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Fighting Shutdowns in Sunny California

Abstract

[Excerpt] Contrary to the belief that only the Northeast is suffering as the sun-belt 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.

Keywords

labor movement, layoffs, unemployment, California, union

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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.

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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

as a grassroots challenge to plant closings and their impact on jobs, families and communities in the San Francisco Bay area. Similar labor-community organizations developed in the Northern California timber areas and in the agricultural valley, where the president of the United Rubber Workers Local 726 headed a Central Coast Coalition.

In November 1981 at least five local plant closure coalitions attended the Western International Conference on Economic Dislocation held in Los Angeles. This conference was sponsored by the church and attracted over 500 labor, religious, community and academic activists from the western United States and Mexico. Here they formed links and networks with other activists from the western states. Several days of workshops, forums and late night meetings led to the formation of the California Coalition Against Plant Shutdowns (CalCAPS)—a state-wide network of coalitions, organizations and individuals actively working to fight plant closings and economic dislocation in California.

Networks begun here formed the basis for responding to the massive closings that occurred in the next few years, as many of California's major industrial plants closed in the auto/aerospace, rubber/plastics, food processing, non-electrical machinery and steel industries.

In California, like the nation as a whole, manufacturing has been especially hard hit by the recent wave of plant closures. Large firms account for over half of the jobs lost. Industrial restructuring has hit unions especially hard. Since 1980 the UAW has lost over 26,000 jobs in California, the Teamsters at least 10,000, the Steelworkers about 7,600, and the Machinists over 5,250. Research also suggests that minorities are disproportionately affected by plant closures. A sample study of 25 plants closed in



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.

Unions and Churches Take the Lead

The most important achievement of California's plant closing coalition is to organize diverse labor, church and community groups with interests in stopping plant closures. California's labor-church coalition has learned to look to the community for support, for workers and unions are part of the community, and plant closings hurt not only workers but the rest of the community as well. When jobs are lost, local government is faced with the dual burden of dealing with an increased need for social services while at the same time losing tax revenues once paid by the company and its workers. Plant closing coalitions include not only unemployed workers, unions, and churches but also local government representatives and small businesses who lose customers when plants close in their areas.

This organizing did not come easily. Some of the many unions involved had not worked together before. Church groups are often not aware of labor's perspectives and concerns. But both union and church representatives have learned to work together for concrete goals when specific plants close.

CalCAPS' response to closures has evolved from an initially reactive response to major closings in auto, steel, rubber and canning to a more comprehensive proactive approach. Experience with numerous closings demonstrated that they could not respond just at the factory gates, that labor needs new tactics to effectively respond to plant closings and job loss. Organizing and responding before plants actually close allows labor to gain support to stop decisions that are not in the community interest and also to look at options such as worker ownership, new products and markets and other changes to make the plant viable and save jobs. Recently labor has begun to seek industry-wide solutions to problems such as how to revive the North Coast timber counties or how to save jobs in the unionized machining industry. Whatever the tactic used in labor-community organizing, responses in one plant or community often lead union-community coalitions to become involved in larger issues of labor input into policy and investment decisions.

Unions have led the efforts—promoting plant closure legislation, organizing legal battles against closures and, most importantly, providing direct action support for labor struggles to stop disinvestment and plant closings. In the last three years, California coalitions have included representatives from the Steelworkers, Teamsters, Machinists, United Electrical Workers, Autoworkers, Service Employees International Union and the United Food and Commercial Workers.

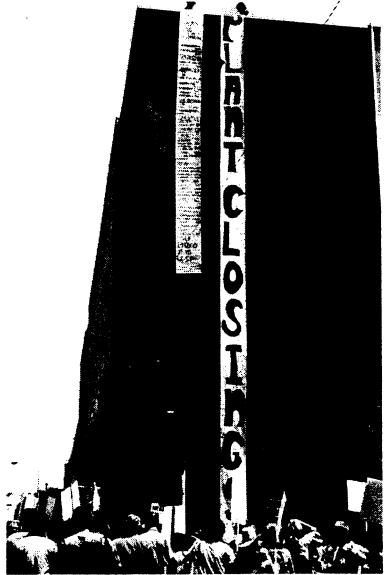
In March 1983 several local coalitions and unions cosponsored a conference held by the National Center for Employee Ownership of San Francisco on "The Union Role in Saving and Creating Jobs."

