

✓ Employment

# Watsonville workers protest planned layoffs

Santa Cruz Sentinel — Tuesday, Oct. 23, 1990—A-3

By DENISE FRANKLIN  
Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — Employees of the Pillsbury/Green Giant plant here are protesting this week at various businesses that are owned by Grand Metropolitan, the company that will be laying off 370 workers at its frozen food plant in January.

About 50 employees marched around the Burger King restaurant on Freedom Boulevard at the lunch hour Sunday, according to manager Melody Keener. The restaurant is owned and operated by local businessman Arnold Hyatt, who purchased the Watsonville franchise from London-based Grand Metropolitan.

is not one of the approximately 20 percent of Burger Kings that are owned and operated by Grand Metropolitan. He announced this at a recent City Council meeting, but said it didn't seem to make a difference to the protesters.

"Of course they hurt my business," he said of Sunday's protest. "I am in support of the fact that they are fighting for their jobs. I understand that. I am in support of their predicament. But they should understand who they are picketing."

But Jim Brough, a supporter of the protesters, said the fact that Hyatt owns Burger King franchises didn't make any difference. "We can't go to London to protest," said Brough. "We (Hyatt) came across as a small, underdog businessman."

'Of course they hurt my business . . . But they should understand who they are picketing.'

— Burger King owner Arnold Hyatt

but he owns 13 Burger Kings and Burger King is the most visible Grand Metropolitan holding in this area."

"Our protests are not aimed at the workers or their unions at these businesses," Brough said. "They are just informational. We want the public to be aware of the situation."

Brough said he was glad the protest hurt Hyatt's business. "Maybe he will get the word out to Grand Metropolitan," he said.

Employees also plan protests this week at three other businesses where products made by the British corporation are sold — Nob Hill Foods, Liquor Barn and Albertson's. They will march in front

of Nob Hill Foods in Watsonville today from 6-7 p.m., in front of Liquor Barn in Santa Cruz from 6-7 p.m. Wednesday, and in front of Albertson's in Watsonville from 6-7 p.m. Friday. They will return to Hyatt's Burger King from noon to 1 p.m. Thursday.

Grand Metropolitan makes such products as Smirnoff vodka, Gilbey's gin, J&B scotch, Ski yogurt and Haagen Daz ice cream.

Pillsbury/Green Giant is laying off the majority of its workers here because the frozen food company is moving almost all of its food processing lines to Ohio and Mexico. The cost of labor in Mexico is an average of more than 50 percent less than the Watsonville plant, and labor is one of the

main reasons for the move.

The size of the local plant's work force will be reduced to 150 workers, but \$3.4 million will be spent to modernize the equipment, according to plant manager Duane Larson.

But that is no consolation to the hundreds who will be laid off. Some 80 percent of them are minorities, particularly Hispanic. More than 75 percent did not graduate from high school, and most have limited job skills. The average age of the workers is 45, with 45 percent limited in their English and 60 percent women.

Pillsbury/Green Giant has started a job retraining program and expects that 80 percent of the laid-off workers will find new jobs.