1984

Laid Off, Shut Down: a Photo Essay

Kate Rhodenbaugh
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Abstract
[Excerpt] In the summer of 1983, four other photographers and I set out to document laid-off workers in different areas, mainly in that vast and loosely termed region called the Midwest. We were all part of a group project funded by the Duke Center for Documentary Photography. As one might guess, unemployment is a difficult subject to portray visually — we found no ravaged battlegrounds, no gaping wounds, almost no outward signs of suffering which immediately catch the stranger’s eye.

Yet there is ongoing devastation in the still depressed pockets of places like Youngstown, Pittsburgh, and Butte. Theirs has become a silent struggle, not only because most of the national media has deserted their hardships in favor of stories which report an overall economy on the upswing, but also because laid-off workers continue to lead quiet, desperate lives surrounded by confusion and new senses of self-doubt. Of course, the prevailing hope is that jobs and the old days will somehow return, that the mills will soon fire up again; but the reality is that many will be worse off this winter than ever before as unemployment benefits end and high heating bills start again.

While in Youngstown, I tried to focus on individuals, their families, - and their homes rather than on soup lines or unemployment offices. In the process, I began to understand why it is usually too costly for them to relocate, why proposed retraining does not always provide viable alternatives, and why remaining in their communities is such a deep-seated emotion. I saw that laid-off workers are a population caught in the middle, in a cruel dichotomy which no longer permits their ingrained middle-class values to quite merge with a middle-class lifestyle. Many carry on a facade of their lives before unemployment until they can no longer afford to make the house payments, bring home nourishing food, and clothe growing children. One worker expressed to me his worry that he and others like him were no longer accounted for in our society. "You have to tell somebody what's going on here," he said to me. "I'm afraid that they're trying to forget about all of us who aren't a part of their so-called 'recovery' You have to tell somebody who can do something about it."

Keywords
labor movement, layoffs, photography, unemployment
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In the summer of 1983, four other photographers and I set out to document laid-off workers in different areas, mainly in that vast and loosely termed region called the Midwest. We were all part of a group project funded by the Duke Center for Documentary Photography. As one might guess, unemployment is a difficult subject to portray visually—we found no ravaged battlegrounds, no gaping wounds, almost no outward signs of suffering which immediately catch the stranger's eye. Yet there is ongoing devastation in the still depressed pockets of places like Youngstown, Pittsburgh, and Butte. Theirs has become a silent struggle, not only because most of the national media has deserted their hardships in favor of stories which report an overall economy on the upswing, but also because laid-off workers continue to lead quiet, desperate lives surrounded by confusion and new senses of self-doubt. Of course, the prevailing hope is that jobs and the old days will somehow return, that the mills will soon fire up again; but the reality is that many will be worse off this winter than ever before as unemployment benefits end and high heating bills start again.

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Kate Rhodenbaugh is a free-lance photographer who did this photo essay as part of a project sponsored by Duke University's Center for Documentary Photography, Durham, North Carolina.
"Steel is the mix of smoke and blood"

I saw that quote towards the end of my stay in Youngstown. It was on a poster in a food warehouse containing government surplus items for anyone in need of help. Above the quote was a black-and-white photograph of a dark, distant mill with its clouds of smoke silhouetted against a night sky. I stood and stared at that image and those wise words for what must have been a long while, and I felt as if finally I was beginning to understand something of this town, of this incredible place.

This "mix," the inevitable intermingling of men, women and their workplace, was what I had seen in so many faces and what I had felt each time I passed the mills. The fact that there is no longer smoke rising from the tall, thin stacks is the irony, the devastation, the loss.
Almost every worker I met was just that—a worker. That was a distinction which they had earned and were not willing to give up without a fight. Most try to bury themselves in odd jobs, gardens and other chores, or volunteer community work. The men especially were ill at ease as they idly sat and told me of their changed lives, strangely out of place in their own homes, their hands inevitably restless, either fiddling with some gadget, pulling at clothing, or groping for a cigarette.

Some power had invaded and its ruler had rewritten their life description.

I'm only 34 and they want to retire me. I have worked since I was 14 years old. I like to work, make a good life for my family. That's just who I am and who I've always been. I don't know how to be anything else.
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We walked downstairs to the basement of the men's club and entered a dimly lit meeting room. The men gathered there looked like they could be holding some kind of Kiwanis or Elk assembly—all clean-cut workingmen, pillars of the community, mostly middle-aged faces with kind dispositions. Then their solemn mood quickly melted this first impression, as they sat on fold-out chairs with big arms folded in, quietly debating in small groups. A few looked very alone, their eyes focused blankly at the front of the room.

Everyone there had been laid off after a new company bought their plant, busted their union, and hired other less experienced workers off the street. They had a right to be bitter, every one of them. The cement plant had been the only main source of employment for years in their small Pennsylvania borough. Now they stood to lose not only their jobs, but also the insurance and benefits their union had once protected.