The conference brought together hundreds of unionists and community organizers to discuss ways that labor could gain more control over investment in communities to save and create jobs. The gathering included speakers describing how their unions had saved jobs.

The religious community plays an important moral role and mobilizes communities to fight closures and to demand corporate responsibility. Church representatives are actively involved in the coalition in religious communities on the West Coast. NCIC's Board of Directors represents 14 Protestant and Roman Catholic jurisdictions in Northern California.

The Interfaith Council recently held a conference on "Work, Theology and Action," which brought 150 representatives of church agencies and congregations from Seattle to Los Angeles together with CalCAPS union activists. A similar event was held for the Presbyterian Church last year. Following these conferences, a Theological Statement on Economic Justice, including recommendations for action, was sent to 3,000 congregations. The Interfaith Council has also supported local strikes and has worked closely with and Unemployed Service and Action Center, which was spun off from the Oakland Plant Closure Project.

Many times in the last two years labor and church have led local coalitions to organize marches, protests and meetings with management or local government to protest closings and demand corporate responsibility in dealing with displaced workers.



Responding to Closings

Much of the plant closing coalition is built through grassroots organizing to stop particular closings. Goals and actions vary depending upon the situation. The following pages describe how various unions have responded to closings. Efforts at General Motors in Los Angeles, in Northern California's timber mills, at Spreckels Sugar and Libbey Owens Ford Glass in the agricultural valley, and at Simpson-Duravent and Caterpillar in the San Francisco Bay area illustrate the importance of linkages, finding allies, organizing, and applying a variety of creative tactics to respond to closings.

G.M. Van Nuys

In 1982, LACAPS began working with UAW Local 645 to build a grassroots coalition and use labor-community organizing tactics to save the one remaining auto plant in California, the General Motors Van Nuys plant. The plant employs over 5,000 workers.

In October 1982 the company announced that it had excess capacity and that the Van Nuys plant was on the "danger list." The plant is one of the last large plants in L.A. not engaged in military production. Over 50% of the workers are Latino, so this struggle is aimed at saving some of the last decent-paying jobs for Latinos in Los Angeles as well as preserving the Latino political institution, UAW Local 645.

LACAPS used a variety of tactics to seek General Motors decisions that favor the community. LACAPS helped to mobilize the community to support the local union's demand that the company make a long-term commitment to produce cars at the plant. The union has threatened to boycott General Motors if these demands are not met, a tactic which could be effective considering that southern California is the largest new car market in the United States. The campaign is supported by a large portion of the minority and religious communities.

Since GM has not announced closure, the lead time for organizing provides a greater chance of keeping the plant open. Victory here would save 5,000 jobs directly and many more indirectly. It would demonstrate that people, when mobilized, can force corporate responsibility. It would be a victory for Latino civil and economic rights, and saving a large non-military plant could bring labor closer with the peace movement in Los Angeles.

California's Timber Counties

In Northern California's timber counties two coalitions, NOR-CAPS in Siskiyou County and RedCAPS in Eureka, focus on mobilizing against closings and helping to provide basic services to laid-off workers.

Northern California is an isolated rural area long dependent upon timber as its economic base. The region has declined since 1960, when Humboldt County alone approximately 11,000 workers were employed in 500 mills. By 1982 the number of mills had fallen to less than 20. Causes for this decline include depletion of the primary natural resource, consolidation of timber holdings, and increased automation. Difficulties faced by organized labor are compounded by recent company demands for concessions from what's left of the timber workers.

Both CalCAPS coalitions have organized numerous conferences and rallies to bring people together around issues of plant closings and

union busting. In Humboldt County, an unprecedented local labor-community movement was initiated last fall to support striking workers at Louisiana Pacific Corporation's Coastal Division in Samoa, California.

