

## Life After Bobcat's Dec. 23rd Shutdown

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BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — Twenty years on a job allows for some time to think. But for Scott Langemo, the past few weeks have been a time to reflect on his years as a tool and die machinist for Bobcat Co. and what comes next.

"There's been a lot of reflecting on what I want to do with my life," he said. "I guess I didn't realize how well I had it made."

The last production shift for Bobcat's Bismarck plant is Dec. 23, ending 475 jobs. For most workers and their families, the question now is, "What next?"

What jobs are available for someone who has spent decades welding, operating a lathe or driving a forklift? What happens to house payments, medical costs or tuition bills? Will they stay here or try somewhere new?

For many, the questions are unanswered.

"You can look at it as jobs, but there are people behind those jobs," said Dion Feigitsch, 45, a laser operator who worked at the plant for 13 years.

End of the line

To Curtis Sprenger, the past few weeks at Bobcat bring to mind the blank expressions of an Alzheimer's unit.

"That's the stare you see at work now. Everyone's mind is on What am I going to do next," said Sprenger, 58, a welder who spent 38 years at the plant. "Every day gets harder."

Since the announcement of the closing, the mood at the plant has been somber. Workers talk about the discomfort they feel waiting for the end.

"Right now, what I'm hearing is that they just want it to be over," Feigitsch said. "It's like watching a slow death."

Terry Tschosik, a welder and lathe operator for 22 years, does not want to be there at the end. He plans to use up his vacation days that week.

"I don't want to be seen standing there and breaking down and crying," he said.

Reality has set in as the last day approaches, Tschosik said.

"It was OK until about this last week," he said. "You can just see their faces saying, God, it's real, it's coming to an end."

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When a job has been part of daily life for decades, its sudden end can have a big impact. Some workers have made plans to stay in touch after the closing. Others talk about their progress in finding prospects for their next job, like "a little support group," Langemo said.

The timing of the closing has been awkward. The factory usually shuts down for a period just before Christmas, but this time the workers know that their holiday break will be permanent. In Feigitsch's family, the closing looms especially large. He has two brothers who also work at the factory, as well as two brothers-in-law and a nephew.

"It's one of those things you try not to talk about," he said. "Just to keep from depressing the rest of the family."

For Langemo, the holidays provide more time to dwell on things.

"The fact is that you're stuck in the house thinking about it," he said.

Workers say they are still working hard up until the end, even as parts of the plant get loaded onto trucks and shipped away.

"I did like what I was doing as a welder," Sprenger said. The adjustment he has to make is recognizing that his contribution is now going toward production that will be sent to Gwinner or Litchfield, Minn., or somewhere else. "It's not for my brothers and sisters anymore. It's for someone else."

### Job prospects

Richard Heidrich thought that after 38 years at Bobcat, he had reached the homestretch to retirement. Now at 58 he is looking for a new job to fill out the last part of his working life. So far, he does not like his prospects.

"There's nothing out there except some part-time, unless you want to move to Williston," he said. A welder, he has seen only seven openings in his field. "And none of them even relatively close to Bismarck."

Heidrich and his co-worker Sprenger started at Bobcat around the same time. Like other older workers, they find themselves trying to navigate the job market after decades at the same job.

Tschosik said he has sent out applications for jobs. Some employers send back letters — "I call them Dear John letters" — turning him down. Others send nothing.

"No response is worse," he said.

Part of what makes the loss of 475 manufacturing jobs significant is that there is not much else that offers similar work for the skills possessed by the laid-off workers, despite Bismarck-Mandan's low unemployment rate, 2.9 percent in September,

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according to Job Service North Dakota.

"There just ain't a lot of forklift driving jobs, machining jobs or assembling jobs," Langemo said.

"It's service, government or sales," said Feigitsch. "There's not much out there with sustainable wages."

Some people have already left town, according to Tschosik, having found new work or a place where they like their prospects. Former workers have gone to the Twin Cities, the oil fields or to the state's power plants.

"They've got to go where their skills will take them," he said.

Not everyone is pessimistic. Langemo tries to look at his job loss as an opportunity to find something more satisfying. He never intended to stay at the same place forever, anyway.

"I figured for years that I'd work for 20 years and go somewhere else. Now there's more motivation." A tinkerer, he is applying for patents on ideas he has been toying with. He also thinks about going back to school. "I'd like to get into teaching, something to make a difference in life."

As bad as joblessness is, Tschosik dreads the idea of collecting unemployment checks.

"I hate going and asking people for money. I hate it. It's not me," he said.

He is confident that he will find something sooner or later.

"Maybe not a job I want, but it'll be a job I need," he said. "I've been pretty lucky. My whole life, I've bounced back."

It could be worse

Heidrich is not happy with his prospects, but he is more worried about other people, the guys with young children and a new mortgage. At 58 and with no kids at home, things could be worse.

"They probably thought they had a job for life," he said. "I only have to take care of me and my wife yet."

One thread that runs through conversations with soon-to-be-unemployed Bobcat workers is gratitude that their situation is not as bad as someone else's. The older workers worry about the younger ones' financial obligations. The younger ones worry about the older ones' employability. Feigitsch's teenage daughter does most of the fretting at his house. "For some reason, she thinks she needs to worry about it more than I do."

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He called his layoff an opportunity to pursue self-employment or other new careers. He is more concerned about his brother losing his job at the plant. "He's 57, and who's going to hire him?"

Tschosik's wife has a job at the Capitol, which will provide his medical insurance. He wonders how the less fortunate workers will make ends meet.

"I'm worried about the people who don't have any other skills and any other training," he said. "Their insurance is going to go away, and I don't know what they're going to do."

His daughter also works at Bobcat, and he thinks about what her options will be.

Langemo sympathizes with the people forced to get by on low wages while he made a comfortable living working for Bobcat.

"I can't see how people can make it on minimum wage," he said. As he ponders what kind of work and pay are in his future, he calls it a humbling experience.

"I don't know if I want to be humbled or not."

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