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Bendix workers bitter over closing

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By Dale Brazco, Toronto Star

WINDSOR — "Bendix Automotive of Canada Ltd. welcomes you," proclaims the sign in the reception lounge, but that was not the case yesterday when the company suddenly closed up shop and prepared to leave town.

As the 500 auto workers filed out of the plant gate for the last time yesterday, some broke into mocking renditions of "God Bless America" while others yelled out "We're going to Japan, that's where all the jobs are."

Andy Marocko, an international representative of the United Auto Workers union (UAW) said that the 12-weeks severance pay the company is awarding its employees is an insult to the workers.

"It's like they're throwing a bone to a dog," Marocko said in an interview. "It's like they're saying: 'Here, we're leaving.'"

John Moynahan, president of UAW local 195, says that strict legislation covering plant closings is urgently needed to prevent "American corporate bastards" from closing plants without warning.

For weeks it had been rumored the American giant was going to move its brake-parts operation to Southfield, Mich.

But the workers didn't believe the gossip until they saw the doors of the plant close in their faces yesterday morning.

Really scared

"I'm really scared, I don't know what I can do," said Ben Belanger, 49. Bendix has been his bread and butter for the past 29 years.

"With the new pension plan I was going to retire to the good life in five years, but now I get nothing, nothing at all," said the heartbroken auto worker who, along with several members of his shift crew, had tried unsuccessfully to drown his sorrows at a local hotel.

Belanger, like the majority of Bendix employees, has worked for the company almost all their lives and now fear they are too old to get a job anywhere.

"Where can I work in Windsor the way things are. All the jobs are leaving town but I'm too old to go after them," said Belanger, who lost his wife in a car accident a few years ago.

Some of the younger workers expressed hostility towards the U.S. parent firm for pulling out.

"Throw all the Americans out of Canada," stockman George Thorne, 33, yelled to reporters after the company told him his services were no longer needed after 12 years.

"They rape the country dry, make big profits here and then pull out. And our government does nothing at all to protect Canadian workers."

Adel Skaff, 39, also a 12-year veteran of the assembly line, echoed Thorne's complaint about American parent companies.

"Why didn't they close the plant in Michigan and keep the jobs open here. They owed us that much," he said gesturing with rage.

"They just put in a \$3-million automatic assembly line. I guess they'll just tear it out now and give

Earl Smith, president and general manager of Bendix, said in a press release closing the Windsor plant after 50 years of operation was strictly an economic decision.

He said the Bendix corporation had recently reviewed its worldwide operations and in light of the depressed auto industry decided it had more plant space than it needed.

The company decided to shut down its Canadian operations completely and move the work to South Bend, Ind., he said.

Smith denied he worked for the company when approached by a reporter outside the front door of the plant. But later he brought out a press release and then directed a security guard to escort the reporter off the premises saying it was private property.

He said any further information would have to come from the head office in Michigan.

A Toronto consulting firm has been hired by Bendix to help the workers find other jobs.

All the employees will get 12 weeks severance pay, Smith said.

Economic move

From a total of almost 600 employees in its two Windsor plants several years ago, Bendix had cut back recently to 150 plant workers and 30 office workers.

The first plant, on Argyle Rd., was closed earlier this year after the union filed compensation claims on behalf of 19 former employees who had become ill or died from cancer.

Company officials insist the closing of the second plant was not connected to the union's action.

The latest plant closing was anticipated by many of the workers who were already on layoff.

"It was only a matter of time before the axe fell," said Roger Butler, 33, an 11-year veteran of the Bendix assembly line.

He said he found ironic that only two days earlier he had received a letter from the company notifying him that his summer vacation had been approved.

"But in a way I'm kind of glad," Butler said. "I've been worried all along about the cancer scare. I wouldn't leave the plant on my own because the money was too good."

But now that he has no choice in the matter, Butler said he may take his nearly \$4,000 in severance pay and get into the bakery business in New Brunswick.

The union says it hopes to set up a meeting with company officials in an effort to change their mind about closing the plant, but admit they aren't optimistic.

Company officials, meanwhile, seem to have ruled out any possibility of a second chance and have put the building up for sale.

The Bendix plant closing is one of a long list announced by auto makers and their parts suppliers, many of which are located in the Windsor area.

Ford Motor Co. of Canada Ltd. has announced it will mothball a Windsor casting plant employing more than 800 workers and Chrysler Canada Ltd. said it will close its Windsor engine plant which employs 480.

Rockwell International of Canada Ltd. said last April it will close a Windsor wheel covering plant which employs 100 workers.