

Minister touts wage protection during visit

BY CAROLINE GRECH
Staff Writer

New wage protection legislation from the federal government has come too late for more than 2,000 workers who lost jobs at a Vaughan auto parts plant this month.

Progressive Moulded Products Ltd. filed for bankruptcy June 20 during a shutdown. Former employees of the plant have been camped out there since the first week of July, when they returned to work and were informed of the closure.

The Wage Earner Protection Program that went into effect this week is designed to help workers receive compensation for unpaid wages.

BALLANTRAE CANDIDATE

Federal Labour Minister Jean-Pierre Blackburn was in northern Markham last Thursday to talk about the initiative.

He said it protects anywhere from 10,000 to 20,000 workers who file claims for unpaid wages each year.

Mr. Blackburn met with local Conservative candidates Duncan Fletcher and Paul Calandra of Ballantrae and other members of the community to discuss everything from election strategies to the environment.

The minister also responded to critics, who say the federal government is not doing enough to help the ailing manufacturing sector in Ontario. The government has helped, providing \$358 million for Ontario, Mr. Blackburn said.

But he stressed throwing money at a struggling sector is not the solution.

"We cannot keep a sector of activity alive with grants," Mr. Blackburn said. "It is not possible, because if we do that we won't be competitive and the best way to support the economic activity in this country is see that these companies are more competitive and to help these companies implement new technologies in their enterprises."

The minister lauded the wage protection program, saying workers won't have to worry when they lose their job due to company bankruptcy.

The government would pay eligible workers and then seek the money from the employer, which could include seizing assets if necessary.

TOO LATE FOR SOME

But the initiative may be too little too late for the Vaughan workers because the program only took effect last week.

The employees are trying to force Progressive to provide severance pay owed to them under the Employment Standards Act.

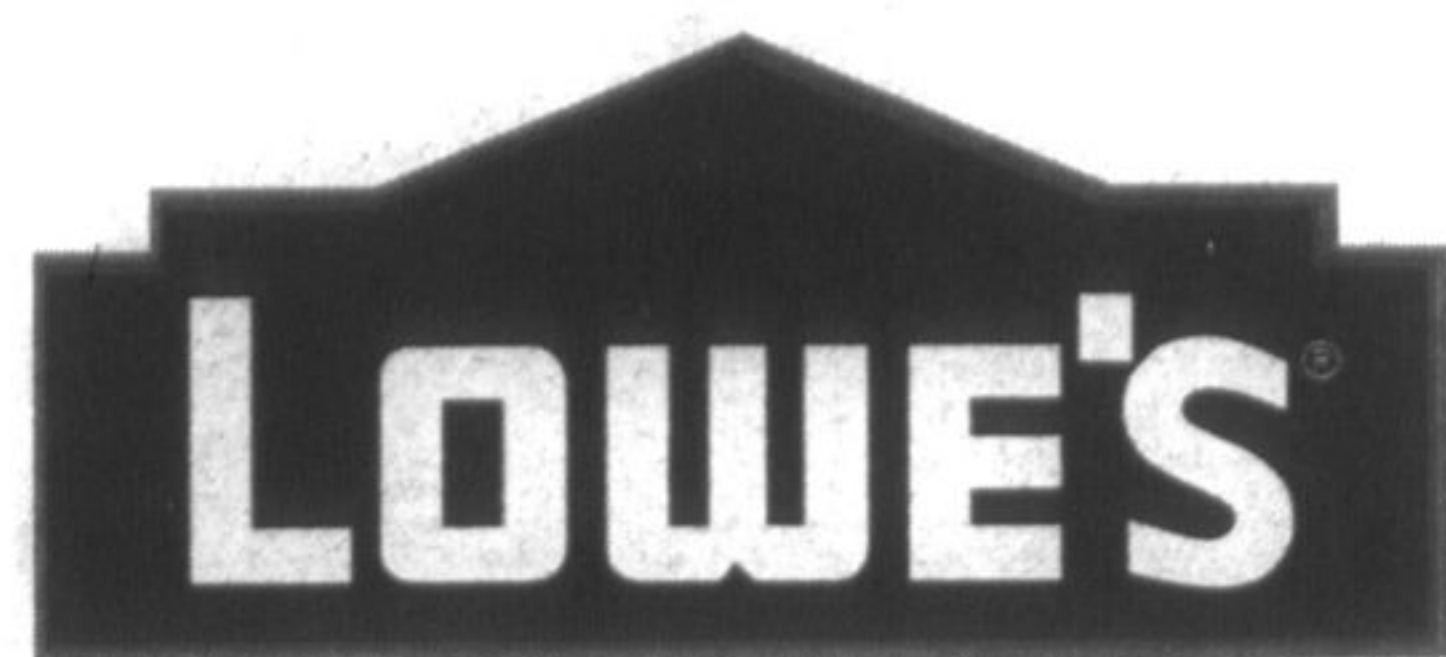
That's because the company filed for bankruptcy and no claims can be made against it, including severance requests, company spokesperson Michael Danisher said.

