

VCF Watsonville RP 4/27/91

Watsonville's pajama factory closes; more layoffs

By SUSANNA HECKMAN
STAFF WRITER

Watsonville's "pajama factory" — Colshire of California, a 40-year fixture here — has closed, leaving more than 20 employees without jobs.

Another 30 have been laid off from the factory since January, and will be included in a union benefit package, said Ken Smith, of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union Local 792, which represents the employees.

For the workers, the layoff presents a dilemma that has become all too familiar to Watsonville residents. Many of the laid-off seamstresses worked for years at the

factory. They are mostly Latinas who don't speak much English. Several of them said yesterday they don't have high school diplomas, and most of their co-workers don't, either.

Although they are highly skilled at sewing, Smith said, many of the workers "don't have marketable skills so that they can just turn around and compete in a shrinking market. It's a severe dislocation."

Colshire was a subsidiary of the Michael Berkowitz Co. in Weston, Conn. Company president John Berkeley is scheduled to release a statement and answer questions about the closure Monday.

In an interview last summer, Colshire plant manager Eugene Sabatula said Colshire had specialized in bras and other lingerie in recent years, hoping to gain a special niche in the increasingly competitive domestic textiles industry. At the time, the plant employed 65 seamstresses and pattern cutters, and was hoping to hire about 20 more.

In its heyday during the 1960s and 1970s, the factory employed 150 people.

Sabatula declined to comment for the most part yesterday, referring questions to Berkeley.

"Things were looking so good (last summer,) and then they just

started to bottom' out," Sabatula said. "Since the earthquake, things had just gotten bleaker and bleaker, then the decision was made."

The company is reportedly moving its operations to an existing Berkowitz-owned plant in Uniontown, Pa. It was unclear, however, whether the closure here would involve an expansion of jobs or operations in Uniontown.

Several seamstresses said yesterday that they were angry about the layoffs. Maria Garcia, who had worked for eight years at the plant, said she earned minimum wage, \$4.25 an hour, plus whatever

See LAYOFFS page 2 ►

Spectra-Mat lays off 15

Spectra-Mat Inc., a Watsonville company that manufactures electronic parts, laid off 15 of its 93 employees this week.

Sandra Petznick, Spectra-Mat's personnel manager, said the 16 percent reduction in work force was the first layoff at the company in at least two decades.

The layoffs were spread out through all the company's areas, she said. Those who lost their jobs will be given assistance in resume-writing and

referrals to other companies, she said.

The company makes cathodes, which are heating elements for microwave tubes. The end-products vary, she said, and they include radar equipment and other high-tech instruments.

Over the last year or so, sales of that kind of instrument have declined, she said, causing a ripple effect that Spectra-Mat is now feeling.

—Susanna Heckman

LAYOFFS

► From Page 1

piece work she could complete.

Working as hard as she could and not stopping even to go to the restroom, she said, she could earn \$7 an hour, which was considered on the high end of the scale there.

Elsa Camacho, who had also worked for eight years at Colshire, described an increasingly oppressive atmosphere, in which seamstresses were yelled at to work faster and faster.

"(The manager) wanted quality and quantity — for \$4.25 an hour," she said.

Other seamstresses, including Delia Saldaña and Tomasa Diaz, both 16-year veterans, and Delia Teran, an eight-year worker, said they churned out thousands of silky bras and other items a week, which were sold under major labels such as Victoria's Secret.

They said the unemployment insurance most of them are eligible for, just over \$100 a week, will not be enough to support their children.

When the company announced the layoffs, they said, there was no severance pay and "no thank-you."

ACTWU Local 792's Smith said he is being honest with the laid-off workers in telling them that he doesn't expect Berkeley will agree to any kind of severance pay.

"I totally understand their feelings of frustration at not being able to get severance pay out of the company, and I'm disappointed, too," he said.

The union made a "reasonable" proposal for severance pay, Smith said, taking into consideration that the company is small relative to, for example, Pillsbury-Green Giant, which put together an extensive severance package for

Watsonville residents it laid off this year. The offer was flatly turned down, Smith said.

In the mid-1980s, Colshire came under new management and at the same time became what is known as a "contract shop." That meant that instead of making its own "Lady Berkleigh" pajamas and clothes, it would contract its services out to any company that needed a quick sewing lot done.

Smith traces some of the changes to the switch to a contract shop, because it meant that instead of relying on long-term relationships and commitments for a label or a market, the factory was forced to compete with other, non-union shops in Los Angeles, Mexico and elsewhere.

Management began coming to the negotiating table and saying it couldn't compete, Smith said, and needed to forestall negotiated pay raises, which employees agreed to for a time. Finally, the company told them that if it didn't get a 10 percent across the board wage cut, it would close in January.

"The employees had reached a point where they didn't feel they could give anything else up, and that putting in 20 years of work at a place is worth something," Smith said. They voted "resoundingly" to turn down the pay cut.

While apparently management blames the workers for "shutting the plant down," Smith said, the union "totally respects (the workers') decision and considers it courageous."

The union is counseling workers on pension and insurance benefits, and is working on getting the workers' vacation compensation and union benefits within the next few weeks, Smith said.

There is no legal means to force the company to make severance payments, he said, but the union is continuing to press the issue with the company, he said.