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Job fair helps Stop & Shop workers

Cara Baruzzi , Register Staff

NORTH HAVEN — Having been a truck driver at the Stop & Shop distribution center on Montowese Avenue for the past 17 years, Richard Duryea of Clinton is job hunting for the first time in a long time.

"The shock is over; now comes the reality," said Duryea, one of 850 workers who will lose their jobs when Stop & Shop closes the distribution center by midyear.

He and other workers attended a career fair Wednesday at the Fantasia banquet hall on Washington Avenue, from 2 to 7 p.m. The event, organized by Stop & Shop exclusively for workers about to lose their jobs, was designed to connect them with potential employers.

Stop & Shop plans to close its local distribution center, at 300 Montowese Ave., this summer and move its operations to a newer, bigger facility in Freetown, Mass., and to a third-party distributor.

Other distribution centers for companies including Pepsi, Coca-Cola, BJ's and Home Goods were among the employers at the event, said Stop & Shop spokesman Robert Keane.

While Duryea is optimistic that, as a truck driver, he will be able to find work relatively easily, he is still pondering where he will find his next job.

"I'm not exactly sure," he said, adding that his coworkers who are losing warehouse jobs may have a harder time finding work because fewer of those jobs are available. "It's the warehouse people that are really going to have a tough time."

Some workers, like Zoraida Valles of New Britain, plan to seize the opportunity to explore new career paths.

A clerical worker at the distribution center for the past five years, Valles plans to pursue a career in the medical field.

"I'm looking at something different," she said.

Milton Foreman of Bridgeport, a janitor at the distribution center for the past two years, plans to return to his previous work as a chef.

"I'm going back into my field," said Foreman, who searched for jobs online in the state Department of Labor's "Career Express" bus, which was parked outside the job fair.

The bus, which travels throughout the state to various events, has six computers that allow people to search and apply for jobs online with the help of labor department staff.

"We're hoping for a great turnout," said Sandy Mello, coordinator of the Career Express. "We're here to let (workers) know this isn't the end of the road."

Foreman, who also used the Career Express bus to set up a new e-mail account he plans to use when sending prospective employers his resume, said events like Wednesday's job fair provide useful resources.

Having worked at the distribution center for only two years, he said, he expects to have an easier time job hunting than some of his coworkers who have worked there for many years and haven't sought work in a long time. "They don't know what's out there," he said.

While some are using their job loss as an opportunity to ponder different career moves, many others need to find employment as soon as possible for financial reasons, said Maria Vasquez of Springfield, Mass.

After spending the past six years working inventory and computer operations jobs, she is hoping to find similar work quickly.

"I'm trying to get into the job force right away because I have to," she said.

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Bill Pitre from Workforce Alliance discusses job opportunities with Stop & Shop employee.





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03/16/2006

Stop & Shop workers to vote on offer

Cara Baruzzi , Register Staff

NEW HAVEN — Workers who will lose their jobs when Stop & Shop begins closing its North Haven distribution center later this month will vote here Saturday on an agreement union leaders and company officials have reached on various issues, including severance pay.

The vote will take place at a meeting scheduled for 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday at Hill Regional Career High School, 140 Legion Ave., said Robert E. Bayusik, secretary-treasurer of Teamsters Local 443.

The Teamsters represent most of the 850 Stop & Shop employees who learned in January they will lose their jobs by midyear. Stop & Shop plans to close the North Haven distribution center at 300 Montowese Ave. beginning around March 25 and shift its operations to a newer, larger Freetown, Mass., facility and a third-party distributor.

"We negotiated a fair package," Bayusik said, adding that union members can vote to either accept or reject it.

Stop & Shop spokesman Robert Keane declined to comment on the agreement.

The final offer is essentially the same as the tentative agreement that union and company officials reached last week, Bayusik said, adding that in the final agreement, "We just got things clarified."

The agreement calls for eligible workers who have been with the company for five or more years to receive one week's pay for each year of service, up to a maximum of 20 weeks.

For eligible workers with between six months and five years of service, the agreement calls for severance pay totaling between \$400 and \$1,600.

The offer also addresses several non-severance issues. It gives workers who opt to go to the Freetown, Mass., Stop & Shop facility a 60-day trial period. Stop & Shop has said jobs may be available there. If the workers leave the Freetown job within those 60 days, they would remain eligible for severance pay.

A moving allowance of up to \$2,000 is included in the agreement for workers who choose to go to Freetown.

Stop & Shop officials have said they plan to close the facility on or around June 1. But, in the proposed agreement, Stop & Shop has agreed to retain some transportation jobs through the end of the year, Bayusik said.

Union leaders negotiated the best package they could for workers, short of convincing Stop & Shop officials to keep the facility open, he said.

"That's not going to happen," he said. "The reality is, they're going to close."

Meanwhile, North Haven officials stepped up efforts to introduce potential employers to the 850 workers who will be laid off when the center closes.

Ralph Durante Sr., chairman of the North Haven Economic Development Commission, invited officials who are helping the workers to an economic development breakfast at Anthem Blue Cross Blue Shield Wednesday and urged local companies to hire the workers.

A job fair will be held from 2 to 7 p.m. Wednesday at the Fantasia banquet hall, 404 Washington Ave. Twenty-five companies have committed to being there, and more are expected.

Durante asked anyone who can hire displaced workers to contact Dan Flanagan, president of Teamsters Local 443, Chris Reardon of the Workforce Alliance, or Peter Raymo and Barbara Friend of the state Department of Labor. George Cunningham, a consultant helping Stop & Shop with the job fair, also was introduced.

"They are dedicated employees. It's very tragic, not just for the union employee, but all of us. Anything people can do to support our people, any jobs," Flanagan said to an audience of 125.

Raymo said labor department staff will be stationed at the warehouse to give direction to workers, help them search for job sources, use a state job bank, file for unemployment compensation and accomplish similar tasks.

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