



Kurt Ellison

Maria Zamudio, left, and Josefina Chavolla picketed Burger King in Watsonville Saturday.

## Group of laid-off workers keep pressing Green Giant boycott

By SUSANNA HECKMAN  
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A group that has called a boycott of Pillsbury-Green Giant products has been staging weekly pickets of Burger King on Freedom Boulevard — the most visible effort in its dogged organizing campaign.

Trabajadores Desplazados, or Displaced Workers, was formed to protest Pillsbury-Green Giant's terminating nearly 400 permanent and seasonal jobs at its Watsonville plant in January.

It has called for a boycott of not only Pillsbury dough products and Green Giant packaged vegetables, but also of two of Pillsbury's sister companies — Burger King and Haagen Daz ice cream. All of the food companies are among those owned by Grand Metropolitan in London.

Pillsbury-Green Giant maintains that it has acted responsibly above and beyond both the legal and industry norms.

The layoffs were a business decision motivated mainly by a need to cut distribution costs, company officials say. They say expansions at the company's plant in central Mexico and in Ohio are part of an overall restructuring plan to better serve the people who buy frozen vegetables — people who live on the East Coast.

Here in the Pajaro and Salinas valleys, which have experienced a number of abrupt closures with no severance or retraining at all, the

company says, it gave several months' notice, negotiated a \$2 million severance package, and set up a center on its grounds for a government retraining program.

It also invested \$3.4 million in upgrading the Watsonville plant, it says, a sign it is planning to stay for the long haul.

Teamsters Local 912, which represents the workers at the Watsonville plant, denounces the layoffs as an example of corporate greed, but has not joined in the boycott campaign, pointing out that it still represents the 150 or so employees who remain.

But other critics of the company, including some laid-off employees, continue to kindle the flames; Mike Kostyal, a coordinator for the Desplazados, said about 30 people attend Desplazados meetings regularly.

The critics charge that the company shifted jobs to Mexico and is exploiting its workers there; the company counters that it pays above-average wages at its Mexican plant.

The Desplazados have persuaded four grocery stores in Watsonville not to re-order Pillsbury-Green Giant products, Kostyal said — Freedom Foods, Daylite Market, La Flor Del Valle and Happy Burro Market.

The statewide League of United Latin American Citizens, or LULAC, voted at its annual convention last week to support the boycott. Locally, groups that have

pledged support include the Community Action Board of Santa Cruz County, the Resource Center for Nonviolence, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and Steamfitters Local 393.

Kostyal said since the group began campaigning for the boycott more than a month ago, it has distributed 9,000 pieces of informational literature about it and has received 3,000 pledges to join the boycott. The networking to get the word out is national and international, he said, extending to Canada and Mexico and soon to Europe.

And while the Desplazados point to several small changes they say prove the company is worried, Pillsbury officials brush off such suggestions.

The company has not officially responded to the boycott, and spokesman Terry Thompson said last week that Pillsbury is "not formally tracking" the boycott, as it would if there were "more evidence of activity."

Thompson said he was curious about why Pillsbury was being targeted. Simplot, which shut down two Salinas plants late last year and laid off up to 800 workers, now processes virtually all of its broccoli in Mexico.

Kostyal said one reason for not focusing on Simplot is that it doesn't have its own label and can't be targeted by the average consumer.