

Rumors still afoot about Green Giant Rios urges plant to stay

By LANE WALLACE
STAFF WRITER

Watsonville City Councilman Oscar Rios has heard Pillsbury Green Giant officials say there are no plans to close the company's Watsonville plant, but he's not so sure it will remain open.

"I'm not saying they're going to close it, but all the signs are pointing" to some kind of move, Rios said Saturday during a meeting with 35 Green Giant workers at the Watsonville International Senior Center.

"All we are saying is 'stay,'" Rios said after the meeting, in which he reported on his trip earlier this month to frozen food-plants in Mexico, including the Green Giant plant in Irapuato.

Pillsbury Green Giant announced in January it will move its cauliflower and broccoli production lines, a large portion of its Watsonville operation, to Mexico by the end of this year. The company said it plans to put in another kind of food processing in the Watsonville plant, but won't say yet what that product will be. Green Giant employs up to 555 people at peak times in Watsonville.

At Saturday's meeting, workers said some of the equipment for

Workers worry about their jobs

Elias Ruiz is concerned about the possibility of Pillsbury Green Giants's Watsonville plant closing, not so much for himself, but for his fellow workers.

Ruiz, 62, said if he's laid off he can take retirement.

"I can still work at other jobs part time," said Ruiz after listening to City Councilman Oscar Rios talk about community concerns that the plant may close.

Ruiz said he's concerned that people who haven't reached retirement age will have to find new jobs. And even if the plant doesn't close, Ruiz said, he's afraid the work force might be reduced.

As a janitor, Ruiz makes \$7.95
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processing broccoli had already been moved. When the question came up as to whether the company will leave Watsonville entirely, a third of the workers said they felt a move is coming.

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"I want the company to stay here," said Rios, who heads the Watsonville office of the Cannery Workers Organizing Project, a non-profit agency. The agency financed his trip to Mexico.

Rios was scheduled to meet this morning with Duane Larson, manager of the Watsonville Green Giant plant, and is planning more meetings with the workers and the public.

"Our research says Green Giant is not losing money in Watsonville," said Rios, who was accompanied on his trip to Mexico by Bill Segal, a UC-Berkeley economics lecturer who lives in Watsonville.

Because of the low cost of labor in Mexico (\$3.96 a day at Green Giant in Irapuato), some U.S. frozen-food companies are going to Mexico. Line workers at the Watsonville Green Giant plant make about \$7.50 an hour.

Rios said Grand Met, the London company that bought Pillsbury Green Giant last year, is trying to increase its frozen-food profits to "shore up its losses at Burger King."

Grand Met's holdings include Burger King, Alpo dog food, Gilbey's gin, Smirnoff vodka, and Almaden wines.

Segal, who spoke briefly during the meeting, said, "Burger King

is in trouble. People don't want to eat there."

One worker suggested boycotting Grand Met products, an idea Rios said he supports.

"We're not against Green Giant making profits," Rios said. But, he said, the Watsonville plant is "a vital force in the local economy."

Rios said the Green Giant issue will come up during the fourth annual Cannery Workers Conference, scheduled for 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sunday at the Watsonville Senior Center, 114 E. Fifth St.

Rios said he's also planning a meeting with Green Giant workers and public officials at noon April 8 at the International Senior Center, 127 E. Beach St.

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an hour, 45 cents more than line workers. He's been at the plant 13 years.

Hilda Magdalena, a line worker at Green Giant for 16 years, said if she's out of work it would take her up to a year to find a comparable job. She said she has been going to school to earn her GED diploma.

Many workers at Green Giant have been there for 20 to 30 years, Magdalena said.

—Lane Wallace

REFERENCE

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