

The murder of the Mon Valley

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“From the Monongahela valley
To the Mesabi iron range
To the coal mines of Appalachia
The story's always the same
Seven hundred tons of metal a day
Now sir you tell me the world's changed
Once I made you rich enough
Rich enough to forget my name”

– Bruce Springsteen, *Youngstown*

The Mon Valley follows the windy Monongahela River, which forms at a confluence in Fairmont, West Virginia and flows north to its terminus into the Ohio River in Downtown Pittsburgh. The valley and its namesake river get their names from the Lenape word *Mēnaonkihēla*, which means 'where banks cave and erode.' Although originally intended to refer to the tendency of the river to undercut its banks, causing them to cave in, it's just as fitting today, as countless developments constructed along the river and in the immediate area over the years are literally crumbling to the ground.

Several Native American groups—including Shawnee, Seneca and Iroquois—inhabited the Mon Valley before the arrival of Europeans, which began with the appearance of French trader Robert de La Salle in 1669.

These newcomers established their first trading post and settlements in the area in 1717. A dispute over control of the area sparked the French and Indian War between the French and British in 1754. The latter was victorious, coming out of the war as the dominant power in eastern North America.

In 1768, descendants of William Penn, the “founder and absolute proprietor” of the Province of Pennsylvania, took control of what would become Pittsburgh and the surrounding area from the Six Nations through the Treaty of Fort Stanwix.

Pittsburgh's strategic position at the intersection of the Monongahela, Allegheny and Ohio Rivers led to growth. After the American Revolution, a boat building industry sprung up to meet the needs of European settlers headed west into Ohio Country.

In 1791, small farmers in the Mon Valley angered by taxes decreed by the new government launched the Whiskey Rebellion after their efforts at peaceful repeal failed. The rebellion grew and drew in large numbers of poor people with their own economic grievances. The French Revolution was praised in mass meetings and calls were raised to bring the guillotine to Southwestern Pennsylvania.[1] Finally, the federal government raised a militia larger in number than Washington's army during the revolution to put down the insurrection. The rebellion collapsed as the armed forces moved in in 1794.

Glass production began in the city in 1797, and increased (along with the production of metals and metal alloys) as the War of 1812 shut off access to British goods.

Growth continued, increasing the need for coal mined from the surrounding area. The extensive

Pittsburgh Coal Seam, which stretches many miles southwest of the city, became the most important coal seam in the United States. In 1760 coal was being retrieved in small quantities from natural entries. By 1857, more than 22,000,000 bushels of coal were being taken out of the mines annually to supply some 1,000 factories.

The American Civil War added to the region's growth. The Union's need for iron and weapons opened new avenues for capital. The first steel mill was founded in Braddock by Andrew Carnegie in 1875. The mill's easy access to bituminous coal for coking combined with the new Bessemer process technology for mass production contributed to its success. Growth was subsidized through the intensive exploitation of workers at every step of the process.

A huge boom in the railroads occurred after the Civil War. Capital flooded the industry—which was then the largest employer in the country—between 1866 and 1873. Then the bubble burst as the Great Depression of 1873 set in.

Attempts to “correct” the economy by attacking workers were met with resistance. Increasingly poor working conditions and dramatic cuts in wages and hours prompted a number of scattered strikes.

In 1877, a strike broke out in Martinsburg, West Virginia, after railroad bosses cut wages for the second time in a year. Train movements in and out of the city were brought to a standstill. The governor called in the state militia, but its members refused to act against the strikers. Word spread out of West Virginia, and so did the strike. Outside of the St. Louis Commune[2], which arose when rail workers joined others in taking over and running the city, the most dramatic events occurred in Pittsburgh. After local police refused big capitalist Thomas Alexander Scott's recommendation to give starving strikers there “a rifle diet,” the militia was sent in. The murder of twenty strikers and the injury of dozens more only led to more anger and further actions. The militiamen were forced to take cover in a railroad structure. Strikers then burned down dozens of buildings and locomotives and hundreds of train cars. The militiamen shot their way out of town, killing 20 more people. The rebellion continued on until federal troops were sent in by President Hayes.

