

Politics and Economics

Bolton Metal closure marks end of an era

by Suzan Erem and Ben Brewer

The darkened entrance of the 1970s-style building off Blanchard Street in Bellefonte smells of stale disinfectant. On the back wall of the gymnasium-size meeting room hangs a painting by a United Auto Workers member depicting wars in which members have served. Behind the dais where union officers used to sit hang the framed charters of the UAW, the AFL-CIO and other unions that once used the hall.

For more than 30 years, hundreds of workers debated and voted on contract proposals in that room. On weekends, their families danced and held formal dinners to honor community leaders.

At the end of the hallway is Jim Strunk's modest office. The union treasurer is surrounded by boxes of records dating to 1957, file cabinets and bookshelves. Against one wall leans a massive brass plaque naming hundreds of union workers who served and died in World War II.

Strunk checks his records. Nine people still working at Bolton Metal Products. Down from 147 after the first of the year. Down from 232 in 2007 ... and down from 1,400 in the 1970s.

On Feb. 1, the company announced that most of the remaining workers would be jobless within months, joining their counterparts at Corning, Murata and plants across the nation. The Bellefonte facility, seven years shy of its 100th birthday, would be disassembled, the equipment sold to a plant in Ohio, the scrap metal sent to England.

Bolton, formerly Cerro Metal Products, and before that Titan Metal Manufacturing, would no longer make the brass rod, wire and low-melt alloys it had for decades. The factory that had operated since 1915 would be shuttered.

Despite the decline of U.S. manufacturing and tough times at Cerro, hopes were high when United Kingdom-based Bolton MKM took over the facility last year with plans to implement a new business model to streamline operations and expand into new markets.

"I felt that Bolton coming in here would be our savior," Strunk said. "I hoped we would all have decent jobs and be able to work until we decided to retire."

According to Strunk and UAW Local 1282 President Joe Galbraith, the plant was

making money for Bolton. Not only had the company paid workers a production bonus shortly before the closure announcement, but workers had agreed to a \$2 per hour pay cut in their last contract to help keep the plant viable.

"Everyone on the management side said the model was working," Galbraith said. "No one was more shocked than me when they called me in and dumped it on me."

"That was a real rip-off as far as I'm concerned," said Strunk. "[Bolton owner Martyn Meade] used us for a year, and then he dumped us."

It was a lesson hard-learned since the day a year earlier when Strunk first met company president John Husa.

"I said, 'Thanks for taking a chance on us. Tell your boss that we appreciate it, because I think we'd have been down the tubes without you buying us out,'" Strunk explained.

"His response was, 'We're not here to take a chance. We're here to make it go.'"

"I was always taught that kind of guy's a liar."

Husa could not be reached for comment, but in a *Centre Daily Times* article on the layoff of 80 Bolton workers, published less than three months before Bolton closed, he said, "I absolutely see a future, and I believe this new move basically is the security for the plant."

Engineering and maintenance manager Bob Kersavage claimed Bolton could not overcome weak market conditions and rising raw material prices.

"We tried to give it our best effort," Kersavage said. "But business conditions in general across the United States were tough, especially in housing and automotive, our two main outlets."

Others said market conditions had little to do with it.

"Their interest in buying the facility was to close it down," Centre County Board of Commissioners Chairman Jon Eich said bluntly. He believes Bolton bought the facility to put a competitor out of business and reduce the supply in the brass rod and wire markets, he said.

Bellefonte Mayor Stanley Goldman said Bolton bought Cerro to make a quick buck.

"I thought Bolton bought this business to build it up," Goldman said. "But it's obvious that they bought it to go out of business. They own other businesses, and this proba-



Photo by Doug Bauman

Jim Strunk, treasurer of UAW 1282, will soon have to part ways with the union hall that UAW has called home since the 1970s. The union lost nearly all of its remaining 230 members to recent layoffs at Bolton Metal Products, formerly Cerro, which used to employ more than 1,400 people in Bellefonte.

bly was a competitor of their other businesses."

The meager severance package added insult to injury. Bolton gave workers the option of a one-time payment of \$1,300 or two months' health insurance, and that only after Galbraith held company officials over a barrel on a technicality in the plant closure notice.

"It stinks," Strunk said of the severance. "It comes to \$37 and some for each year I worked here."

