

EMPLOYMENT Uncertain future

Trouble looms for workers facing layoffs in Watsonville

By KEITH MURAOKA
Sentinel staff writer

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WATSONVILLE — Many of the 382 Pillsbury/Green Giant workers who will lose their jobs Jan. 18 have no idea if and when they will find another job.

That sad fact comes despite projections from officials of the frozen-food processing company, which is shifting most of its production to plants in Mexico and Ohio, that 80 percent of the workers will find new jobs locally.

Pre-layoff assistance has already been provided by the company, and a \$1.4-million job-retraining program will begin after Jan. 18, said Kathy Zwart, retraining program coordinator for the county Human Resources Agency.

Officials of Teamsters Union Local 912, which represents the workers, are proud of what they describe as an "unprecedented" severance package of pay and benefits worth more than \$2 million that — for the first time — includes seasonal workers.

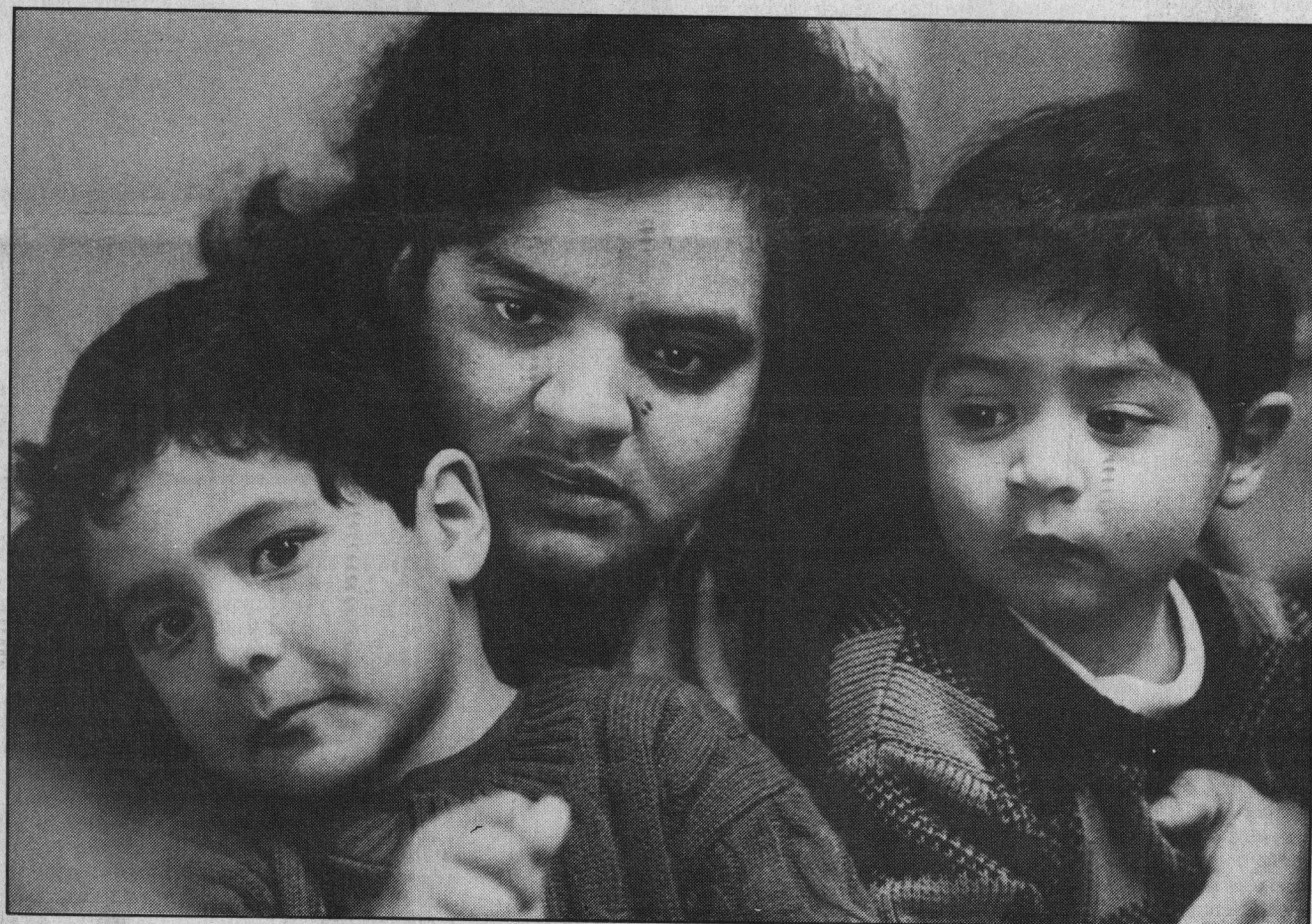
Full-time employees will be given one week's pay for every year of service, and two weeks pay for every year after 20 years, said Teamsters' secretary/treasurer Sergio Lopez. Seasonal workers will get half a week of pay for every year they've worked, up to 10 years, and three-quarters of a week for every year up to 20 years. Medical benefits are also included.

