

BUSINESS

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Monday: Money & Careers

Shares of Chiquita Brands International and Dole Food Co. continue to languish even as the United States prepares to slap tariffs on European imports retaliate against banana-import rules.



It has been three months since Dillard's Inc. shuttered the Fairfield headquarters of Mercantile Stores Co. Inc. and released about 850 workers. For many, the loss of their jobs has been a particularly bitter experience, as they seek new work and battle the anger and resentment of being let go. Four workers have agreed to share their stories. The Enquirer will follow their progress through the year.

Ex-Mercantile workers wrestle with anger, uncer

THE CINCINNATI ENQUIRER

Mercantile: Former workers wrestle with anger, uncertainty

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 meant to them. They wanted to know more about Dillard's, which had become a shadowy villain enlivened by rumors.

"One of the most pervasive of the change-related fears is the fear of the unknown," said Beverly Smallwood, a Hattiesburg, Miss., psychologist who specializes in corporate change and restructuring. "When the real announcement comes, the fear becomes specific."

In the Mercantile case, the fear involved job loss. About 1,000 people were forced to start over. Many, like Ms. Gaydosh, are self-supporting and advancing in years. She fears she will not recapture her former salary, \$8.50 an hour.

"I'm right now living on borrowed money, and for me, that's a real hardship because it has to be repaid," said Cheryl Clevenger, 50, who began working for Mercantile 12 years ago, two years before her husband died. The mother of four last worked in Mercantile's quick-response department.

Ms. Clevenger had hoped to find work by now earning \$12 to \$15 an hour, her range of salary at Mercantile. Now she's realizing she might have to settle for \$8 or \$9 an hour.

Likewise, friend Bobbie Venturini, 47, took a pay cut to work again. But she thinks her job as assistant at Schlemmer Associates industrial parts in Springfield Township presents opportunities to grow.

"I didn't think I'd ever do this again," Mrs. Venturini said of job hunting. "I thought I would retire there," at Mercantile.

Clouding the tasks at hand — to move on with life — are continuing issues with Dillard's.

"Nobody's been there to answer our questions. It's no question that people are getting mad," Ms. Clevenger said.

Dillard's did not return calls for this story.

The deepest cut

Despite the reasons for the anger, the long-run effects of such hard feelings could be more devastating than the deal that put so many people out of a job.

Ms. Blum's temper went hair-trigger in the early days after the dismissal, and she couldn't sleep.

"The least little thing threw me off," she said.

work" and "tough decisions." The latter involves the realization that the women might each have to take a job that pays less than what Mercantile had paid.

As for the former, hard work, Ms. Gaydosh and Ms. Blum have enrolled in computer courses to expand their knowledge — and to eliminate a reason for not getting a job. All but Mrs. Venturini have enlisted with several job placement agencies.

Is that a light?

Ms. Clevenger and two of her friends still have to grasp Dr. O'Grady's fourth rung on the crisis ladder, what he calls the "where do I hang my hat?" stage.

For Mrs. Venturini, that question was answered when she took a job. It soon will be replaced by the fifth, "unexpected pain" stage. There, she might wrestle with feelings of being overwhelmed.

For the others, the decision "who to work for" has become a compromise formed by personal limitations and the passage of time.

► Ms. Clevenger's severance lasts through April, but she took the savings in a lump sum to pay off bills. This made things easier early on, but now, she can't collect unemployment until the end of April.

She sent out more than 40 resumes, went on 10 to 15 job interviews and turned down a few entry-level positions because the pay was too low. If she isn't working by February, she'll be in trouble, she said.

"I don't know how to let the person I'm interviewing with know I feel like I can do anything," she said.

► Ms. Gaydosh's severance totals \$4,000, and she's begun drawing on it for support. Her health care expires at the end of the month.

Like Ms. Clevenger, she realizes she might have to settle for less pay. She's been on about eight job interviews but has not had an offer. Computer software training courses, taken with Ms. Blum, start this week.

"I thought I'd get a job right away," she said.

► Mrs. Venturini found a job but was not in such an urgent situation. She uses her husband's medical coverage and figured she could look through January before resorting to a placement agency.

"I was pretty lucky compared to some of the other ones," she said.

She experienced a few hardships: