

# BITTERNESS REMAINS AFTER PLANT CLOSING

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MERIDEN WHEN the Webster Wilcox Company closed its silver holloware plant here in March, some employees said that it gave its 350 workers - average age 57, average service record 25 years - about 25 minutes notice.

To ease the shock, the company put up \$4,500 for a six-month counseling unit to help former employees cope with the stress of unemployment. But now the end of that counseling program is drawing near, as are state unemployment compensation benefits.

A spokesman, Robert B. Treloar, who was marketing, advertising and merchandising director of Webster Wilcox, a subsidiary of the International Silver Company, said that the company placement effort that had found jobs for all but 50 of those who were looking for work.

About 90 of the workers took early retirement, he said, while 30 to 40 others took advantage of their union seniority to bump younger workers at International Silver's Factory E plant in Meriden, which produces flatware.

He described those who had not yet been placed as "mostly women in their 50's who are general laborers and harder to place." Helen Zelenski, who at the time of the plant closing was president of Local 7770, United Steelworkers, disputed Mr. Treloar. "Not many people have used the company's placement program because they were being scattered over a 50-mile radius," she said. "Our roots are in Meriden, our ages are in the 50's and 60's, and the company was trying to put us back in the minimum wage jobs.

Whatever the actual number still out of work, it is clear that five months after ending production at the century-old business, once the mainstay of the International Silver Company, the anger and bitterness remain.

"People are shocked and they're angry," said Donna Landerman, a consultant for the counseling program, Job Loss Project, that was set up to work with Webster Wilcox former employees. "The reality is that some of them may be out of work for the rest of their lives." The project operates out of the mental health division offices of the Meriden-Wallingford Hospital.

"Some of these people are not that employable or can't move," she said. "We have seen evidence of depression and increased alcohol use."

Many of the workers still unemployed have been receiving state unemployment compensation and Federal Trade Readjustment Assistance, a program that was initiated to blunt the impact of industries that suffered from foreign competition. But now some of this is to be cut.

John Pescatello, director of state unemployment compensation, said that Congress has passed legislation that, beginning Oct. 1, will prevent jobless workers from receiving Federal benefits and state benefits simultaneously. They must exhaust the 26-week state benefits before getting the rest of any remaining Federal aid due them, said Mr. Pescatello. It is expected that all benefits will have been exhausted by the first of the year.

Mrs. Landerman said she and project director, Peter Gandleman, have requested Insilco to extend its commitment to the counseling project beyond the promised six months. They said they would be looking for alternative financing sources if the company turned them down.

Meriden is a town where unemployment is frequently the highest in the state, but it is only one of many communities to be affected by plant closings. In the last five years, 75 plants have closed their doors in Connecticut, eliminating more than 10,000 jobs.