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BABINDA

Sugar mill closure a 'black day' for workers

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BABINDA survived Cyclone Yasi, but it might not survive the closure of Maryborough Sugar.

The small town, 30km north of Innisfail in north Queensland, thought that the worst was over when Yasi headed inland last Thursday morning.

But more bad news hit yesterday, when the owners of the biggest employer in town, the sugar mill, announced that it would be closing.

The town is still without power as a result of Yasi and much of the cane in fields around the town has been flattened. While Yasi did not inflict as much physical damage on Babinda as much as other towns in the area, the closure of the mill hits the town in human terms, with the loss of 50 jobs in a town of only 1000 people.

But the mill's new owners insist the devastation wrought by Yasi on the sugar cane farms in the area was not the main reason it closed.

Since January 1 the mill has been owned by a company that is a joint venture between Maryborough Sugar and Bundaberg Sugar, and its chief operating officer, Mike Barry, said that over the past decade, the mill had lost a lot of suppliers to banana farms and timber plantations.

"The timing is unfortunate, and we appreciate the fact that the announcement has come off the back of the cyclone," he said. "But we had a board meeting yesterday (Monday) and made the decision

then to close the mill. It's a been a long-term thing. Having made the decision, we felt it only fair to tell the workforce of our plans."

But the workforce, many of whom are the sons of men who also worked in the mill, didn't seem to appreciate the gesture.

Yesterday was the first day back at the mill for the workers after Yasi, and following news of the closure, many of them gathered at the Babinda State Hotel.

Julian Camilleri, the local Australian Workers Union representative and one of the mill's longest-serving workers, said many of its employees were over 50 and unskilled.

"In this community, there's nowhere to find another job," Mr Camilleri said.

"It's an older workforce and a lot of people I represent don't have modern skills, like how to use a mobile telephone or a computer. What are they going to do?"

Three generations of 54-year-old John Martinod's family have worked at the mill, and the cane train driver has worked there himself for almost 40 years.

"We just went through a cyclone, and now this," he said.

Babinda State Hotel publican Kitty Anning said the mill's closure would hurt the town's small businesses.

"It's a kick in the guts for this town," Ms Anning said, surveying her pub.

"This will have a huge impact on the businesses, we depend on the mill — it's the town's biggest employer.

"It's a black day for Babinda."