

✓CF Watsonville - General 1980-1990

RP 4/24/90

Green Giant workers prepare for worst

By EMILIO ALVARADO
STAFF WRITER

With the future of the frozen food industry in Watsonville looking somewhat shaky, Green Giant plant workers are preparing for the worst by drawing up a plan they hope can be set in motion if the company shuts down and moves to Mexico.

About 75 cannery workers met Sunday morning at the Watsonville Senior Center and put together a set of proposals they hope will ease the economic hardships they will face if they find themselves out of work. Pillsbury-Green Giant has said it intends to move its broccoli and cauliflower lines from the Watsonville plant to Mexico. The company has said it would not close the Watsonville plant, but has not yet announced how it plans to use it. Rumors have abounded that the Watsonville plant will be closed.

If Green Giant does close its Watsonville plant, workers want the company to pay for job training for up to two years and health insurance for one year, with the option of workers' paying the premiums during the second year.

In addition, they will ask for three week's pay for every year that full-time and part-time employees have worked at the plant. They also want the company to set aside \$100,000 to be used to

operate a network that would help workers find job training and employment.

The recommendations will be presented to their union representatives when they meet tonight, said Manuel Diaz, a member of the Cannery Workers Organizing Project.

There has been no strong indication yet as to which way Bush's decision will swing, but Rios said he was convinced that the tariffs would be lifted and workers should be prepared to see the plant move to Mexico.

Jose Ramirez, who has worked at Green Giant for the past 16

Panetta, D-Carmel Valley, has told him that the logic in Washington for lifting tariffs is to stimulate the Mexican economy by having American companies invest there. One of the latent effects of this economic injection is that Mexico will rely less on its exportation of drugs to the United States, Rios said.

"Believe or not, that's what he said," Rios said, setting off a round of laughter. One man in the back of the room said to the person sitting next to him, "Why don't they do something about the drug problem here?"

Several people at the meeting complained that their union officers from the Teamsters Local 912 have not kept them informed about negotiations they are conducting with company officials. Lauro Navarro, a member of the Cannery Workers Organizing Project, the group that organized the meeting, said their union representative, Sergio Lopez, was on vacation.

"It's not time to be on vacation," said Navarro, who has worked at the Green Giant plant for 13 years. "He should be here, at the front of our struggle."

The cannery workers will schedule other meetings in the next few weeks. At those meetings, they said they would iron out specific recommendations they will give to their union negotiators.

'The Pajaro Valley is in a crisis. The sad thing is that many people don't realize that.'

— Councilman Oscar Rios

Watsonville City Councilman Oscar Rios, who runs the cannery workers project, told the workers that preparedness was urgent, because it is likely that President George Bush will permit the lifting of tariffs on frozen foods from Mexico. In doing that, Bush would decide the fate of about 400 workers at Green Giant.

"The Pajaro Valley is in a crisis," Rios said. "The sad thing is that many people don't realize that."

For the last few months, the federal government has been investigating the possibility of lifting the 17.5 percent tariff. A recommendation will be made to Bush, who will then decide whether to lift the tariff or not.

years, agreed with Rios.

"If tariffs are removed, it opens the flood gates and all the American companies will go to Mexico," Ramirez said. "They want to go to Mexico not to help Mexico; they want to go to Mexico to exploit it."

Economics is at the center of the frozen food industries' interest. In Mexico, companies will pay workers an average of \$3 a day and have much lower costs for energy and water than at U.S. plants.

Earlier this month, the Watsonville City Council and the Monterey County Board of Supervisors voted to oppose any reductions in the tariffs on imported frozen vegetables.

Rios said U.S. Rep. Leon