In the timber counties, local coalitions must focus on providing emergency services to unemployed workers. Now, facing economic devastation and massive unemployment, coalitions are moving to unify and strengthen rural organizing and planning activities through a state-wide rural coalition to develop a cohesive approach to combat dislocation and reemploy timber workers.

California's Agricultural Valley

Similarly, massive economic transition has occurred in California's agricultural counties. In the last few years closures in Salinas alone have displaced more than 7,000 workers.

One of the first closures, Firestone Tire, led to the formation of a Central Valley Coalition in 1980. The group's co-chair is President of United Rubber Workers Local 726, which lost 1400 jobs when Firestone closed. Lessons learned in the Firestone closing helped Central Valley Coalition build networks and seek early warning of closings to help save jobs when possible. Two major efforts occurred here to identify other products that companies could produce to keep workers employed.

In one major closure, CalCAPS and the Glass and Ceramics Workers Union saved several hundred jobs at a Libbey Owens Ford glass plant by teaming with management in a rescue plan to change production from auto glass to plate glass. The company had lost much of its windshield market when California's auto plants closed. Through collective bargaining, the union developed a unique agreement that included tradeoffs of wages and benefits in exchange for company agreement not to contract out work and to diversify the plant's production to other marketable glass products. The plan was accepted by the glass division management, but lack of support from the conglomerate has prevented full use of company resources to produce flat glass. Although this effort was less than totally successful, it encouraged other California unions to try similar new product development tactics.

In 1982 the Central Valley Coalition worked closely with the Sugarworkers Union to try to stop the Spreckels Sugar Mill closing in Salinas by organizing to convert the mill from sugar to ethanol production. Workers, unions and community groups researched the new product for the company after demand for sugar had declined. The plan would have saved more than 100 jobs. Although the uncertain market for ethanol made the project too risky to obtain funding, local groups successfully organized diverse interests such



as small businesses, local government, farmers and unions. The plan would have helped local farmers, for example, to maintain a market for their sugar beets. Organizers obtained foundation support, government-funded feasibility studies and technical assistance, and statewide recognition that plant closures are not always inevitable.

Simpson-Duravent and Vacaville

In 1983 the Oakland Plant Closure Project joined workers at Simpson Dura-Vent Company and their union, UE Local 1412, in a long, hard battle to keep the Duravent plant from moving from Redwood City to Vacaville. Though the community organizing and legal effort did not stop the move, workers got a severance agreement and organizers won an important victory—an ordinance in Vacaville restricting the use of municipal funds to finance corporate relocation. This is an important first step toward halting job raiding between communities.

When Simpson-Duravent announced plans early last year to move facilities from Redwood City to Vacaville, 80 miles north, the union discovered the move was being financed with tax-exempt redevelopment funds. The company planned to use public money borrowed at a very low interest rate to runaway from the union. Demonstrations by union members and their allies were held at Vacaville City Council hearings on the case, and the UE filed a lawsuit protesting the use of tax dollars to finance a move within California. In July, under growing labor and community pressure, Vacaville adopted a policy that called on companies moving into its industrial park and using tax-exempt financing to provide advance notice of plant closings to affected workers, including those in other parts of the state.

In the meantime, Simpson Dura-Vent decided to move to Vacaville anyway, without public financing. The UE continued to press for

and won severance and relocation protections for workers just a few days before the Redwood City plant closed. The agreement provides for 25 Redwood City plant workers to be hired at the Vacaville plant, based on seniority.

Caterpillar Tractor

This year, several local coalitions established "response teams" consisting of coalition organizers and CalCAPS members with legal, academic, religious, or community organizing backgrounds. Teams meet with workers and communities facing layoffs or closures to suggest appropriate actions and to help with labor-community organizing.

This approach has begun at the Caterpillar plant in the San Francisco Bay Area. CalCAPS is supporting the Machinists' efforts to persuade the company to sell the closing plant so that Caterpillar workers could be hired when the plant is reopened by another owner. The Oakland Plant Closure Project helped the union devise its demands for the company and to organize broad-based public support for reopening the plant by a user providing comparable employment.