Strunk's father retired from Cerro after 33 years. Strunk, with 36 years at the plant, won't get that chance. At 58, he'll have to find another job to help his youngest daughter through college. But the pickings are slim.

"I don't think there are any super jobs out there," he said. He wants to apply his treasurer skills, but the cards are stacked against him. "I've done all the books, payroll and taxes for the union with no mistakes for 12 years, but who's going to hire a guy who's been working for a union?"

The North American Free Trade Agreement provides for education funds for workers unemployed due to foreign competition, but the workers' first application was turned down. The union is appealing the decision, Galbraith said.

Meanwhile, men in their 50s are scram-

bling. Some have found jobs at Penn State and others with local government. Some hope to start their own businesses, a tough go, especially during a recession. Most are trying to patch together a living until their Social Security and union pensions come through.

Just as it's done for plant closings before this, Career Link is helping connect laid-off workers with retraining programs, health benefits and other support services, but Sally Kolesar of Career Link said the first challenge is getting workers over the initial shock.

"Part of it is convincing these fellows that there is life beyond brass and that they can be a part of it," Kolesar said. "Losing your job is a very traumatic experience, especially after you've been there for a long time. You lost not only income, but the dream of secure retirement. You lost your friends you've worked with for 30 or 40 years, familiar faces, your routine."

The plant closure translates into about a quarter of a million dollars per year in lost taxes. Bolton paid more than \$100,000 in annual property taxes. The 232 workers at the plant were contributing nearly \$150,000 per year in local income taxes, according to

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Voices in Labor

Mandatory overtime harms health care workers, patients

by Laurie Rougeux

I am a licensed practical nurse at Hearthside nursing home and a member of the Service Employees International Union. I have been a nurse for 16 years and believe that mandatory overtime is dangerous for my residents and damaging to my family.

When I am required to stay beyond my scheduled shift, I get tired but still have to provide medications, compassionate care and treatment to 34 residents. I just pray that I don't make a mistake that could harm someone.

And then there is trying to be the best mother for my only son. When Phil had his first middle school band concert, like many mothers, I had planned to leave work on time and fix him dinner before the concert. But 20 minutes before the end of my shift, my supervisor called and told me that I couldn't leave and I was mandated. The concert went on without me, but my absence was devastating to my son.

Mandatory overtime is any time a worker finishes a scheduled shift and then is told by a supervisor that he or she has to stay



longer. This is a common occurrence in our country. According to the *Financial Times*, Americans work the longest hours of any industrialized country in the world. We do have restrictions on working hours in

the case of some jobs that affect public safety, such as for truck drivers and airline pilots.

Yet we do not have national regulations on mandatory overtime for workers in health care. In our union, we have fought to restrict mandatory overtime in the contracts we bargain with employers, but Pennsylvania has no law protecting health care workers and their patients from this dangerous practice.

As nurses have reported in surveys conducted by the state, forced overtime is common in Pennsylvania health care facilities. Nearly one out of seven registered nurses and over one in 10 licensed practical nurses

reported on the state survey that they had experienced forced overtime just in the two weeks prior to completing the survey. In both cases, nurses who reported forced overtime were twice as likely to say that they were dissatisfied with their jobs.

So far, no one in our state government has thought to survey certified nursing assistants, but I know from personal experience that CNAs do most of the care for residents in our nursing homes and also have problems with forced overtime.

Through our union, SEIU, we have been fighting hard for years to get a bill passed that would ban mandatory overtime for health care workers in our state.

Make no mistake, health care workers like myself went into this job to care for people in need, and we will still be there for our patients when they need us. Our bill makes exceptions for real crises and state-declared emergencies, such as big snow storms or multicar pileups that land a lot of people in the hospital at the same time.

But emergencies like that are rare. Right now, most forced overtime happens because of employers' poor staffing and scheduling policies, which allow managers to use forced overtime as a regular staffing tool instead of a last resort in real emergencies.

Last May, the Pennsylvania House of Representatives passed SEIU's bill, HB 834, banning mandatory overtime. It now must pass in the Senate before the end of this year for Gov. Rendell to sign it into law. Yet for 11 months, it has been bottled up in the Senate Labor and Industry Committee.

