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# Laid-off workers unhappy with results of retraining

By SUSANNA HECKMAN  
STAFF WRITER

The county-administered federal program to help laid-off Pillsbury-Green Giant workers get jobs is exaggerating its success, some workers said yesterday.

About 50 laid-off workers attended a public hearing yesterday called by *Trabajadores Desplazados*, or *Displaced Workers*, a group not affiliated with Teamsters Local 912.

The hearing at the Marinovich Park community center was heavily attended by television news crews. Mike Kostyal, a coordinator for the *Desplazados*, said yesterday's hearing was called to counter a press release sent out last week by the Santa Cruz County Human Resources Agency.

The release said the county's CareerWorks program — the job-training program administering Job Training Partnership Act funds — had received an award from the National Association of Counties.

The award honored the CareerWorks program for its level of coordination of union, company and worker input in designing the retraining program, and its success as measured by the number of graduates of the program who were employed.

About 39 people have completed various tracks in the retraining effort, and of those, 35 are employed at an average wage of \$7.87 an hour.

While that means that more than 85 percent of those who completed the program have jobs, it's a small number compared to the 250 or so who were eligible for retraining. Only 166 people have enrolled in the program, which extends through next summer.

The press release provided most of those figures. But Kostyal said it created a false impression that everything was fine, when "The reality is that people are having a very difficult time getting jobs."

"This is very much a model for what's in store for other laid-off workers in the future," he said, especially if the United States comes to a free-trade agreement

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'The reality is that people are having a very difficult time getting jobs.'

— *Activist Mike Kostyal*

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with Mexico and more companies shift jobs south.

Those testifying yesterday expressed disillusionment and anxiety about their futures.

Concepcion Castillo, a displaced worker who said she had just completed 10 months of retraining, said her unemployment insurance is at an end, all her bills are late, and when she applies for jobs, she is told she needs at least a year's experience.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," she said through an interpreter. "JTPA said they would help us with everything, all our necessities, but they haven't given us one-fourth of a cent."

Another speaker, Maria Leon, said, "From the day the company told us that we were going to lose our jobs, they said we'd find other jobs that would pay as much, and that was what they told the public, but it was a lie."

Yolanda Navarro, one of the most active of the *Desplazados* group, said a labor/management committee set up to coordinate the program leans in favor of the company.

"When we go before them and ask them to go to the company for us, they won't go," she said, referring to an attempt to get severance pay increased. "The company is 100 percent behind them."

Others expressed frustration with the length of time required for education when there's little money coming in. Maria Salazar, who said she is taking a class through the retraining program, said the class is almost over and she hasn't seen much progress in herself or her classmates.

"Rent doesn't wait, food doesn't wait," she said.

Another speaker said he'd always dreamed of being a teacher, although he doesn't have even the equivalent of a high school diploma. He said he was discouraged when he heard through the program about teachers getting laid off, too.

Four county workers attended the hearing, and stood in the back to listen to testimony. Afterward, Will Lightbourne, the director of the county's Human Resources Agency, said he understood the displaced workers' anger, and only hopes it doesn't prohibit them from staying enrolled in the program. A number of them have dropped out when the chance of a job came up, even if it was a very low-paying job, he said.

It's a tough decision for them, he said, because "We can't guarantee a safety net for them."

"The sense of betrayal is very acute ... And this is a difficult economic time to face being in the job market."

Lightbourne said he didn't know whether anyone had raised the workers' expectations at the beginning of the process about what the program would be able to do, as some of the speakers had indicated.

But, he said, people who started out with no English skills whatsoever do need more time to learn, and the county is working with the Department of Labor to see whether parts of the program could be extended beyond next summer.

Along with help in the form of referrals, job clubs, child care and transportation, the program is providing some rental assistance to about 28 displaced workers while they take classes. The \$70,000 rental-assistance program supplies cash when someone is threatened with foreclosure. It was funded by grants from the Greater Santa Cruz County Community Foundation and Pillsbury. But that money will run out, too, Lightbourne said.

"We're not here to make the company look good or bad," he said. But it looks like the two are aligned because Pillsbury kicked in some of the money, he said.