Asked about the situation in Concord, Mr. Blackburn shrugged, saying the law is too late for Progressive's former employees.

He stressed the program would prevent other situations like this from happening.

"No, it won't help (Progressive employees), but at least you know now that it is the law," he said.

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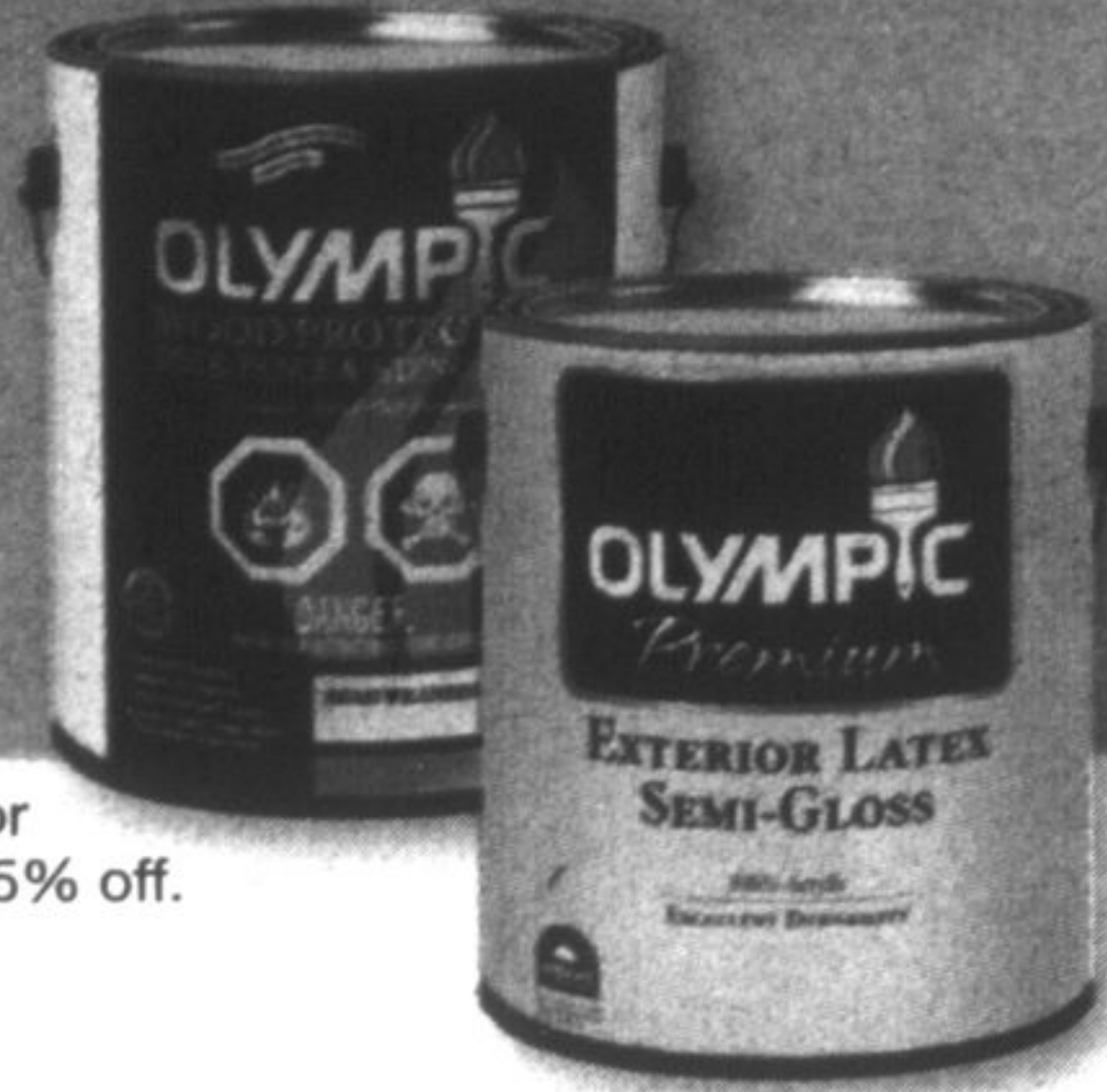
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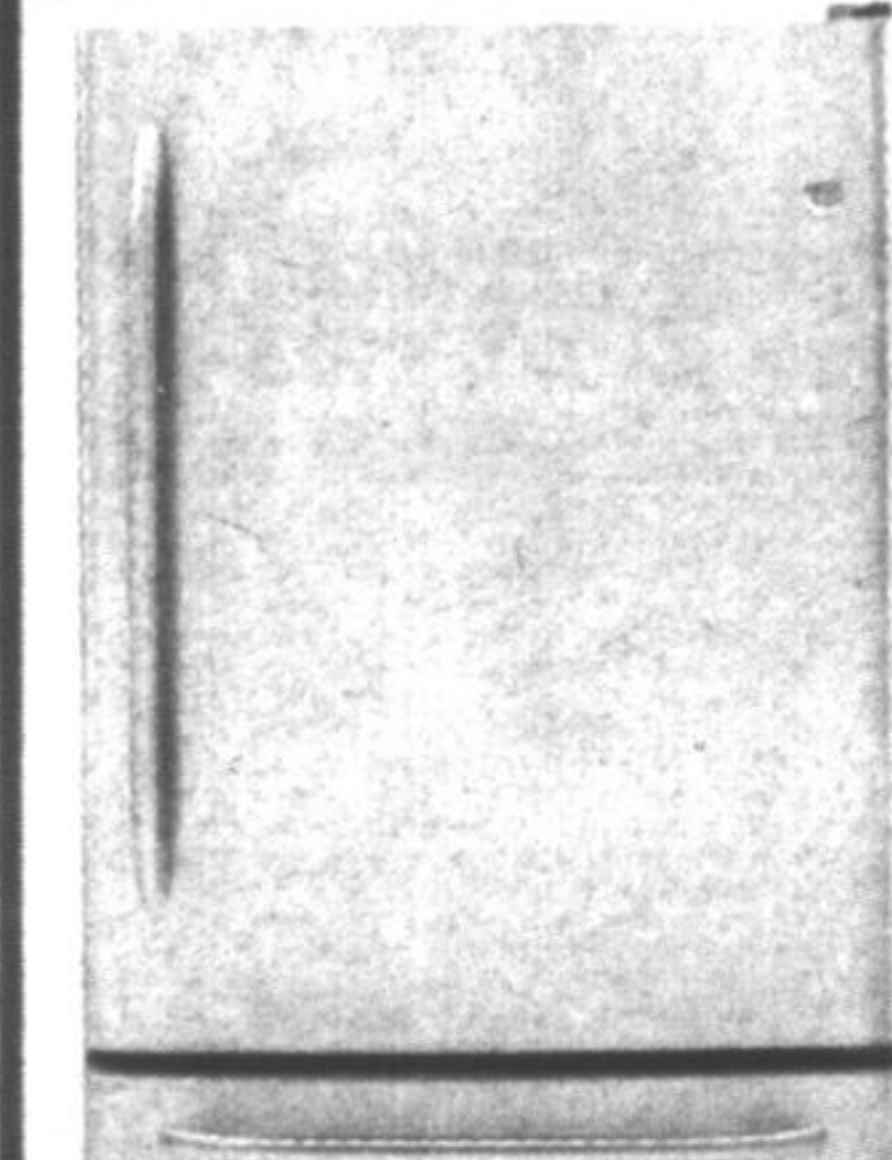
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