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Centre to help laid-off workers

By STEPHEN UHLER

Workers affected by Commonwealth Plywood Company Limited's decision to close down its veneer operation now have a place to turn to for help.

The Commonwealth Action Centre, operating out of the Knights of Columbus Hall at 170 Ellis Street, Pembroke, is getting ready to open its doors to lend whatever assistance it can to help laid-off employees get back on track. It is funded by Ontario's Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU).

Anna Darlington, action centre co-ordinator, said she and a committee of five Commonwealth employees will be helping workers with career counselling, needs assessments for them and their families, connect them with employment services and offer other support.

Support will include providing workers with computer/Internet access, photocopying and faxing services to support their job searches, and keeping them informed of vocational and retraining opportunities.

"We can let them know where these resources are, and give them access to many different options," Ms. Darlington said.

"Most importantly, we're here to let them know they aren't alone in this. We're here to help them."

Employees learned January 14 the company was closing its Pembroke veneer operation as of March 9, a victim of the tough hardwood veneer market. The move put roughly 100 full-time employees out of work. Those 40 or so other employees left in the milling and plywood sections will continue on filling orders.

David Weisenberg, plant chairman of United Steelworkers Sub Local 1-1000, and a member of the action centre committee, said the plywood department has enough orders to keep it running for some time to come, but didn't know what would happen to it in the long term.

In the meantime, the committee's focus now is getting the centre up and running.

"It's a difficult thing right now, as this is all new to us, too," Mr. Weisenberg said. While most of the laid-off workers have been seeking new employment, and some have been successful, it is the rest the centre is trying to help.

Fred Brannan, another committee member, said it is going to be a hard adjustment for many of the employees, some of whom have spent their entire lives working at the veneers plant.

"Some went right out of school and into the plant, and never had another job," he said. "Some people haven't seen a resum, before, or know how to take part in a job interview."

Mr. Brannan said the aim of those in the centre is to help these workers find their feet again as they work on rebuilding themselves. He said the hardest part is the plant itself is still in limbo, most of it is shut down, but some of it continues to function.

"We're not sure if we're going down or not," he said, but added the way the veneer industry is, he doesn't see the government stepping in with money to keep operations going.

Ms. Darlington said it is too easy sometimes to talk of jobs lost without considering the people themselves, and how their lives are disrupted by these happenings.

"These are individuals with family ties to the plant which include generations," she said. "This is a human situation."

The Commonwealth Action Centre is open Mondays to Wednesdays from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. No appointments are necessary and workers are encouraged to drop by, whether it is to get help to plan their futures, receive some encouragement, or to visit for a coffee.

Workers are also encouraged to call 613-732-9605 or e-mail cwac@bellnet.ca to get further information.

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THERE TO HELP - Workers laid off by Commonwealth Plywood Company Limited can turn to the Commonwealth Action Centre for help. In the picture by the entrance to the centre are, from left, David Weisenberg, plant chairman of United Steelworkers Sub Local 1-1000 and a member of the action centre committee; Fred Brannan, action centre committee member; and Anna Darlington, action centre co-ordinator.

Photo: Observer Photo