



Former Feltex workers (from left) Teresa Rybka, Teresa Smolinska, Nadia Bradic, Zofia Nadja, Maria Zaleski, Ermelo Varelo, Zofia Kloss, Grazyna Kowalski and Florica Stoican.

PICTURE: PENNY STEPHENS

# Carpeted workers breaking down the barriers

By **LARRY SCHWARTZ**

TERESA Smolinska had no problem finding a job when she came to Australia from Poland 30 years ago.

"It was not hard," said Ms Smolinska, who found work in a carpet manufacturer's yarn mill in west suburban Braybrook, where the workforce was then mostly a mix of Yugoslavs, Italians and Poles.

"I no speak English. Not even Yugoslav. I remember my boss tell me like this, 'Teresa, you no have to speak English. You have to work. You have to understand the job.'"

Almost three decades later, she was among 165 staff called to an October 2005 meeting at which they were told they would

lose their jobs in 18 days. "Now it's different. Everywhere you need to speak . . . and read and write English," she said.

Most of these men and women — almost equal numbers of each — were aged 40 or more. Few had resumes, computer skills, interview confidence or understanding of the workings of employment and training-related bureaucracies. They had little or no work experience outside of the company and poor English.

They had at least one advantage over others in a similar predicament — a special arrangement in which the employer, Feltex, agreed to set up a fund to be used with a State Government training scheme for training for the mostly migrant workers.

Ms Smolinska said the program gave her a first chance "to go to school" in Australia. She completed courses that would enable her to work in the gambling and security industries, found work cleaning apartments, and plans to do another course in aged care.

"It's very unique," said Dot Peterson, a former Feltex leading hand and now an organiser with the Victorian branch of the Textile Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia, which proposed the arrangement and co-ordinated the program. "I don't think we've ever seen any other company in our industry ever do that."

Feltex covered half of the \$150,000 spent on courses completed by the workers over the 12-month period; the rest was

paid by the State Government.

The union contacted 121 of the 165 after the program ended last October. While many had retired or chosen not to seek another job, 66 (54 per cent) were working; 39 full-time and 27 part-time. Only 12 were still unemployed and looking for work. Common jobs were in textiles, transport, warehousing, cleaning and aged care.

A small group of former Feltex workers attend a weekly English class conducted by the TCFUA at Victoria University's Sunshine campus.

Maria Zaleski now has a full-time job in a plastics warehouse. She had spent 24 years at the factory. It was her first job. "We just felt shocked," she remembers.

"It was like a morgue," says

TCFUA project officer Maree Keating, who visited the site on several occasions in past days.

"Everyone felt betrayed," says a worker in an oral history called *Finding the Threads*, published by the union.

"As each new reduction in tariffs has been announced since 1989, a corresponding wave of middle-aged manufacturing workers have been cast out of their long-term, familiar workplaces into the unknown," wrote Keating, who is researching a doctorate at Monash University's Global Institute, in the latest issue of educational journal *Fine Print*.

*Finding the Threads*, published by the TCFUA, sells for \$10 from [mkeating@tcfvic.org.au](mailto:mkeating@tcfvic.org.au)