

Unilever

Inbell Feb. 17/06 p. 4

Unilever closure

• Story continued from page 1.

"It really hasn't settled in with some people yet."

After Wednesday's meeting, Rappel said, "people were just kind of walking around aimlessly."

"There are still questions and answers that need to be addressed, and management's trying to get as many answers (as possible) to the people," said the former union chief steward. "It's a lot of stuff to absorb. Monday morning will be business as usual. We've got to produce."

Colin Grills is the current chief steward of United Food and Commercial Workers Local 175, which represents about 130 staff at the site. He's been a soup mixer at Unilever for five years.

"About a week ago we were told we were getting a substantial-size contract, and then they're telling us they're going to be shutting the doors within the year," Grills said Thursday, recalling how there was "a bit of a gasp" as company officials announced the closure with a prepared statement.

"It's really too bad," he said. "Everybody in that plant is friendly and hard-working and they hate to see it being broken up that way."

He said the staff is an even mix of workers with 10 or more years on the job and those hired five or six years ago.

Blair said the average age is 47 and about 60 per cent of staff are male.

Grills described it as "your typical workplace."

"The employees themselves are excellent peo-

ple. The company did a really good job of hiring," he said.

Rappel said ending his job at Unilever will be like "not seeing your family anymore."

He said he realized the reality of companies scaling back operations to save money, though he's not convinced it will help Unilever.

"All companies are doing it," said Rappel. "I'm not saying it's the right decision. I don't think they're going to have the flexibility in their supply chain like they did."

However, Rappel continued, workers don't

appear overly angry.

"I didn't get any bitterness from them," he said. "That's the kind of workforce we have there. It's a blow to us all, but we're all going to just keep working. There's probably some underlying bitterness ... It's not directed at our level in Belleville; it's Unilever it's directed to."

"When you get taken over by a multinational company, all you are is a number to them."

But he was also careful to note the general mood isn't entirely negative. Instead, staff are preparing for their futures.

"On the flip side of it, I'm glad they gave us this much notice," Rappel said. "It's not like going in and the doors are closed. The benefit package that they seem to be offering is pretty good. I can't say anything bad about the Belleville plant."

"Management, they've been great. We've always worked together as a team."

Workers were generally reluctant to speak publicly about their situation. Some said they had been through the same situation at Trenton's FBI plant close.

Others have worked at Unilever for much of their lives and are now faced with some hard decisions.

"I'm not really sure what my options are," said one longtime employee who asked not to be identified.

Blair said the Unilever plant in Bramalea, west of Toronto, is expanding and looking for people with skills similar to those required here. However, he said, there are only 28 to 30 openings.

The company owns 20 acres along University Avenue just southeast of Highway 401 and Cannifton Road. Blair said it's not known what will happen to the building and land, but that some of the equipment will move to the plants taking over production of the various lines. Other equipment may be sold, he said.

Meetings continued Thursday as workers sat down with management and union officials. The company has said it will provide help for employees seeking new jobs and has already received offers of assistance from municipal officials and the Brighton office of the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs



INTELLIGENCER PHOTO BY LUKE HENDRY

The Unilever Foodsolutions plant on University Avenue will close by the end of this year.