

Laid-off workers plan Green Giant company boycott

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A coalition that includes a group of Watsonville residents laid off by Pillsbury-Green Giant is launching a boycott of the company and two of its sister companies.

The coalition, including Trabajadores Desplazados — which means “Displaced Workers” — and a number of labor, environmental and church groups are acting in response to the layoffs at Watsonville’s Pillsbury-Green Giant plant, which scaled back its work force from a seasonal high of 550 to a permanent 150.

The company laid off about 300 workers in January and offered several dozen more early retirement. The move was part of an international restructuring, which included a doubling of the work force at the company’s plant in Irapuato, Mexico.

Trabajadores Desplazados, the National Toxics Campaign, the California Public Interest Research Group, and the Northern California Interfaith Council on Economic Justice and Work called a news conference in October to announce the forming of their coalition.

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lition.

The coalition vowed to take some sort of consumer action, although it wasn’t clear until now whether that would take the form of a boycott.

The groups held a press conference today to draw attention to their plan.

Earlier this year, some of the coalition members had picketed Burger King in Watsonville, because the fast food chain is owned by Grand Metropolitan, Pillsbury’s parent company.

The coalition is now calling for consumers to boycott Burger King and Haagen-Daz ice cream, another Grand Met subsidiary, along with Pillsbury-Green Giant.

Pillsbury owns several brand-name products besides Green Giant frozen and canned vegetables. It also owns Hungry Jack dough and pancake mixes, Totino’s and Jeno’s brand frozen pizzas, and Joan of Arc canned beans. A spokesman for the coalition, Mike Kostyal, said some of the group would be calling on local grocery stores to stop ordering those products.

Grand Met owns dozens of other subsidiaries, from Alpo Petfoods to a number of dairy companies in Europe, and the companies that make or import nearly every brand of scotch, whisky, gin, vodka, tequila and bourbon that Americans are familiar with. It also owns a number of brands of

beer and wine, from Inglenook to Almaden vineyards.

Kostyal said, however, that the coalition is asking consumers to boycott only Pillsbury, Green Giant, Haagen-Daz and Burger King.

“I can’t see J&B Scotch drinkers giving it up for the boycott,” Kostyal said. “Haagen-Daz and Burger King are very familiar to people.”

Kostyal said the coalition’s demands include the restoration of the jobs at Watsonville’s Green Giant plant, or an extension of severance pay, medical insurance and retraining for three years; higher wages for workers at the company’s Mexican plant, and the right to organize a union there; and a sizable contribution to a water and sewage treatment system in Irapuato.

He said the coalition plans to contact union halls, church groups and environmental organizations across the United States about the boycott.

The boycott does not have the support of Teamsters Local 912, said local president Sergio Lopez.

“We certainly understand the frustration and the anger that the displaced workers feel,” he said.

But, he said, he didn’t think the union or the workers had the resources to fight the huge Grand Met.

He also said the union has to consider the 190 workers it represents who are still at the plant.

“We would be putting ourselves out of work,” if the boycott was successful, he said.