Centre County's own Sen. Jake Corman is on the committee. He needs to hear from constituents that this bill should be voted out of committee and passed in the Senate. Call him at his Bellefonte office at (814) 355-0477 or in Harrisburg at (717) 787-1377, and tell him to vote to protect health care workers and their patients!

Laurie Rougeux is a licensed practical nurse and member of SEIU Healthcare Pennsylvania.

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Voices estimates.

Also lost is the money that Bolton and the workers spent in the community, Goldman said.

"It is a catastrophe for Bellefonte," he said of the closure.

Yet union leaders said that aside from state Rep. Mike Hanna, elected officials

haven't responded.

"Some of them showed up the day the plant closed at the union hall, saying, 'We'll do everything we can for you,' and we haven't heard a word since then," Galbraith said.

But state Sen. Jake Corman told *Voices*

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Borough takes steps to improve pedestrian safety

by Susannah Barsom

There's good news for pedestrians who find getting around downtown State College a frustrating and sometimes dangerous experience: The borough is developing a comprehensive pedestrian and bicycle safety program.

Proposed improvements—some already implemented—include a three-second “head start” at traffic lights, extended sidewalk areas at corners and the construction of a pedestrian refuge island at the intersection of Foster Avenue and Atherton Street. The program will be based on the “three E’s: education, engineering and enforcement,” said Mark Whitfield, the borough public works director.

The difficulty of pedestrian transportation lies in getting people safely across busy streets when drivers and walkers alike tend

to ignore transportation laws. Motorists often do not stop for pedestrians at crosswalks, and pedestrians tend to jaywalk, both in violation of Pennsylvania law.

Discussions of these safety problems often emphasize enforcement: ticketing people who fail to yield to pedestrians or who cross streets at improper places or against traffic signals.

Although there are not enough officers to monitor all borough traffic situations, it may be possible to influence such behaviors by increasing enforcement at key times of the year, according to State College Police Chief Tom King.

The beginning of the fall semester would be one such time, giving local police the opportunity to let the thousands of new drivers and walkers in town know that they will be expected to follow traffic laws while they are here, King said.

While the police use enforcement to get across their message of pedestrian safety, public prosecutors are also sending a message. The recent deaths of a pedestrian and a cyclist resulted in minimal punishment to the drivers.

In the case of Xiaohui Xia, a 25-year-old graduate student from China who was struck and killed while crossing South Allen Street, it was determined that she was at fault because she was outside of the “virtual” crosswalk. There is no painted crosswalk at the intersection where Xia was struck. But the driver was not faulted for the accident.

Local physician and bike and pedestrian safety activist Paul Simpson called the message the district attorney’s office is sending to drivers “cryptic at best.”

While increased enforcement and prosecution may help to improve pedestrian safe-

ty, the borough is examining other approaches as well. New signage, bike lanes and additional physical constructions will all be considered in the development of the safety program.

According to the borough’s research, signs reminding motorists to yield to pedestrians have worked well on Westerly Parkway and other two-lane roads. But signage is not designed for one-way streets, Whitfield said.

Whitfield and King said that before attempting to install signs downtown, they want to make sure that drivers in both lanes of the one-way streets will get the message. They said they are concerned that pedestrians crossing the street when one lane of traffic has stopped may go unnoticed by drivers in the other lane. State law requires that vehicles in both lanes of traffic stop at crosswalks when a car in either lane has stopped.

While the borough has its own set of traffic problems, most municipalities also have trouble spots for pedestrians. Citizens can help to improve the climate for pedestrians and cyclists by noting problem areas and bringing them to the attention of their local officials.

The Pennsylvania Department of Transportation’s “Walk Smart” Web site has extensive information on pedestrian safety, including a walkability checklist that can be printed, completed and submitted to local officials.

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he’s optimistic. By keeping taxes low and improving infrastructure, he said the county can draw more manufacturing. Yet tax money is what funds infrastructure, and the county now has less of it.

“We need to make this area attractive to businesses so they’ll locate here and grow here,” he said. “With the right product, manufacturing can succeed.”

The Bolton workers can’t wait until that day. Their families have to eat and their children finish college so they can have a chance at a more secure life.

And the union hall that has been their home base for decades has already been sold ... to a dentist.

Jim Strunk and others still seethe.

“I don’t think anybody in their right mind wants to get rid of their home. That’s our union home. That was our place.”

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