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New York's Last Coal-Fired Power Plant Is Closing

The community is fearful of what will happen once it shutsters.



Mike Adinolfi, 41, has worked at the Somerset Operating Company, New York's last coal plant, in Barker, for his whole adult life.

By [Anne Barnard](#) Photographs by Libby March
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BARKER, N.Y. — It is the last coal-fired power plant in New York State. White steam trails from its smokestack like a banner flying in the wind, visible for miles across flat farm fields near Lake Ontario. But not for long.

Sometime this month, the 44 remaining workers at the Somerset Operating Company will power it down for the last time. They have long planned to gather ceremonially in a cavernous hall, beside the plant's roaring turbine, as it goes quiet, but now coronavirus restrictions may deny them that moment of closure.

"This plant is my life," Darlene Lutz, 60, said, then burst into tears. She started out shoveling coal, then rose to become the plant's first and only female operating-room engineer. She had even persuaded her husband to take a job there.



The coal plant looms large in Barker, with industrial smokestacks that stand red barns and lakeside gazebos.

Across the country, [coal plants are going offline](#), priced out by natural gas and squeezed by regulations and incentives aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions and moving to clean, renewable energy sources. The closures bring common challenges: lost tax revenues and jobs, efforts to retrain workers and clean up sites.

And this one, of course, comes as the [state battles the economic headwinds](#) of [the nation's largest coronavirus outbreak](#).

But every plant has a specific place in a community, and each community has its own story of costs and resilience.

Here in the northwest corner of New York, about an hour's drive from Buffalo, the story is of the plant's unusually close-knit workplace gradually dissolving over the past decade; of a school district banking for survival on the plant owner's

The New York Times

experimental new business model; and of nearby residents debating whether [solar-panel farms](#) and wind turbines should be the landmarks of the future.

The plant's closure is also an early test of the [state's new climate law](#), one of the most ambitious in the nation, and whether it can get buy-in from some of the most affected New Yorkers.

The law, passed last year, is supposed to transform the state's energy grid to carbon-free by 2040, something officials say cannot be done without eliminating coal power. The state has separately committed to eliminating it this year.



This plant is my life,” Darlene Lutz, 60 said. She is the first and only woman to work as an operating-room engineer there.

“As the federal government continues to support the dying fossil fuel industry, deny climate

change and roll back environmental protections,” said Basil Seggos, the commissioner of state’s Department of Environmental Conservation, “the closure of New York’s last coal plant makes good on our commitment.”

The climate law is also supposed to create thousands of new jobs, including high-paying union jobs like the ones the Somerset plant employees are losing.

But state officials say the bulk of those jobs will be in retrofitting — updating home-heating systems, for instance — and will be more plentiful in more populous areas downstate.

That means prospects are slim for the people who will lose or have already lost jobs at the Somerset plant, which at its peak two decades ago employed several hundred people.

“It speaks to that feeling of upstate and rural communities, that somehow we matter a little less,” said Robert G. Ort, the state senator who represents the area.

The tensions around the closure reflect the differences in the state, which sprawls from New York City and its suburbs to rural areas like Somerset, which are more conservative and more Republican.

The political balance tipped last year when Democrats seized control of the State Senate, which gave them both legislative houses and allowed for the passage of the climate act.

To help implement its ambitious goals, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo recently issued rules that would make it easier to get permission to build renewable energy sites, including wind turbines and solar-panels, allowing applicants to bypass zoning rules and other local regulations.

But that, too, rankles in Barker and neighboring towns, where a local group called [Save Ontario Shores](#) used environmental and aesthetic arguments to head off a proposed wind turbine project. Sign saying “No to industrial solar”

The New York Times

signal suspicion of proposals to build large installations of solar panels on farm fields.

“It’s like saying, we’re closing this large employer in your community and putting something that you may not want in its place,” Mr. Ort said.

He called on the governor to use his leverage to find union jobs for at least some of the 20-odd plant workers who are not yet of retirement age.

The state Department of Labor said it had provided job fairs and placement services — which will now go online because of the coronavirus outbreak — that have already helped find new jobs for 10 former employees of another recently shuttered upstate coal plant, in Cayuga.

“I just worry about the guys who are in their 40s,” said John Mason, 60, the plant’s operations manager. “Some of us are retiring, a few folks in their 20s are young enough to start over, but for those guys in the middle, it’s tough.”



The Department of Labor sent over trainers to teach workers how to write their résumés, but Brian Gregson, the plant manager, said résumés

were beside the point for workers whose value is measured not in titles, but in craft and work ethic; his workers needed more active job placement and training.

“These are salt of the earth guys,” he said.

