

Laid-off IQT workers take aim at Ottawa

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Cindy Rupert and her husband Bob Brigaitis worked as operation managers for IQT in Oshawa until they were laid off earlier this month, along with 1,200 workers in Canada.

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Staff Reporter

Bob Brigaitis and his wife, Cindy Rupert, considered themselves an IQT family.

As operation managers, they spent ungodly hours at the job, working weekends and evenings to file reports.

Their kids, Cameron, 9, and Kennedy, 11, grew up listening to conference calls on the drive to school. They visited the Oshawa call centre on hot summer days to hand out Popsicles to employees. And they affectionately referred to the staff as “mommy’s secret agents.”

But it all came to a halt when Brigaitis and Rupert were abruptly laid off on July 15 along with 1,200 workers in Ontario and Quebec without notice, wages or severance pay.

A week later, the anger toward IQT co-founders David and Alex Mortman is being redirected to the Canadian government for what employees say is a system ill-equipped to handle the needs of the suddenly unemployed.

“We have a month (of savings) to keep us afloat and then we’re done. We’ll lose our house and our cars,” said Rupert, fighting back tears. “My kids are asking me for two dollars to go to the store but I don’t even know where my next two dollars is coming from.”

Under federal law, workers can claim up to \$3,400 in unpaid wages, severance and vacation pay under the wage earner protection program (WEPP). The only catch is the company must file bankruptcy, something that IQT Solutions has not done.

“In our experience, a lot of companies don’t go through with formal bankruptcies . . . they simply shut down,” said Mary Gellatly, a legal worker with Parkdale Community Legal Services.

Gellatly said this leaves workers without financial support, which is problematic since low-income employees often live from paycheque to paycheque.

Following the layoffs, provincial Labour Minister Charles Sousa also demanded reform to unemployment laws.

“I urge your government to consider expanding the scope of the WEPP beyond bankruptcies and receiverships to include all situations,” he wrote to federal Labour Minister Lisa Raitt. “More and more often, we hear of companies refusing to go through proper channels of declaring bankruptcy, leaving workers with no financial support.”

In an interview, Raitt said that legally “it is the bankruptcy application that starts the whole process” and unfortunately, that’s the current policy.

On Friday afternoon, about 100 former IQT workers attended an information session in Oshawa on employment insurance and training opportunities.

Many stormed out exasperated saying that none of the options provided the immediate help they needed.

Employment Ontario is offering the Second Career program to former workers, which provides up to \$28,000 for skills training to laid-off employees. In order to be considered high priority, one needs to be unemployed for 26 weeks.

Although interested, Rupert said her family couldn't afford to be without income for that long.

IQT Solutions still owes her husband \$37,000 in total, she said.

Employment insurance is also pending for the laid-off workers because they did not get records of employment from IQT, Brigaitis added.

"We're receiving the same script and it is leading us nowhere. Everything is on hold for everybody."

Meanwhile, one person is still focused on the Mortmans: Kennedy, Rupert's 11-year-old daughter. She's started a letter to Alex Mortman.

"Dear Mr. Mortman, my name is Kennedy Rupert," the letter reads. "And I'm sure you recognize my last name."

Kennedy plans on finishing it this week.

