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Labor
Research
Review

FIGHTING SHUTDOWNS

... In Sunny
California

... And in
Philadelphia

Unemployment
Makes Us Sick

plus: Debate—
the IAM 100
Contract 'Model'



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FIGHTING SHUTDOWNS in Sunny California

□ Alison Givens

Contrary to the belief that only the Northeast is suffering as the sunbelt expands, California is being wracked by severe economic upheavals. High levels of unemployment persist in many areas of the state, fed by a constant stream of closures and layoffs in all sectors of the economy. Between 1981 and 1983 over 1,000 California firms closed permanently, and more than 165,000 jobs were lost. Another 414,000 workers lost their jobs as the ripple effect hit suppliers and small businesses.

In response to the growing number of plant closings, local coalitions have formed throughout California, including major industrial unions, churches, and diverse community organizations. These coalitions have developed a variety of responses to closures: organizing to force corporate responsibility in dealing with workers; finding ways to keep plants open by using worker buyouts or product diversification; pushing for legislation; promoting military conversion, and increasing labor-community input into economic planning.

Whether in a legislative fight or a local response to save jobs in one plant, the California coalitions demonstrate that workers faced with plant closures are not helpless, that workers, unions and communities can fight the economic upheavals they face.

Though most of these efforts have failed to stop plants from closing, the California movement has grown increasingly sophisticated and creative with each new struggle, often winning important benefits for dislocated workers and establishing precedents for future efforts. As United Electrical Workers organizer Henry Unger, a veteran of

Alison Givens is the pen name of a woman who works closely with labor-church coalitions in California to develop alternatives to plant closings. She is co-chair of the Economic Development Task Force of the California Coalition Against Plant Shutdowns (CalCAPS). Parts of this article are based on descriptions of CalCAPS activities written by various members of the CalCAPS coalition, including Kathy Seal of the Los Angeles CAPS.

several plant closing fights, says: "Each succeeding struggle against plant closures will be played out differently. But one important lesson remains for them all: Analyze the enemy and develop a game-plan based on the workers' strengths and management's weaknesses."

This article describes California's labor-church-community coalitions and the variety of tactics they've used to either stop closures or to gain benefits for workers and their communities. Members of California's coalitions have learned from experience how to move beyond response at the factory gates to act *before* plants close. Networking to share experience and support, the coalitions have learned the importance of developing alternatives to job loss and of becoming involved in creating new jobs in the community.

Organizing Coalitions Against Shutdowns

Ad hoc coalitions were first formed around specific plant closings at major facilities, with local unions reaching out for community support. As local coalitions developed a more permanent character, they began linking up with other local coalitions across the state and with larger networks both nationally and overseas.

One of the earliest efforts was led by the United Electrical Workers (UE) in the Los Angeles area in 1980. When General Electric announced it was closing its flat iron plant in Ontario, California, the union worked with community organizers to form a broad-based coalition. Money was raised, petitions circulated, and a large newspaper ad appeared in the local paper urging the entire community to write John Welch, G.E.'s chairman of the board. The coalition focused on exposing that G.E. was closing a profitable plant to move it overseas.

The campaign attracted widespread community support, and the state funded a feasibility study on the possibility of a worker buyout. In the end, G.E. sold the plant to another company, which plans to reopen it with fewer workers and lower pay. Although this particular fight was lost, it demonstrated the potential of labor-community coalitions. It is also credited with playing a central role in the UE's national contract bargaining with G.E., when the union won a provision requiring six months advance notice of any plant closing or product line movement.

During the UE-G.E. struggle, United Autoworkers Local 216 at General Motors in South Gate started the Coalition to Stop Plant Closings in Los Angeles. The coalition formed in response to the massive layoffs that presaged the total shutdown of the GM plant in 1982. The local union contacted other unions, community and religious groups to join the coalition, and sponsored a successful march and rally in South Gate in 1980.

At the same time, the Oakland-based Plant Closures Project formed

California showed that over 50% of the affected workers were minorities. For thousands of black, Hispanic and women workers, employment in unionized industrial sectors has been the primary opportunity for economic advancement.

Major closings and relocations are now affecting workers in clerical, high technology and service jobs as well—areas unprotected by unions. A recently released study by the Plant Closures Research Group at the University of California in Berkeley shows that, since January 1980, 43,000 high-tech workers lost their jobs in 147 closings and mass layoffs. Furthermore, new employment generated by recent growth in California is increasingly stratified, with many low-wage, low-skill jobs and a few high-wage, high-skill positions.

Thus, economic recovery and new business growth are not resolving concerns regarding the quality and stability of the jobs created, the social and human costs of deindustrialization, attacks on union labor, and the emerging pattern of economic growth. These conditions pose new challenges to protect job rights, unions and communities.

Since 1982, the CalCAPS network has helped to coordinate community-based responses to plant closings and unemployment. The following labor-religious-community coalitions make up the backbone of CalCAPS: NorCAPS (North Counties), REDCAPS (Humboldt County), Central Valley Labor Coalition (Modesto, Stockton), Plant Closures Project (San Francisco Bay Area), and LACAPS (Los Angeles).

Representatives of local coalitions and affiliate groups meet several times each year to share information and plan state-wide approaches to the problems of economic dislocation. This sharing of information enables local groups and unions to use a variety of tactics to fight plant closures and to be creative in developing responses based on what has been learned from experience throughout the state. Since its inception, CalCAPS has maintained a broad outlook for building the movement against plant closures. CalCAPS Task Forces work for legislation, community-based economic development, direct action in opposition to individual closures, and national and international responses to the problem of capital flight.

Networks extend nationally to maximize the ability to address plant closing issues. CalCAPS participates in and supports two networks: the National Network on Plant Closures and the Interfaith Economic Crisis Organizing Network. These networks provide support for national plant closing legislation, HR 2847, and for exchange of information. In addition, California coalitions try to link with organizations overseas, including visits to labor and progressive coalitions in Europe and a recent Asia tour by members of the Oakland Plant Closures Project.