Legislation

Responding to specific closings has led California coalitions to seek legislation against closings, to begin to reduce dependence on military production and to become involved in labor-community planning to encourage a healthy economy and job creation.

California's plant closing coalition seeks long-term organizing and education regarding policy alternatives to stop closures and to reduce their effects on workers and communities. To this end, CalCAPS has coordinated state-wide lobbying, testimony and mass mobilizing in support of plant closure laws.

In 1982 CalCAPS, working with organized labor and other concerned citizens, devoted tremendous resources to the effort to pass AB 2839, coordinating a systematic campaign of grassroots education, lobbying and networking. The bill called for 90-day mandatory prenotification of closures. As part of this campaign, approximately 500 unionists, plant closure victims, church and community members from throughout the state mobilized in Sacramento to press for a crucial Assembly Ways and Means Committee vote on the bill.

CalCAPS has also built support for unemployment benefit extension legislation, worked to close loopholes in California redevelopment financing, and fought against Right to Work and Enterprise Zone bills. At the national level, CalCAPS works with groups throughout the country to support plant closure and unemployment protection legislation.

CalCAPS also uses federal legislation to protect workers. When Atari laid off 2,900 workers in 1983 with no advance notice, even the business community was shocked. The Employee Law Center in San Francisco requested assistance from the Oakland Plant Closures Project to develop a class action lawsuit against the company, charging that Atari violated worker's rights and broke the law by not giving notice.

CalCAPS is now promoting local ordinances modeled on the ordinance passed in Vacaville. The Vacaville plant closing ordinance is one of the most stringent in the country. It requires companies that obtain more than \$1,000 in tax-exempt redevelopment funds to provide at least three months advance notice on any plans to reduce, relocate or cease production where more than 35 workers are affected. The ordinance also requires companies to notify unions that hold contracts at plants scheduled for closing, and to advise the city of any labor disputes over relocation plans. Companies must also adopt an affirmative action hiring plan to promote job opportunities for minority workers in Vacaville.

State legislation also has been introduced modeled on the Vacaville agreement. Legislation would require businesses receiving public financing for redevelopment to provide three months notice of any closing or work force reduction.

New Product Development and Military Conversion

CalCAPS recognizes the link between plant closures and California's dependence on military production. As Ellen Green, former director of the Oakland Plant Closure Project, notes: "We need to be thinking in terms of taxpayers as investors. You can get a better investment than you get with military investment. People don't realize the links between investment in military and loss of jobs and businesses. We want to recognize ourselves as taxpayers and investors to gain control of our investments for us in our best interest."

Developing new products for companies to produce, similar to the efforts at Libbey Owens Ford and Spreckels Sugar in California's North Central valleys, is a needed building block toward conversion from the military economy.

In Los Angeles the UAW is working to reduce dependence on military production at one of the largest defense contractors in the U.S., McDonnell Douglas Corporation. UAW Local 148 is organizing to diversify production at the Long Beach Douglas Aircraft plant. The local union is taking a cue from the Lucas Aerospace workers in Great Britain where, in the late 1970s, production workers and engineers demanded that the company convert some of its unused military production capacity to produce socially useful products.

Since October 1982, CalCAPS has been working with the UAW, the Mid-Peninsula Conversion Project and state government representatives to create jobs at Douglas Aircraft, where employment dropped from 30,000 in 1967 to its present low of 4,800. Changing the products in specific plants which now support military production provides a way to reduce dependence on the military while at the same time saving jobs. Tools used in earlier attempts to investigate new product development—such as gaining community support, conducting market feasibility studies on possible new products; and fostering labor input into product development—are used to promote conversion from cyclical military production. At McDonnell Douglas this seems increasingly possible since the plant is one of California's largest metal shops. The union is working to convince management to reuse some of the plant's 87% idle capacity for electric rail cars, wheel chairs, commuter aircraft or any of a number of other commercial products.