But, Lopez said simply, "Three months down the road, they're (workers) going to be in trouble." Teamsters' president Joe Fahey added, "There's no severance package that replaces someone's job."

According to Lopez, some workers have already moved from the area. He's heard of people moving to the Central Valley where the cost of living is cheaper.

Moving would be a last resort for

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Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Yolanda Navarro is hoping that her family won't be forced to leave Watsonville in order to find work.

Workers feel angry, betrayed

By KEITH MURAOKA
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WATSONVILLE — One underlying sentiment prevails when it comes to next week's layoffs of 383 workers at the Pillsbury/Green Giant frozen-food processing plant here: anger.

The workers, whose average length on the job at the plant is 14 years, are angry and feel betrayed.

Lauro Navarro, who has worked for the company for 13 years, said, "Green Giant is a good company, but now they're going for more money. They are making money no matter how much they hurt us."

Navarro's wife, Yolanda, who has worked for Pillsbury/Green Giant for 14 years, agreed. "We were making money for them. We are the ones who make their money. And this is how we're treated."

Anolfo Gomez, another soon-to-be unemployed worker, called the layoffs an "injustice," saying, "The workers are the ones that have helped them make their fortune. Added fellow worker Maria Collazo, "When they lay you off, they don't care."

Lauro Navarro added, "The system should be more balanced. We've worked more than half our lives for

them (Pillsbury/Green Giant). The poor ones only get poorer."

Pillsbury/Green Giant, which is owned by Grand Metropolitan, a British corporation, will eliminate 382 of 500 jobs from its Watsonville food-processing lines. That work will be moved, instead, to Mexico and Ohio. Company vice president of operations Michael Shaeffer has already conceded he would be "less than honest," if he didn't agree that the lower wages in Mexico were a contributing factor in the decision to drastically reduce Watsonville operations.

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Layoffs

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Gloria Zamudio, who has worked at Pillsbury/Green Giant for 12 years. Yet, she said she would sell her house and pack up her three children if she didn't find a new job.

Selling a home and cashing in on equity isn't an option for others. Mikaela Savala, who is a 17-year employee and has four children, said, "We don't have anything; we rent."

For Lauro and Yolanda Navarro, a husband and wife who have both worked at Pillsbury/Green Giant for 13 and 14 years, respectively, it's a double-whammy. They have five children, and also may be forced to move from Watsonville.

"We're going to try to do our best to stay here," Lauro said. "After all, this is our home. We have friends and family here."

"But," added Yolanda, "we may have to move."

Of the numerous Pillsbury/Green Giant workers interviewed by The Sentinel, none had new jobs lined up or knew what they would do when severance-package money ran out. All planned on taking part in the retraining program.

Yolanda would like to become a beautician, while Lauro wants training to become a carpenter. Savala hopes to get work as a seamstress, and Zamudio has painted houses and wallpapered before.

