Clothing trade leaves worker loyalty in rags

THE Bonds Wear factory at Cessnock will close next year. It will be the last page in a fascinating chapter of clothing manufacturing in the Hunter, a great industrial story, though it could have been much longer and undervalued.

The textiles and clothing industries were the Hunter's largest employers on a regular basis during the 1960s and 1970s. By 1973, there were 14 textiles and clothing factories in the Hunter employing a total of 2519 people.

Five firms dominated. The largest was the giant fabric manufacturer National Textiles, which ran plants at Kotara and Rutherford. National Textiles employment peaked in 1984 with 135 workers.

Alongside the National Textiles plant at Kotara was a clothing manufacturer King Gee, which had 335 workers at its peak in 1980. Another was the iconic Bonds Deipict-Carrington whose payroll rose to 600 in 1986, its workers sewing clothes for Katzies and other Coles-Myer discount stores.

Locally owned giant, Rundies, the suitmaker, got 400 workers in 1985 at its sparkling new premises at Kotara after it shifted from Hunter Street.

And in Cessnock, Bonds Wear bustled up to 340 workers in 1989. Textile and clothing industries came to the Hunter in a post-war rush. There were reasons for two reasons. First, labour was cheap, especially female labour in a region dominated by male jobs in coal and steel.

Second, the NSW Labor government had an active policy of decentralisation, providing incentives to Sydney firms to go north. Firms like Bonds, for instance, moved in Cumberland Street, Cessnock, in 1960 with a bundle of government goodies. Many firms went into former military sites dotted around the Lower Hunter.

Like the other textiles and clothing firms, bonds Wear factory at Cessnock was bought by Australians across the decades. In the 1970s, because consumers had little choice. Australia ran one of the world's most protected economies in the decades after the war and the textiles and clothing industries received more protection than any other.

From July 15, 1975, though, the world of protection began to be dismantled. This was the day when Labor prime minister Gough Whitlam announced a 25 cent per cut to tariffs across the board. An astounding 34,000 textiles, clothing and footwear jobs were lost across Australia in the next 24 months.

A decade later, the reformist Hawke-Keating Labor government resumed aggressive tariff cuts, while encouraging affected industries to become internationally competitive with generous government assistance packages. Textiles and clothing firms in the Hunter were major recipients of assistance grants and employment in the clothing and textiles industries grew to record levels.

The plan at the time was neat: concentrate the traditional clothing brands into big firms like Pacific Dunlop, which gobbled up brands like Bonds, Berlei, Holeproof, Jockey, Dunlop, and Smazier and Linter, which grabbed King Gee, Speedo, Shubhles, Formfit, Hilton and Razzamatazz. And then let the big manufacturers cozy up to the big retailers and secure the best shelf space while Australian consumers stay loyal to the brands.

As tariffs fell over the next decade, though, import growth and the big manufacturers faltered. Linter collapsed with its major owner, Abe Goldberg, fleeing the country, leaving Linter struggling with a huge debt burden. Linter was broken up and the Hunter hits closed down.

By 2001 Pacific Dunlop also wanted out. It bundled its clothing brands into a neat package and sold out to private investors. Bonds Wear – the brand and the factory – became a piece of Pacific Brands Pty Ltd. Then, in 2004, loaded with debt, Pacific Brands was floated on the Australian sharemarket, and the private owners walked off with $1 billion in profits, about five times their initial investment.

Now Pacific Brands is restructuring again as its debt burden cripples the company. Its Australian factories will be shut with production going offshore. Soon the stars in the Bonds ads – Sarah O'Hare, Pat Hutter and Michael Clarke – will be donning Chinese-made undies. Pacific Brands hopes you will remain loyal to the brand. This is the firm's prime asset.

For the women and men from Cessnock who will lose their jobs, however, loyalty to the brand cannot be assumed so easily. I visited their factory half a dozen times during the 1980s and 1990s as they responded to each new corporate strategy. Just in Time, Quick Response, Value Added Management, Total Quality Management, and so on.

I have visited many factories in my lifetime. I have never seen anyone work as hard as the women at Bonds Wear. Their daily bound by frenetic output targets, with time allocations for each sewing operation broken into fractions of minutes, and their wages calculated accordingly.

These women have given their sweat to behalf the brand. Now they are discarded so the brand and its owners can survive, and probably prosper.

HARD YAKKA: A scene from a Hunter textile factory in the early 1980s. Output targets were frenetic.

Church slow to recognise the gift of women

They should be given more opportunity, writes Michael Malone.

YESTERDAY we celebrated International Women’s Day. This day, which has been observed for almost 100 years, is an opportunity to connect women around the world, those whose needs are great and those whose gifts and generosity have been placed on the genius of women, not acknowledged the person, because women (and men) who have been unable to participate as they wish. I know that there are women who have been remedying any injustice or healing the wounds of the world.

The Catholic Church is yet to recognise sufficiently their place, their gifts, their contributions. There are far more opportunities for women than ever before, in the church and in the wider community. I urge the Church to support and wisdom of the women on staff and the women of the dioceses.

However, structures remain that limit the influence and scope of women. I know that there are women (and men who have been wounded by the church) who are not able to participate as they wish. International Women’s Day encourages us to reflect honestly on the magnificence part that women play in the church community and in our nation, as well as on less palatable realities. The first step in remedying any injustice or imbalance begins with me.

Michael Malone is Bishop of the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle and chairman of the Bishops Commission for Church Ministry, Incorporating the Office for the Participation of Women and the Council for Australian Catholic Women.

Odd spot

Roman Catholic bishops in Italy are urging the faithful to go on a high-tech fast for Lent, switching off MP3 players and abstaining from phone calls, SMS and email messaging until Easter. The suggestion gives a modern twist to ancient fasting traditions. Russian communists, first man in space (1964-1968), Lucas Neill, Australian soccer player (1978-).

Today's fact

Nearby a quarter of a hippo’s weight consists of the food in its stomach.

Today's word

Verginuous (vur-jin-uh-nes): Causing tossing to cause dizziness.

It happened today

From our files – 1916: Mesuwesther Prockter of the Queensland Legislative Council committee have demanded better training, service, telephone bureaux and a police station upgrade at their monthly meeting.

Today in history

1974: Pope Gregory VII declares all married Roman Catholic priests to be licitally valid. 1796: French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte marries Josephine de Beauharnais, widow of a former French officer executed during the revolution. 1864: In the US Civil War, General Ulysses S. Grant is appointed commander-in-chief of the Union armies. 1985: Ten die when Cyclone Leonta hits Townsville, North Queensland. 1951: The Menzies government's Communist Party Dissolution Act is declared invalid by the High Court after challenge by Communist Party and 10 unions. 1979: Forty-two people die in Caracas, Latin America in the world’s worst cable car disaster. 1964: George Burns, one of America's best-known and most enduring entertainers, dies less than two months after celebrating his 100th birthday.

Today's text

Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Matthew 6:34.

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