The effort is unique in that the UAW has persuaded Douglas management to work jointly with the union to diversify products. The union obtained several feasibility studies to determine markets for various products and also located information on cities that might purchase rail cars in the future. The company is very interested in this information and has teamed with the union to investigate further. The goals of the union and management are not identical, but in this case the union's need for jobs, members, stable employment and a say in decision-making overlaps with management's need for profitability, reuse of unused capacity and counter-cyclical production to maintain its skilled work force.

A recent bitter strike, lasting more than three months, delayed the union-management effort. In the meantime, however, the two parties have agreed in principle to establish a joint task force to discuss ways to diversify and reuse the plant's idle capacity. If successful, this project could be an example of working people and their supporters leading the way in economic planning and job creation.

As this project progresses, local coalitions help mobilize community support for the effort and train other groups in the concepts and practical aspects. "New product development" could become a practical alternative to unemployment and deindustrialization, and a basis for policy alternatives regarding investment.

Active Role in Economic Development

Increasingly in California, local community organizations and unions seek to be proactive in response to plant closings. Unions are involved throughout the state to promote early warning systems used by workers to warn of impending closings. In addition, labor has begun to work with several county governments to establish

"business retention and expansion programs" to encourage business to stay in California and to expand.

The Central Labor Council of San Francisco is spearheading a campaign to pass a local ordinance creating an Economic Development Commission of San Francisco. The Commission would encourage and coordinate economic development and expansion, discourage plant closings and reduce the effects of unavoidable plant closings. The Commission would include representatives of business, government and labor, with four of the nine members of the Commission nominated by the Central Labor Council. The Central Labor Council wants to be actively involved in the local economy and the Commission creates a forum for the labor input. The Commission would provide for incentives to business such as financing, zoning relief, and management assistance. It would also encourage joint union-management task forces to solve problems within individual plants. These incentives would be available only if the company provided 12 months notice of a proposed reduction or expansion.

A major California government response to plant closures in California has been to retrain workers, using more than \$2 billion in retraining funds. Although there is plenty of money for training, the success of retraining depends upon available jobs. In Los Angeles, the county AFL-CIO has become actively involved in retraining through a Business Labor Council (BLC) made up of companies, unions and training organizations to improve retraining and reemployment programs for displaced workers. The BLC was proposed by the AFL-CIO and is funded by the State government.



Labor's interest in plant closures and economic development raises questions of labor control over investment and jobs. One tactic proposed by a number of local unions is to develop worker-owned and managed businesses to overcome situations where traditionally owned business has not provided adequate employment. Several public sector union locals, for example, have begun to identify markets for janitorial services so that they can begin a janitor business to reemploy laid-off county janitors.

The tactic of beginning your own company has been successful in at least one case recently. Sacramento cab drivers on strike against Yellow Cab in 1982 formed their own Capitol City Cab Co-op to provide work for members. The Cab Co-op has nearly 80 worker-owners and has grown in one year to be the major competitor of Yellow Cab in the city.

Conclusion

California's unions have organized with church and community representatives to fight plant closings and create positive alternatives to job loss and economic dislocation. Organizers have learned the value of coalition to preserve communities and worker neighborhoods. Coalitions make it easier to organize and to network with different interest groups. Churches seek economic and social justice, unions seek high quality jobs, workers want a steady livelihood, government wants to preserve the tax base.

Organizing in individual plants has led to labor-community involvement in questions of investment and policy. Organizers have learned where to get the information they need to demonstrate that corporate decisions may not be in the best interest of communities and to develop alternatives to closings. Coalitions begin around a closure and the campaign leads to different options depending upon the situation. Now coalition members have learned from experience to plan ahead to see potential problems in particular plants, industries or communities.

Most importantly, California's plant closing coalition illustrates how labor can develop new tactics, to branch out and build alliances in the community and with local government. CalCAPS experience shows that these tactics can win. California unions are experimenting with innovative tactics like labor-community organizing, new product development and worker ownership. In each case tactics depend upon the situation, such as why the plant is closing and the interests of affected workers. But in all cases building coalitions and expanding beyond responding "just at the factory gates" can result in important gains.