In 1892, another serious dispute erupted in the town of Homestead, a borough directly across the Mon River from Pittsburgh. When Carnegie's manager Henry Clay Frick demanded wage cuts for skilled workers—as a result of new technologies that allowed for more production by unskilled workers—and attempted to break their union through the removal of numerous workers from their bargaining unit, the members of the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers refused to sign new contracts. Frick responded by locking the workers out of the Homestead Steel Works and declaring that Carnegie would no longer recognize the growing union, which had carried out various successful strikes in the recent past, integrating the struggles of groups of immigrant workers, running off strike breakers and even taking control of the town. The plant was surrounded with barbed wire and high pressure houses and towers housing snipers were installed. Sympathy strikes soon broke out across the region. Workers set up 24 hour pickets around the area and patrolled the railroads and rivers. Communications were maintained with workers elsewhere through the telegraph lines. Deputies sent to order the strikers not to interfere with the plant's operations had their orders ripped out of their hands and were put on a ferry and sent downstream. Carnegie then hired 300 Pinkerton security guards to reopen the plant and allow scabs to enter. As the Pinkertons approached Homestead by boat on the Monongahela they were greeted by pot shots from the advance guard of workers stationed on the river. Word got back to Homestead and the strikers blew the whistle at the plant, sounding the signal for the town's populace to meet there. Soon after, the Pinkerton guards attempted to land. Shots broke out. Two were killed on each side, and several were injured. The tug that brought the guards into town departed with the

injured, leaving the rest stranded on a barge. Five thousand descended on the river bank. A cannon was set up and attempts were made to sink the barge. When news spread to Pittsburgh, thousands of workers gathered in the streets. Many were armed and planned to march on Homestead to join the fight against the Pinkerton agents. Mill hands from surrounding areas joined the strikers. The agents finally surrendered. They were eventually put on a train and sent out of town. The state militia entered the town and took control of the plant, allowing production to restart with replacement workers brought in from other areas by train. The working class was divided amongst itself with the typical tactics. At a time when pay could be determined by ethnicity, desperate black workers and Eastern European immigrants willing to work for lower wages were the first to cross the picket lines. Strike leaders were jailed or forced into hiding. The American Federation of Labor refused to support the struggle. A last ditch effort by the strikers to enter the plant and prevent the ovens from being lit ended when militiamen fought them off, bayoneting six in the process. It wasn't long before the strike fell apart. Steel output recovered, and then expanded.

Financier J.P. Morgan and attorney Elbert H. Gary combined the Carnegie Steel Company with several other outfits to form the U.S. Steel Corporation in 1901. Pittsburgh became the producer of half of the steel being used in the continually expanding country.

The need for labor sparked mass migrations. European immigrants arrived in droves. They were joined by workers from the South. The already large population grew 66 percent between 1900 and 1910, continuing a massive population swell that began in the beginning of the 19th century.

Large numbers of houses were constructed by and for workers around the mills and mine towns were established throughout the area.

Industry continued to develop for years, boosted by U.S. needs in the first and second world wars. Throughout the duration of World War II, the Mon Valley produced nearly 100 million tons of steel.

The population peaked in 1950. Although the industrial base continued to expand for another two decades, changes were already beginning to unfold. Increased productivity and efficiency, automation, drop in demand, increase in the price of raw materials, and competition from newer, less expensive production facilities in places like Germany and Japan—which were often funded at least in part by profits extracted from workers in the Mon Valley and surrounding regions—lead to the shut down of one facility after another. Plant closures were followed by mine closures. Huge numbers of workers lost their jobs.

In the aftermath of the recession in the early 1980's, some 153,000 steel workers were laid off.[3]

In the onslaught against the working class in the Reagan years, attempts to fight against closures and mass unemployment—where they existed—fell flat. Union bureaucrats, comfortable in their downtown offices and homes built with dues money, offered nothing more than concessions and nationalist poison that blamed workers in other countries for everything.

An organization called the Mon Valley Unemployed Committee sprung up from the initiative of laid off steel workers that urged their union, the United Steel Workers, to set up unemployed committees to keep them involved in struggles with the bosses that had eliminated their jobs. Running into barriers set in place by the union leadership, they eventually set out to work on their own. They established a food bank and helped workers facing eviction, utility shutoffs and other economic problems, and lobbied government officials for extensions in unemployment compensation. They held protest actions and

raised demands. As a reformist pressure group, the organization enjoyed some level of success. But it never became any more than that. After its earliest struggles, it grew almost in direct proportion to the abandonment of many of its original stated goals. Today it is funded by charities like the United Way and grants from foundations. Paul Lodico, a leading member of the group, died in late 2010. Any possibility of the organization being anything more than a lobbying group had already died years earlier.

