

Green Giant plans retraining program

By SUSANNA HECKMAN
STAFF WRITER

A consultant for Pillsbury-Green Giant has already launched parts of a "career transition" program for about 400 workers at the Watsonville plant who will be laid off between November and January.

Michael Hickey, president of Hickey & Associates, a human resources firm in Maryland, was in town last week to work out more details of the plan.

He said he was hired to create a model for the transition programs, which will then be tailored to the work forces at the Pillsbury plants affected by the restructuring — plants in Fridley, Minn., Springfield, Ill., and Terre Haute, Ind., as well as Watsonville.

In Watsonville, workers voted June 16 to approve a \$2 million severance package, including the retraining, after the Teamsters Local 912 leadership recommended it.

Pillsbury informed the workers of the layoffs April 30, but it is not yet known who will go and who will be among the 150 or so who will stay. As part of the agreement between the company and the union, employees over the age of 55 have until Aug. 3 to decide whether they will take early retirement or bid to keep

their jobs.

In the meantime, Hickey said his company has launched the initial stages of the 18-month transition program, including worker surveys and personal counseling. The next step will be to get a center open at the plant, he said, which should happen by late this month.

A committee made up of six members — three representing company management and three representing the union — will oversee the transition program. The committee will be headed by Claire Biancalana, a dean of instruction at Cabrillo College.

The committee will get some technical advice from the Private Industry Council of Santa Cruz County, Hickey said. On a day-to-day basis, the center will be run by a director who has not yet been hired, and will also be staffed by local, bilingual counselors and teachers, he said.

A core element of the program, Hickey said, will be classes in English as a second language. He estimates that half the Green Giant workers speak only Span-

ish. While 18 months probably isn't enough time to learn English, he said, "it's a heck of a good start."

"In December 1991, (when the program ends,) there will still be people needing training programs. But at least they'll already be plugged in to programs like the EDD (Employment Development Department)," he said.

Although much of the funding and training for the employees' transition will come from the government and the union, along with the company, Hickey maintained that it's still a remarkable plan for Pillsbury to commit itself to.

"It used to be that when you had these situations, the government would come in and the company would go out," he said.

The transition program in Watsonville will also include elements such as skills training, helping people get the equivalent of a high school diploma, helping them start their own businesses, and completing labor market surveys to find out what kinds of

jobs are available in the community.

It will also coordinate child care, transportation, and other logistics.

To fill in what many wage-earners lack — a business network that they can milk to find jobs — the program will include job and career fairs, and the like. Plans include making a video about the desirable work ethics and abilities of the Green Giant employees, which will be shown to local businesses.

Hickey is optimistic that everyone who becomes involved in the transition program will find another job.

"It's not easy, but the important thing is that people need to feel good about themselves," he said. "People need to look forward and be positive."

Hickey said he has worked with thousands of displaced employees throughout the United States, some who don't face the same obstacles Green Giant's workers face, and some who do.

"We have found that they do have a future," he said.