"Many people are too old," said Albert Mendez, who has worked at

the plant for 13 years, of the job retraining.

Maria Collazo, a two-year employee, agreed, saying, "What about the ones who worked there 20 or 30 years, and didn't have a chance to go to school? What are they going to do?"

Esther Tabancay is one of those workers Collazo described. Having turned 65 last month and having worked at the plant for 21 years, Tabancay opted for retirement.

"I'm too old to start over," she said. "If not for this, I'd still be working. But, at least for me, the timing came at the right time."

Tabancay also worries about her friends and former co-workers. "They don't know anything, but frozen food," she said. "They're used to good jobs all year-long. They have homes and families. What are they going to do?"

Problems abound for the soon-to-be unemployed.

The average age of the workers is 45, with 45 percent limited in the English language, and 60 percent are women. To top things off, the recent spell of freezing weather has raised havoc in the local agricultural industry and could prompt more layoffs.

"As much as I pray, I don't know what will happen to these people three months down the road," Teamsters' Lopez said. "I'm pessimistic (about many workers finding new jobs) because of the state of the economy and the recent freeze." Added Teamsters' President Fahey, "I just don't see where in the county they're going to

work."

Janna Duran, director of the newly opened Pillsbury/Green Giant Job Assistance Center, conceded, "It's going to be a challenge because it's a very tough (job) market out there. But, we need to stay very positive."

Duran remains optimistic, saying that she's had potential employers come on site several times, and had others call in job orders.

Meanwhile, the workers and others are bracing for the worst.

The Community Action Board and Second Harvest Food Bank are working with the Committee for Displaced Green Giant Workers to establish a food pantry where the newly unemployed can get free food. Also, a public-assistance workshop will be held at 7 p.m. Tuesday at the International Senior Center, 127 E. Beach St., where information will be provided on such things as Medi-Cal, Medi-Cruz and the food-stamp program.

Christine Johnson-Lyons, administrator for the Community Action Board, fears that many of the Pillsbury/Green Giant workers won't be eligible for public assistance "because benefit programs are so restricted for the very poor."

She said the 382 soon-to-be unemployed only adds to on-going unemployment problems that include recent layoffs at Watsonville Community Hospital and the Santa Cruz County Metropolitan Transit District.

"This trend does not bode well for the community at all."

Anger

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Local plant workers average around \$8 an hour. Wages in Irapuato — a city of 500,000 in central Mexico where operations will be transferred — are about \$4-per-day. Teamsters Union Local 912 president Joe Fahey, which represents the workers, said, "Pillsbury/Green Giant stands to gain over \$5 million a year in labor savings by going to Mexico."

To make things worse, support-

ers of the workers maintain the health and safety of American consumers will be jeopardized because produce grown in Mexico is not subject to the same stringent pesticide regulations as those in the U.S.

Those supporters, which include the Committee for Displaced Green Giant Workers, Teamsters Union Local 912, Northern California Interfaith Council, California Public Interest Research Group, National Toxics Campaign and Migrant Media Productions, recently screened a 15-minute video shot in central Mexico last year allegedly depicting widespread contamination, including the use of wastewater to irrigate crops.

Terry Thompson, vice president of public relations for Pillsbury/Green Giant at its Minneapolis corporate headquarters, vehemently denied charges questioning the quality of its Mexican produce. He

said in the eight years Pillsbury/Green Giant has had a processing plant in Irapuato, the company has "never been accused of any violations" by either the U.S. Food and Drug Administration or custom officials.

"We don't like distortion of facts," Thompson said, pointing out that Pillsbury/Green Giant will retain nearly 150 full-time employees in Watsonville to handle brussels sprouts and spinach lines.

The loss of nearly 400 local jobs will have far-reaching effects throughout south county, according to the Committee for Displaced Green Giant Workers. They estimate that for every job lost in the food-processing industry, at least three more jobs will be lost in the community.

Studies have shown that each 100 jobs lost costs a community \$3.75 million annually, according to the workers' committee.