getting hurt on the job at the local food-processing plant. She now sits in the local jail, refusing rehab. The film never sheds light on the whereabouts of their father. Eviction notices are piling up on their door, and soon the water is turned off. To keep their heads above water, the two regularly visit the plant where their mother used to work. The workers are a close-knit group who are kind to Ruth and Blaze. Their mother’s closest friend, Linda (Becky Ann Baker), makes them meals and generally looks after them.

Despite her difficult home life, Ruth is a bright young woman who thrives at school—that is, when she is not getting into trouble for stealing books, talking back to

administrators and missing class to make money to survive with her brother. She is quite endearing, though at times somewhat hardened, understandably. She found herself forced into adulthood at a young age.

The audience soon learns that Ruth has been accepted to college. She had filled out an application form, but, due to concerns that she could not afford the tuition, decided not to send it in. Blaze, determined to give his sister every opportunity in life, submitted the application without Ruth’s knowledge. To his great pleasure and her initial dismay, she was accepted.

The rest of the film follows the two siblings as they struggle to scrape together enough money for Ruth to attend school, despite the odds stacked against them. Their journey leads them to take jobs on the scrap metal crew, which entails breaking into abandoned factories and warehouses at night and stripping the walls, shelves and conduits of any metal. Their boss, Hark, sells the material they collect abroad.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the film is its social setting. The impact of deindustrialization is not just the film’s backdrop, but rather an essential part of the story. When the movie begins, there are rumors that the plant where most of the town works, including Linda, may close. Halfway through the movie, the rumor turns out to be true. The workers are suddenly locked out of the plant, without even being permitted to gather their personal belongings.

Meanwhile, the dangerous, largely illegal scrap metal business is booming. In one scene, Hark explains to Ruth and Blaze: “You ever looked around this town? Manufacturing drying up left and right, leaving behind whole buildings that are just rotting away. We scrap the metal, and we sell to China, straight from the yard. I’m talking modern-day gold mines.”

These “gold mines” provide a living only to the handful of individuals who own the businesses. Those collecting

the scrap face the possibility of arrest, the risks of working in rundown buildings in the dark with power tools and the threat of violence from rival crews.

It speaks volumes about the state of American capitalism that young workers in the region view tearing apart abandoned factories as their most promising and lucrative career opportunity. Ohio and the Midwest more generally once constituted a booming center of US manufacturing.

Jackson lies in the southeast corner of Ohio near West Virginia and is considered part of Appalachia. Jackson County was the second leading coal-producing county in the state during the coal mining era and was also home to industries such as General Mills. In the 1930s and 40s, the largest businesses in the town were the Star Furnace Company and the Globe Iron Company. Both firms used local coal and iron ore deposits to make iron products. Dayton (to the west) and Youngstown (to the North) were major hubs of manufacturing jobs. In fact, Dayton was once home to the largest concentration of General Motors employees outside of Michigan.

With the general decline of the economic position of US capitalism in the 1960s and '70s, companies like General Motors began to chase cheaper labor elsewhere and, in the process, created what is now known as the “rust belt.”

Locals often date the birth of the rust belt in Ohio specifically to September 19, 1977, when Youngstown Sheet and Tube laid off 5,000 workers at its Campbell works. The date is known as “Black Monday.” At the time, the shutting down of the plant made national news. Over the next decade, tens of thousands of workers in Ohio 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 closed shortly afterward.

This trend continued for decades. By 2016, Ohio had lost half of its peak manufacturing jobs, and median household income trailed the nation’s by \$5,300. In 2019, General Motors closed its Lordstown Assembly Plant, a 6.2 million-square-foot industrial complex, after more than a half century of operation and the production of more than 16 million vehicles.

The process of deindustrialization set off major struggles by workers defending their livelihoods, including by the Youngstown steel workers who waged a powerful struggle against the Campbell Works. Miners throughout Appalachia engaged in a wave of wildcat strikes from 1974 to 1979 in which nearly every miner

east of the Mississippi took part. Ultimately, the workers were betrayed by the trade unions, and the latter collaborated with the political establishment, above all the Democratic Party, in overseeing the creation of the poverty-stricken towns across the region today.

Holler does not touch upon this history. One does not get a sense of the processes that went into the grim reality depicted on screen. Riegel’s film also lacks any indication of genuine social struggle. While the workers at Linda’s plant are portrayed as resilient and admirable characters, they seem to more or less accept the plant closure without a fight.

More than anything, these limitations express objective problems. The history of struggle in this region is generally not taught in classrooms. Moreover, the reemergence of class struggle on an international scale, which is still only in its initial stages, has been blacked out in the mainstream media. And the artists have been oriented in a very different direction for decades.

In fact, right now, nearly 3,000 Volvo Trucks workers at the New River Valley plant in Dublin, Virginia (only 200 miles southeast of Jackson) are engaged in a fierce struggle against their union and the international Volvo corporation for a living wage, health care, benefits and safe working conditions.

There are important features of social life absent from *Holler*. However, such limitations do not take anything away from Riegel’s moving portrayal of working class life and conditions. The film is an immersive experience and an honest portrayal of the difficulties faced by wide layers of the population. More importantly, its characters leave the audience with a sense of hopefulness and resiliency.



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