And so, with nothing to stop it, the decline continued. In fifty years, Pittsburgh went from being the twelfth largest city in the United States to the fifty first. The entire Mon Valley shared its fate.

The loss of income for steel workers, miners, glass workers and the like lead to a disappearance of businesses that relied on their spending.

Massive plants up and down the Mon River and throughout the area were stripped and abandoned. Having already served their purpose in the eyes of the capitalist class, the huge, complex facilities were deserted.

In 1986 an abandoned steel plant along the Mon in the city of Monessen was used to film RoboCop, a dystopian movie set in a future Detroit in the midst of an economic collapse, illustrating the case perfectly. Monessen, which was created by the East Side Land Company in the late 19th century, has lost more than 50 percent of its population.

A few miles down the river, the borough of Brownsville also lays in ruins. Once a major transportation hub and center of coal and steel production that was larger even than Pittsburgh, Brownsville now resembles a ghost town, with a downtown lined with abandoned and disintegrating buildings. The town, which in the past gave birth to its own suburbs and is home to the prototype flatiron building, has lost 74 percent of its population since 1940. More than 50 percent of the population under age 18 falls under the official poverty line.

The Homestead Works was torn down in 1984. In 1999, a strip mall was constructed in its place, offering low-paying, part-time employment to the remnants of the borough's population.

The coal town of Marianna, Pennsylvania, built by the Pittsburgh Buffalo Company in 1907, which was considered such a shining jewel of industry that it was visited by President Theodore Roosevelt upon its construction, was totally forgotten after the mine closed in 1988. Though several hundred residents remain, the town's economic base is long gone. A trip through Marianna reveals the collapse and decay of dozens of the borough's distinctive yellow brick row houses and buildings.

Canonsburg too has lost its economic base. The area which once housed a refining mill that processed uranium ore for use in the Manhattan Project was simply covered over with clay and fenced off, in a process resembling the sort of approach taken to much of the region in recent years.

These are just specific examples of a disaster that has affected the entire Mon Valley, and the larger "Rust Belt," for the last several decades.

But for a select few who don't have to worry about trivial matters like finding a regular source of income, things have apparently improved. Since 1989, Pittsburgh has regularly been named one of the "most liveable cities" in the country, and even the world, by outlets like *Yahoo!*, *Forbes*, *The Economist* and *Places Rated Almanac*.

In 2009, President Barack Obama lauded Pittsburgh in a statement released a few weeks before the heads of the most powerful countries in the world gathered downtown for the G-20 Summit, claiming the city stood “as a bold example of how to create new jobs and industries while transitioning to a 21st century economy.”[4] Pennsylvania Governor Ed Rendell gushed that the choice of Pittsburgh as host of the gathering was “a vote of confidence that Pittsburgh had transformed itself from the old economy to the new economy.”[5]

What sort of transformation *has* occurred? According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, there are now fewer jobs in the Pittsburgh Metropolitan Area than there were ten years ago. Jobs for workers in manufacturing decreased 17 percent between 1999 and 2004, from already low numbers[6]. This loss of jobs, which is two percentage points lower than the national average, is what's being promoted as a “success.” The much touted “high tech sector” accounts for only 6 percent of the jobs in the region[7], and few of those are accessible to unemployed workers forced from their jobs in industries like steel and coal. While there has been moderate job growth in healthcare, the biggest growth has come in the lower-wage accommodation and food services sector.

It seems then that more than anything else, Obama and Rendell's statements serve as a stern warning to workers that in the “new economy” meager job growth limited largely to a few new positions—for those with special skills and education—and a continued shift in existing employment from heavy industry to low paying jobs in services is the best they should expect.

Indeed, large numbers of working people have already realized this, prompting them to search out alternative sources of income. Many rely on disability benefits from the state (with disability in Braddock, once home of Carnegie's premier steel works, reaching nearly 30 percent, according to most recently available US Census data[8]). Some have resorted to theft. (Pittsburgh's robbery rate is more than twice the national average, according to FBI statistics[9].) The numerous home invasions that have been carried out across the region in recent years are but an acute expression of this. Many more still have fled the area in search of employment.

