

Winchester deal dies - workers disillusioned

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COBOURG, Ont. (CP) — Over lunch at an Ottawa hotel last Tuesday, Norm Cant was told by a prospective buyer of the Winchester Canada firearms plant that the deal had fallen through.

Cant, 53, director of Winchester's Canadian operation, called his management team in the next morning and gave them the bad news. The word flashed through the plant in minutes — 85 employees were out of work immediately and all 300 would be gone by the end of January.

The firearms factory has been an important part of Cobourg, a community of 11,000 on Lake Ontario, ever since 1929 when the H. W. Cooley Machine and Arms Co. moved here from Toronto. The firm was bought out in 1961 by Olin Corp, a U.S.-based multinational conglomerate, becoming part of its Winchester Group and the area's second-largest employer.

But officials say the group hasn't been profitable for several years and Olin, based in Stamford, Conn., decided that Winchester should concentrate on its high-priced line. That meant stopping production of the lower-priced Cooley products manufactured in Cobourg.

Employees heard the news last August from Olin officials who flew in for the occasion.

TAKES, THEN LEAVES

Joe Leduc, vice-president of the International Association of Machinists union local that represented the workers, says he was first shocked, then disappointed "because it seems that a multinational corporation has come into this country, taken what it wanted and pulled out."

Cant, who will lose his job when the plant closes, immediately started a campaign to find a buyer, enlisting the federal and provincial governments in the search.

Several groups expressed interest in keeping the plant going by sharing ownership with the employees. But in recent weeks, Cant was confident he'd finally found a Canadian buyer who would follow through.

Prospects looked good and Cant hurried the matter along so he could give the 85 employees whose jobs ended Friday the good news.

But the deal died after a survey of Winchester Canada's large U.S. customers.

"We found they had gone to other sources for their lower-priced firearms," said Cant. "We're very late in the season now to catch the 1980 market."

Large catalogue firms have already locked up their orders for next fall when hunters will be ordering new guns.

NO FEDERAL HELP

Cant said he and the prospective purchaser still kept an appointment with a federal trade official, but were told there was no money available to help the deal through. The rejection at the hotel lucheon became a formality.

"Up until this day, I refused to believe it was happening," said Mary Bourgeois, 57, who worked at the plant for 31 years.

Allan Jeffers, director of administration and personnel, was busy last week giving administrators and office staff a course in how to keep up their morale and find jobs.

But to Wayne Schwantz, 34, who became unemployed on Friday, there was no softening the blow.

"I'll be getting severance pay, but what's \$1,000 today? I just heard on the news they're putting 6,500 General Motors workers on temporary layoff next month. It seems it doesn't matter where you go, there's no guarantee of a future these days."

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