Still, only one man was pursuing a lawsuit against the new company, and the union’s weekly pickets had been dwindling to a dedicated few. I did not quite understand this. Maybe most were in shock at first and then lost the kind of confidence needed to wage war against their unjust but ominous enemy. In this case, their spirits had been broken.
They made promises to us. J & L [Jones and Laughlin Steel] gave us verbal and written promises that our jobs would be secure. They needed money to upgrade the mill so we voted for the concessions—hey, I stood up on a table at that union meeting and shouted at everyone that we better take those cuts! I wanted to keep working. So we did keep working and everything seemed alright. Some people went out and bought cars or made down-payments on houses. Then all in one day it was over.

J & L officials made the announcement that our mill was not making enough profit; almost every worker would be laid off within a short time.

It's rough, but thank goodness we are doing alright for now. Something told me not to buy the house we were renting. What about some of the other people, though? They're in over their heads because things were going good and they trusted what the company told them. So now a large group of us have a suit against J & L. We have to let them know. They have a responsibility.
One rainy afternoon, I met with a small group of women, all of whom had been laid off from Republic Steel. As we sat around the union conference table lunching on seven-layer salad, tuna stuffed rolls, and green jello, they spoke about their lives in the mills. These wives, mothers and daughters were pioneers, some of the first to break into the steel labor force in the mid-seventies. It was their chance. It was their chance as women to make a good living without a college degree, without having to depend...
A single mother could provide well for her children. Now that opportunity has been virtually wiped out.

I know that what we have lost is different from the men. Many of them have been working there for years—they grew up in it. But we fought to finally get the right to work in those mills, and a job is a job. Now having no money hurts us just as bad.
I think everyone forgets about the children when they tell a man, "Steel is dead. Go find other work." Now if I was a single man, maybe I would go off to Texas or Florida to find some type of job. But I have a wife and two little ones who depend on me. What am I supposed to do? Try to sell the house, pull the kids outta school, pack 'em in the car, and take off? I hear that things aren't too good in places like Texas anyway. We could lose everything. I sure can't go off alone and afford to pay for them and the house here.

So we stay and we make ends meet the best we know how. Here I've got my family, and a roof over our heads, a garden. I've got friends who I can count on here and they know they can count on me.
My son is beside me on every march, every demonstration, every fight I take on. He is young and this is the time for him to learn about injustice, and how we, together, can bring about change. He is only nine, but already he seems more sensitive and insightful than most adults who are running our communities. "Daddy, seems like there shouldn't have to be places like that," he told me one day after we had made a trip down to the unemployment office. "It seems to me like anyone who wants to work should be able to have a job." Blew me away!
The children are affected and they are the ones who are going to grow up and shape this country.
Most of the younger fellas don't remember how hard we had to fight for our unions and what we had to go through for higher wages, insurance, and safety regulations. They just take all of it for granted. I'm not saying that all of the older ones are doing everything they can. Maybe we've all gotten a little too comfortable. I do know that the union isn't what it used to be. When did we stop fighting? When did our leaders get so close to the company heads?

Most of us do believe in a union, but we've lost faith in our locals, they seem too afraid to rock the boat. Maybe if we could stick together then we could fight these layoffs. Then it's back to the same old thing: a lot of guys think it's too late. They say that the union should have done something before all these shutdowns started to happen. They had to know that all this could happen.
People have to wake up and realize that we're all in this together. I'm not out of work, my job is pretty secure for now, but if something is affecting my community, then it is affecting me and my family. If I see that something is wrong, like if workers have been treated unjustly, then I get involved. I walk picket lines or whatever else to lend support. That's just my philosophy.
What happens to a home place, a tradition, a class of people, a whole way of life?
While I was in Youngstown, I struggled over the question of what responsibility the steel companies should have to their workers and to their communities. Again and again they have demonstrated their philosophy of "take the money and run." This attitude escalated as local, more sympathetic owners sold to out-of-state parties, which had no real vested interest in the future of the area.
I know that many a staunch capitalist would scoff at me and dismiss me as naive, but how can a steel company pull out of a place like Youngstown without batting an eye? The Mahoning River is polluted, the economy is in shambles, and the former, loyal employees are left to salvage their shattered lives, to pick up the pieces.
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If this sadness could take hold of a stranger like me, I thought, what must this loss be doing to those who grew up and made homes of their own here, who lived mainly to feed and, in turn, be fed by the mills?

You know, I didn't think I'd miss it... that dirty smell of coke burning, the constant clanging and banging of all those railroad cars, the dust, and pollution. Those aren't good things but all that stuff meant we were workin' and, well, it just seems dead now.

There used to be a red glare from those blast furnaces that would light up the sky at night.