The plant’s owner, Beowulf Energy LLC, is seeking state approvals to open a data hub — a facility that rents servers to companies that store vast amounts of data — on the site. It expects 30 to 40 jobs on site, but nonunion and primarily for data technicians.

Mike Adinolfe, 41, has worked at the plant for his whole adult life, much of it alongside his father, who helped build it. He said he was all for green energy — he was thinking of investing in a friend’s solar-energy scheme — and hoped the data hub got approved, because it would provide tax revenues to the town and school district.

But Mr. Adinolfe, who, with a high school education, was able to buy a house and support a family with his plant job, does not expect to get a job at the hub. In any case, he said, “those jobs won’t be like these.”

To listen to Mr. Adinolfe and his colleagues is to get a taste of the sense of powerlessness among workers whose jobs are left behind by technology and politics.

To them, and to much of the surrounding community, the plant is about more than jobs — it is about identity.

From Mr. Gregson, the plant’s top manager, to Vince Muto, a union shop steward, all the employees interviewed spoke with pride about its record of safety and cleanliness. While most acknowledged that the coal era was ending no matter what, they said the plant had met all the increasingly tight environmental standards for coal burning over the years.

The New York Times



Vince Muto, 63, is a union shop steward. Like other employees, he spoke with pride about the site's record of safety and cleanliness.

On a tour of the plant, it was easy to see the grandeur they found there. A six-mile loop of railway tracks brought coal that was whisked up covered conveyor belts, crushed to powder and burned. The buildings form monumental, crisscrossing shapes, like something out of an Escher print or Charles Sheeler's famous paintings of the [River Rouge](#) auto plant.

Inside the control room, consoles dating to the 1980s had a steampunk feel, with physical knobs, switches and levers, and alarm lights with messages like "Generator Trouble," or the more cryptic "Hotwell Level Trouble." (All the functions are now duplicated on computer terminals, but the physical controls still work.)

Tony Spector, 66, a control-room operator on duty for one of his last shifts, said he planned to retire and enroll in bible school with his wife. In an adjacent kitchen decorated with wallpaper of a cottage in winter woods, Ms. Lutz showed off a stack of photo albums covering decades of employee events: charity cleanups, surf and turf dinners, birthday parties, retirement parties.

On most pages, every person's name was noted with painstakingly cutout paper labels.

Even outside the plant, it looms large — literally and figuratively. Its industrial smokestack stands incongruously behind red barns and lakeside gazebos.



A six-mile loop of railway tracks brought coal that was whisked up covered conveyor belts, crushed to powder and burned.

A couple of miles from the plant, at Pizza, Wings & Things, one of the few restaurants in the tiny village of Barker, several patrons were retirees who had helped build the plant and remembered the joy at beating out the next town over in the competition to win the facility.

Just down the street stand the district's schools; the plant's payments to the state in lieu of taxes had allowed it to run a surplus for years. Now, its budget is kept in the black only by the savings from those fat years.

There are fears that the district will have to be merged with another.

The New York Times

“It’s impossible to overstate the impact on the school district,” Mr. Ortt said. “It is going to be a very real threat, financially, to its long-term viability.”

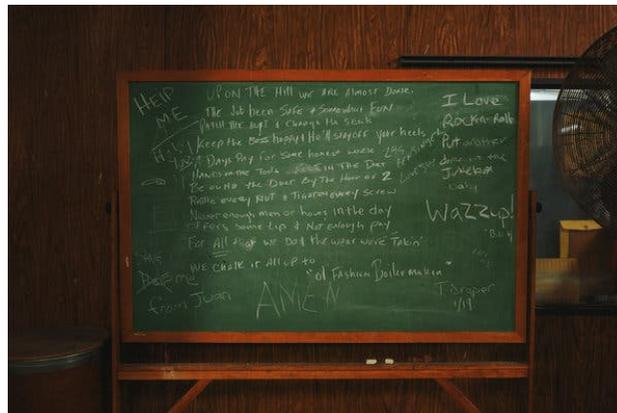
Jacob L. Reimer, the schools superintendent, brushed off the idea of a merger, adding, “The schools are really what gives the town its identity.”

He arrived two years ago to steer the district through the plant closure, having weathered one in another town, Brockport. He said his goal was to find cuts that did not affect education.

One project, for instance, is to install solar panels on school property to reduce electricity costs. That, like the data hub project, has been welcomed without any community opposition.

When it comes to other clean-energy projects, the residents are not so sure.

“I consider myself an environmentalist,” said Molly Miller, 47, who moved to Barker from the Buffalo suburbs for its quiet and open space. “I just think the character should stay rural.”



A chalkboard displayed a poem that recalled the camaraderie among workers at the Somerset Operating Company.

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