

Bristol Apparel may be on brink of closing

LEE DAVENPORT
Bristol Herald Courier

Bristol Apparel could be on the brink of closing, according to union officials who met with employees Tuesday to discuss the possibility of what the company has termed a "permanent" shutdown.

"I've worked here 26 years and I've never seen anything like this," said an employee, who declined to give her name, of a so-called "warn notice" distributed to all 170 employees on Friday. "I don't know what we're going to do."

In the notice, Lou Perlman, president of Bristol Apparel's parent company, House of Ronnie Inc., said a lack of orders for women's sportswear from buyers such as Wal-Mart and Victoria's Secret would leave the plant with no work to do by October.

"The layoffs are permanent in that they are currently expected to last longer than six months," Perlman said in the letter. "Prospects of securing additional business is not promising."

The letter also called declines in business "dramatic and substantial."

The work stoppage would be complete by Nov. 4, employees were told in the notice, a copy of which was obtained by the *Bristol Herald Courier* from plant employees.

A spokeswoman at the company's New York City offices said Tuesday that Perlman declined further comment.

The demise of Bristol Apparel — formerly Bristol Lingerie — would make it the third manufacturer in town to shutter its plant this year. Raytheon, once one of the city's largest employers, and Kern's Bakery closed earlier in 1998.

Bristol Apparel Plant Manager Linda Venable called talk of a shutdown "a quasi-true rumor." She said no definite answers about the plant's fate would come for another week, and she said layoffs on smaller scales have come almost every year.

"It's basically a yearly thing, and every year the rumors get big-

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ger and bigger," she said. "We've done this every year for about 10 years now, but it gets worse every time. The layoffs get longer and longer."

Connie Brown, assistant regional director of the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees, said the union would "negotiate the closure if in fact it does close."

"We would negotiate any severance and see that they get their economic benefits," she said.

Brown defended the company, saying it has tried its best to keep its employees in the face of stiff competition from overseas plants that churn out goods at rock-bottom prices. Some of those plants, according to the union, pay their workers as little as 6 cents an hour.

"The union has been fighting the situation for a lot of employers," she said after Tuesday's meeting at the plant. "This company is one of those companies that has really fought hard to try to stay open."

Rumors of a shutdown began to circulate three months after Bristol Apparel streamlined its operations, consolidating a plant on Bob Morrison Boulevard in Bristol Virginia and another in Johnson City into a building on Weaver Pike that had been occupied by another clothing maker.

That company, Bristol Jeans, shut down a year ago. At the time, Bristol Jeans officials blamed cheap foreign labor for driving the business under.

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