



[Print This Article](#)

Sunday, May. 04, 2008

'Devastating blow'
The sudden closure of Bolton Metals in February left employees stunned

By Jennifer Thomas - jthomas@centredaily.com

BELLEFONTE — It was the end of an era for Bolton Metal Products.



Centre County Historical Society

The Titan Metal Manufacturing Co. lived up to its mythic name during World War II, when the Bellefonte-area factory produced nearly 20 percent of all the brass rods and forgings made in the country. Founded in 1915 in Milesburg, the company moved to the site of the old Nittany Iron Works two years later and, in the early 1960s, was renamed Cerro Copper and Brass Co. Photo provided by the Centre County Historical Society



- [Solid job turns to uncertain future](#)
- [Manufacturing jobs vanishing from county](#)
- [Our paycheck to paycheck series](#)
- [Our paycheck to paycheck series](#)
- [Business Matters content](#)

On Feb. 1, less than a year after a company from the United Kingdom swept in and bought the plant with promises of a solid future, the employees — most of whom still called the company by its former name, Cerro — were called to a meeting.

The message was simple, stunning and heartbreaking: The plant was closing.

“In a way you’ve lost a significant part of your life,” said Karen Emel, who worked in the administrative offices of the brass metal rod manufacturer for most of the past 29 years. “This was really like having the carpet pulled out from under us.”

Part of the community since 1915 — though a dwindling presence over the past decade both in production and job opportunities — Bolton ceased operations immediately.

More than 200 people lost their jobs that day. Seventy-eight more had been laid off at the end of December. Workers at that time were told the cuts would make the company competitive in the future.

Mike McCartney, who spent almost 31 years with the company, said a hush fell over the union hall when the news was announced. He called his wife to say he was done.

She thought he meant for the weekend.

“I thought he was just joking with me,” Jennifer McCartney said. “It was like, you’re in shock. Usually you have some kind of notification you’re going to lose your job.”

For employees, whose average age was 58, the news was hard to fathom. Tenures of more than 30 years were common. Many had never worked anywhere else.

“It’s a devastating blow. I don’t know what more this community can take,” said Chip Aikens, executive director of the Bellefonte Intervalley Area Chamber of Commerce. “It’s just another part of our history now that is tragic.”

The plant manufactured brass rods, wire and low-melt alloys for the plumbing, hardware, valve and fitting, electronics, and other industries.

Bolton’s assets were sold to Chase Brass and Copper Co. in Ohio, which is a subsidiary of Global Brass and Copper Inc. Global Brass, a portfolio company of KPS Capital Partners, operates a fully-mechanized brass rod facility in Montpelier, Ohio.

A representative for KPS said Bolton had made a decision to exit that business and close the plant before the sale was complete.

Bolton said in February that the low-melt section of the plant would continue operations, but details about how many overall positions remained and their future were not available.

Bolton representatives in the United Kingdom could not be reached through e-mail. An employee who answered the phone at the Bellefonte plant said the company’s management operations are being handled in the United Kingdom and about a dozen employees remain in the low-melt operations locally.

The future of those positions and the handful of remaining administrative positions is unknown, the employee said.

Aikens said the loss of hundreds of jobs at Bolton will cause a ripple effect because many of the employees live locally, shop locally and are part of the community.

An economic and work force brief prepared by Penn State's Workforce Education and Development Initiative explored the nonferrous foundry and forging industry, which would have included Bolton, and its impact on the Centre County economy.

Centre County held 76 percent of the state's jobs in the nonferrous metals industry as of the final quarter of 2007, with Bolton accounting for most of those 287 jobs.

That report found that for every 100 jobs, other industries employ an additional 20 workers to supply the non-ferrous metals industry. □

Another 21 jobs were created to service the needs of workers, such as housing, food, health care and retail, the study states.

Using those figures, Bolton's job cuts will end up affecting about 423 employees locally.

Every 100 jobs would generate \$3 million in compensation, such as wages and pensions, and an additional \$726,000 in compensation for the support industries.

"It's a negative multiplier," Aikens said, adding he doesn't know what businesses can absorb the displaced employees. "There's still a need for (the product), it's just the cost of production. They couldn't compete in a global market, and that's unfortunate."

Laid off manufacturing employees often face an uphill climb to replace the wages and benefits they once enjoyed, said John Coleman, president and CEO of the Chamber of Business and Industry of Centre County.

"Most of them will not find a one-for-one replacement," he said. "They will not find it in the same trade and they will not find it in manufacturing."

He said Bolton should assist employees' efforts to find new jobs.

"These are people who have committed decades of their lives to this company," he said.

The plant closing represents the bigger, ongoing problem of Centre County's loss of traditional manufacturing jobs, Coleman said.

"Every \$1 (in manufacturing) means \$6 to the local economy," Coleman said. "A manufacturer is bringing new money in that they are selling products broadly outside of the county."

But manufacturing companies are finding a hugely competitive global marketplace, where it's easier to mass produce goods elsewhere in the world because of lower labor costs and cheaper raw materials, he said.

Successful manufacturing companies are close to their suppliers and to their customers, said Charles W. McMillion, author of a study on Pennsylvania manufacturing prepared for the American Manufacturing Trade Action Coalition.

Centre County's manufacturing is challenged because everything must be shipped or transported via FedEx or UPS, said Joe Merlina, business and industry analyst for the state Labor Department's Center for Workforce Information.

"It's prohibitive," Merlina said.

The county may do best to focus on recruiting technology-based companies focused on advanced-material initiatives, information technology, life sciences and nanotechnology, Coleman said.

“Chasing traditional manufacturing is something anyone in every community can do. Technology companies seem to be the sweet spot in Centre County,” he said.

Bellefonte-based Restek Corp. is an example of a technology-based success story.

The company, which manufactures chromatography products, has seen volume on its primary manufacturing line increase four-fold in the past 10 years, said Don McCandless, company president and head coach. About 90 of the company’s 250 employees are involved in the manufacturing aspect of the business.

“It’s a very niche market,” he said. “There are only a handful of companies around that would do what we do on a mass basis.”

One challenge is to keep costs down. McCandless said Restek looked at costs associated with opening a foreign location but found no advantages if the company was to provide the same level of service, quality and keep a technical edge. Instead, the company invested more locally and expanded its manufacturing facility about 40 percent earlier this year.

“To me it’s a no-win situation, chasing low-cost labor,” he said. “I think we just have to be smart about it.”

Coleman said Centre County’s top employers, Penn State, Mount Nittany Medical Center and the local school districts, represent the county’s growth areas and strongest job markets — health care and education. Those jobs aren’t vulnerable to jobs being sent offshore, he said.

The chamber’s role is to help create new development that will create additional employment opportunities and stimulate the local economy, he said.

The Benner Commerce Park has available land, but, with the exception of the Cleveland Bros. site, it hasn’t been zoned to allow further development to happen. To draw new businesses in, it is necessary to have shovel-ready sites, Coleman said.

“There are companies interested in this community,” he said. “But when you look at the community as a whole, there are few locations in Centre County for them.”

Companies want to locate somewhere where the local government and businesses are supportive of their efforts.

“This is about companies that can locate anywhere in the nation,” he said.

Jennifer Thomas can be reached at 231-4638.