In 1950, the population of Pittsburgh was nearly 680,000. Today, the population is under 310,000. There has been a huge decline in population throughout each of the last 6 decades. While some of this is due to a shift away from the city and into the surrounding vicinity, much more is a result of massive departures, largely of young people, from the entire area. The well-known diaspora of fans of Pittsburgh's football team—the Steelers—is a palpable indicator of this mass exodus (“Steelers bars” can be found from New York to Los Angeles, and everywhere in between). One is reminded of the Joad family in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Other have sought out a different kind of escape. Drug abuse has been growing for years, especially among middle and high school students and young adults. In 2003, the number of deaths in Allegheny County from drug overdose was more than twice the number in 1999.[10] Considering the futures many have to look forward to, this comes as no real surprise.

A large portion of the population that remains in the region is aged or aging. Close to one fifth of the population in the six-county Pittsburgh Metropolitan Area is aged 65 or older—well above the national average. Allegheny County, which contains Pittsburgh, has the second-oldest population of the 34 major counties in the United States (behind retirement haven Palm Beach County, Florida).[11]

The latest trend across the region is the exploitation of the immense natural gas reserves that exist deep

underground. The hydraulic fracturing process that is used to retrieve the gas has an enormous social and environmental impact (the extent of which is far beyond the scope of this article). But unlike the coal mining boom of the past, “fracking” does not employ large numbers of people. Still, many in the area desperate for employment of any kind welcome the corporations searching for natural gas with open arms, even as the very water they rely on for life is poisoned around them. Ruined farming families look forward to signing lucrative contracts, and young workers hope they can be one of the lucky few to grab a job on the gas rigs, for however long they last.

Once again we see the reality that capital serves only capital; that the “invisible hand” of the market serves only to pat the capitalists on the back and jerk around the working class.

Capital embedded itself along the virgin banks of the Monongahela. It carved up the land in search of coal to fuel its expansion, releasing acid drainage into the water and air. It crammed in factory after factory, filling the sky with so much smoke and soot that author James Parton described Pittsburgh as “hell with the lid off.” It brought in millions to make it all go. And when it was done, it moved on to greener pastures, leaving only industrial waste and fractured remnants behind. It reappears here and there, whenever it sees an opportunity; but never offers any solutions.

This is not a special case or isolated phenomenon. The only thing separating many of the Mon Valley's young nomads setting out in search of work elsewhere from Japan's growing number of “pension parasites” resorting to *hikikomori*—locking themselves in their rooms and refusing to talk to anyone, including their mothers, who deliver their every meal—is the ability of their parents to take care of them. One can imagine what will come of the so-called pension parasites themselves when their source of support no longer exists.

Ours is a shared future.

Only the combined struggle of the international working class can overcome the tyranny of capital and transform the world into a place fit for human beings. This must be our goal. Otherwise the murderer of the Mon Valley may become the murderer of humankind.

[1] Slaughter, Thomas P. *The Whiskey Rebellion: Frontier Epilogue to the American Revolution*. Oxford University Press, 1986.

[2] See: Brecher, Jeremy. *Strike!* Straight Arrow Books, 1972.

[3] Hoerr, John P.. *And the Wolf Finally Came: The Decline of the American Steel Industry*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 1988.

[4] Obama, Barack. “Statement by the President on G-20 Summit in Pittsburgh.” *The White House: Office of the Press Secretary*. Updated: 2009-09-08. Retrieved: 2011-01-24. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Statement-by-the-President-on-G-20-Summit-in-Pittsburgh/>

[5] Smaglik, Paul. “From steel to science.” *Nature*. 14 January 2010.

[6] State of the Pittsburgh Economy. *Pittsburghfuture.com*. Retrieved: 2011-01-24.

<<http://www.pittsburghfuture.com/economy.html>>

[7] "Pittsburgh: Economy." City-Data.com. Retrieved: 2011-01-24. <<http://www.city-data.com/us-cities/The-Northeast/Pittsburgh-Economy.html>>

[8] Rankin borough, Pennsylvania. U.S. Census Bureau Fact Sheet. Retrieved: 2011-01-24. <<http://factfinder.census.gov>>

[9] Pittsburgh Crime Statistics. CityRating.com. Retrieved: 2011-01-24. <<http://www.cityrating.com/citycrime.asp?city=Pittsburgh&state=PA>>

[10] Fahy, Joe. "Drug overdose deaths increasing in Allegheny County." Post-Gazette.com. Updated: 2004-09-27. Retrieved: 2011-01-24. <<http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/04271/386182-85.stm>>

[11] Rotsetin, Gary. "Allegheny still second oldest big county in United States." Post-Gazette.com. Updated: 2001-05-24. Retrieved: 2011-01-24. <<http://www.post-gazette.com/headlines/20010524census4.asp>>