

Future bleak for Watsonville jobless

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WATSONVILLE — The unemployment rate here is more than twice the national average, causing many to question whether laid off frozen food plant workers will find new jobs despite an extensive retraining program.

Watsonville's unemployment rate was 14.1 percent in December, the latest period for which figures are available, according to Tad Kimoto, manager of the Watsonville office of the California Employment Development Department. That's more than double the 6.1 percent national average, and is higher than Santa Cruz County's 8.7 percent rate and California's 7.1 percent rate.

The high jobless rate casts doubt on the optimistic outlook by Pillsbury/Green Giant

officials who have opened a job-assistance center for the 270 workers laid off in January. Company officials estimate 80 to 85 percent of the workers will find new jobs locally.

Skeptics include some workers and Teamsters Union Local 912 officials.

Of numerous newly laid off workers interviewed by the Sentinel, none had new jobs lined up or knew what they will do when severance-package money runs out.

Sergio Lopez, secretary-treasurer of Teamsters Union Local 912 — which represents the laid off workers — pointed to Watsonville's high unemployment.

"I'm apprehensive there aren't any jobs available for them," Lopez said Friday. "I'm hoping that won't be the case. I'm hoping the economy turns around."

Joe Fahey, president of the local Teamsters, agreed, saying, "I just don't see where in the county they're going to work."

Jim Brough, a friend of many of the former plant workers — and a member of the Committee for Displaced Green Giant Workers — added, "Job retraining is just a scam unless there are jobs out there. With no jobs available, there's no alternative but to leave this community."

Both Brough and Lopez said they know former workers who have already moved from the area. Most have moved to the Central Valley where the cost of living is cheaper.

Of course, moving would be the last resort for others.

"We're going to try to do our best to stay here," said Lauro Navarro, who had worked

at the plant 13 years.

Others are too old to be retrained for different jobs, said Albert Mendez, a 13-year employee of the plant. Still others, simply aren't thinking that far ahead, said Brough's wife, Maria, another member of the Committee for Displaced Green Giant Workers.

"I've only heard of one person who was optimistic," she said. "Some are just letting the time go by; others don't want to think about it."

Esther Tabancay, a 21-year employee who opted for retirement, worries about her friends and former co-workers.

"They don't know anything but frozen food. They're used to good jobs all year-long. They have friends and families. What are they going to do?"

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