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WEST COAST FIGHTBACK ON PLANT CLOSINGS

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On November 6-8, over 550 people gathered in Los Angeles to attend the Western International Conference on Economic Dislocation. The conference brought together unions, religious groups, and community organizations for a three-day discussion on how to fight the epidemic of plant closings and layoffs now affecting California and the West Coast.

•Labor endorsers of the conference included the California and Oregon Federations of Labor, the International Woodworkers of America (IWA), and district bodies of the ILWU, the United Electrical Workers (UE), the Machinists, and the United Auto Workers. Trade unionists from Mexico also participated.

## The Plant Closings Crisis

According to California's Employment Development Department (EDD), over 220,000 workers have lost their jobs in the past 36 months because of closings and layoffs. Workers in the auto, steel, lumber and rubber industries have been particularly hard hit. Major shutdowns have included Firestone (1470 jobs), Good-year (1580), General Motors South Gate (3600), and Ford Pico Rivera (2300) in the Los Angeles Area; Mack Trucks in Hayward (1200); Colgate-Palmolive in Berkeley (400); Firestone in Salinas (1600); and Piper Aircraft in Santa Maria (1000).

The end is not in sight. General Electric's flatiron plant in Ontario, Kaiser Steel's Fontana Works, and the Spreckles Sugar Refinery in Salinas are scheduled to close within the next few months. And EDD officials recently told a legislative committee that "another wave of plant closings or major layoffs" is likely in the near future as the recession deepens.

## Workers and Communities Hard Hit

At the conference, workers spoke about the grim personal stories behind these statistics. Ralph Miranda, from the IWA Local in McCloud, told of the shuttered main streets in the small lumber towns which dot Northern California. Twenty years ago, over 500 mills operated in the area. Today, only 20 are still open. In many communities, unemployment is now over 50% and, in just two years, IWA has lost nearly one-third of its members. "The shutdowns have put our whole town out of business," Miranda said.

Others spoke of increased drug and alcohol problems, family break-ups, and premature death. "In the four years before the shutdown at Mack," former UAW steward Louis Quindlen reported, "we had only one death among our members. In the four months since the shutdown we've had four. This is not just an economic issue. It's a moral issue. The lives of our brothers and sisters are at stake."

Dolores Howard, a member of UE Local 1412 in Ontario, reported on the turmoil the General Electric's closure announcement has caused. "We have 250 workers over 50 with back injuries. Where are they going to find jobs? What is going to happen to these families?"

## Community of Chaos

The keynote speakers at the Conference re-emphasized the chaos caused by plant closures and argued the need for alternative policies. Barry Bluestone, of Boston

College, stressed that plant closures are a national problem affecting all regions. He said that this wave of plant closures is part of the general attack on the gains of organized labor and the cutbacks in local revenues and non-defense programs. In an era of high global overcapacity in certain industries (auto, steel and increasingly in micro-electronics), management's strategy is to shift its capital to increase profits and put pressure on workers' standards of living.

Bluestone noted that management now has the technology to be "community free" - to play off workers and areas against each other. "It's their power to move. It's our power to organize - everywhere," he concluded.

Harley Shaiken, an MIT researcher, argued that the problem will worsen in the near future because of a "massive infusion of new technology." This new technology, based around the micro-processor, threatens to eliminate jobs, degrade working conditions, and further facilitate global production. A "technology bill of rights" is needed, Shaiken argued, which will link the introduction of new technology to social and community concerns.

Other speakers from church groups and labor unions spoke of the need to develop new economic, social and legislative policies to deal with plant closures. Political support for this fight came from state legislators Bill Greene and Maxine Waters and from Congressman Gus Hawkins.

#### Local and State Action

After the main Conference ended, a smaller group of about 100 people met to develop plans for follow-up organization and action. The group decided to form a statewide steering committee composed of representatives from local action coalitions around California and from the border area. In six months, this group will develop proposals for a formal statewide organization.

The follow-up sessions also defined several major project areas of work over the next six months. These include working for state plant closings legislation in California, developing international links with workers in Mexico and other countries, strengthening contacts with other plant closing coalitions in the U.S. and supporting alternative economic development strategies.

Participants also agreed that state and local groups should support direct action campaigns by workers and communities to reverse individual company shutdown decisions. "If there's one thing that would really help build this movement, it's a victory," said Rick DeGolia, former chief steward at the now closed Colgate-Palmolive plant. "If we could show them in just one place that we can stop a plant from shutting down, it would give our movement a terrific boost."

Unlike many conferences, this one ended with a clear plan of action. The broad labor, community, and religious coalition at the Conference and the follow-up sessions defined a strategy of direct action, legislation, alternative economic development policies, and national and international coordination and set up an interim organizational structure. It is now up to people at the local level to take up the campaign and to begin to deal with the chaos caused by plant closings.

- Anne Lawrence and Phil Shapira

(The Western Conference on Economic Dislocation may be contacted c/o Church and Society, 2808 Altura Street, Los Angeles, CA 90031. In the Bay Area, contact the Plant Closures Project, 433 Jefferson Street, Oakland, CA 94607, 415-834-5656.)

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