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A look at how laid-off Green Giant workers are faring



Kurt Ellison

Lucina Nolasco gets pointers on soldering from instructor Delia Medina.

This is the first of two stories on how some of the hundreds of workers laid off in January by Pillsbury/Green Giant in Watsonville have been coping with their situation.

By LEE ROMNEY
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Lucina Nolasco considers herself lucky. On Jan. 18, she lost her job of 17 years with Pillsbury-Green Giant; less than a month later, she was enrolled in an English class, working toward her General Equivalency Diploma and receiving electronics training at Watsonville's CET Job Training Center that may help her find another one.

Although feeding five boys — one of them bound for college in Chico — on her husband's field-worker salary of \$350 a week and her meager unemployment check has not been easy, her main worry now is overcoming an old fear.

Nolasco hasn't driven a car since she crashed her husband's 1963 Chevy Impala into the wall outside their Watson Street home

in 1975. She used to walk to work, but if she lands an electronics job making circuit boards or fixing TVs and VCRs, Nolasco said it will probably mean commuting to Salinas or San Jose.

"She's been afraid to drive ever since she crashed," explained her 14-year-old son, Rigoberto, a freshman at Watsonville High School.

Six months after a branch of the county Human Resources Agency launched the Job Assistance Center for the hundreds of Pillsbury-Green Giant workers laid off in January, 152 of them have signed up, and are studying everything from cosmetics to electronics, clerical skills, auto mechanics, English, and basic math and reading. While some may be on their way to new careers, others are discouraged and despondent.

Their anger over the lay-offs, fear of economic hardship, and frustration with the government funding and assistance bureaucracy, have turned in part against the retraining program designed to help them. Some feel the com-

pany's contribution of some funding and classroom space at the plant has made the county effort partisan. For others, returning for English and basic-skills classes to the cannery where they spent years working is a humiliation they cannot bear.

"I didn't go because I didn't want to see the cannery," Nolasco said. "I spent so many years of my life there. I couldn't bear to see that the company left because they wanted more money. It would be like a humiliation to return."

For 39-year-old Nolasco, it was her own quick thinking that got her a place at vocational school instead.

"They didn't offer me anything. I decided myself," she said with gentle conviction, surrounded by her sons in the small living room whose walls bear their photos and trophies. "People who didn't ask — they didn't get anything."

Nolasco said friends of hers who are just taking English classes are

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frustrated because a knowledge of English alone does not guarantee a job. Many can't rely on a husband's salary and must live on their unemployment checks. Returning to the Green Giant plant, where English as a Second Language and basic skills are being taught in trailers provided by the company, just makes them feel worse, she said.

Nolasco said those who are now trying to get into CET have been told by county counselors working at the plant that there are no more places, but she is skeptical. Her skepticism betrays the suspicion that many workers, overwhelmed by the bureaucracy of public assistance, are now directing at the county-administered program, funded largely through the federal Department of Labor's Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA).

"Losing a job is like death. At first you deny that it happened and then you get extremely angry," said Jim De Alba, staff to the county Private Industry Council and executive director of the employment service Careerworks, the division of the county Human Resources Agency that has set up the retraining program.

"People are looking at something to be angry at. Maybe anger isn't easily given to a Grand-Met corporation that's based in London."

De Alba said some workers think of the retraining program as an arm of Pillsbury, an interpretation he disagrees with adamantly.

"We're walking in there to provide a service, and we've been able to leverage some Pillsbury funds," he said. A Maryland consultant hired by Pillsbury-Green Giant to help set up the retraining program had no real authority and acted in an advisory capacity only, De Alba said. De Alba said his program would be happy to serve those laid-off workers who feel uncomfortable returning to the plant at another location.

In addition to those studying at

CET and Cabrillo College, program participants are attending five other vocational schools from Watsonville to Gilroy and San Jose.

Green Giant is providing office space, classroom space, computer, phone and FAX time, as well as funding the positions of Job Assistance Center Director Maria Lopez, and a peer counselor — former laid-off worker Raquel Gonzalez — whose position was requested by other program par-

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ticipants. Both women began work June 17.

The company has also provided \$35,000 to match an equal grant offered by the private Greater Santa Cruz County Community Foundation — the largest grant that foundation has ever approved. And the United Way of Santa Cruz County has kicked in \$10,000 for those Green Giant workers whose homes were damaged in the October, 1989, quake. The combined funds will help a limited number of laid-off workers with housing expenses when they are distributed in July.

Whether or not the shuffle is linked to criticism, there has been some recent restructuring at the plant's Job Assistance Center. Three county workers have left recently, including Kathy Zwart, a liaison between county and company, who transferred to another county job, and Jana DuRon, the program's director, who resigned last month. DuRon's salary was paid by Pillsbury.

Those who remain involved are trying hard to address participants' concerns.

"For those still going through basic skills, we're looking at what works and what doesn't work,

refine it," De Alba said. Careerworks has gone beyond its mandate in trying to locate money to help the Green Giant workers, he added.

While Nolasco is pleased with her training, she is convinced she will never find a job comparable to her old one.

"There's no work like I had," she said firmly. "They paid me well. I had good insurance. Work like that, I'm not going to find."

And the thought of leaving Watsonville — where she has lived since she left the Mexican state of Michoacan 19 years ago — in search of work is out of the question.

"We'll never think of leaving here," Nolasco said.

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