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Résumé de l'article

Cet article est basé sur des pratiques novatrices d'intervention psychosociale menées auprès de travailleurs victimes de pertes d'emploi, dans trois usines du nord de la Californie. L'auteure d'abord trace le profil de la personne mise à pied aux États-Unis et dégage l'impact psychologique des fermetures, en soulignant la tendance des victimes à se blâmer elles-mêmes et à projeter ce blâme sur leurs proches. Ensuite, elle présente les caractéristiques d'un nouveau modèle d'intervention auprès des personnes mises à pied, un modèle qui fait appel notamment à la validation de la colère et à la construction de réseaux de support social. Enfin, elle souligne l'importance de développer ce nouveau modèle sur le terrain même de l'organisation syndicale, vue comme un lieu où les personnes peuvent être traitées comme des personnes à part entière.

Empowering Dislocated Workers in Union-Based Counseling Programs

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Cet article est basé sur des pratiques novatrices d'intervention psychosociale menées auprès de travailleurs victimes de pertes d'emploi, dans trois usines du nord de la Californie. L'auteure d'abord trace le profil de la personne mise à pied aux États-Unis et dégage l'impact psychologique des fermetures, en soulignant la tendance des victimes à se blâmer elles-mêmes et à projeter ce blâme sur leurs proches. Ensuite, elle présente les caractéristiques d'un nouveau modèle d'intervention auprès des personnes mises à pied, un modèle qui fait appel notamment à la validation de la colère et à la construction de réseaux de support social. Enfin, elle souligne l'importance de développer ce nouveau modèle sur le terrain même de l'organisation syndicale, vue comme un lieu où les personnes peuvent être traitées comme des personnes à part entière.

Throughout history, working people have demonstrated a remarkable ability to survive under difficult circumstances. The restructuring of the world economy during the 1980's, resulting in an increasing number of plant closures and large-scale layoffs, has had a major, and sometimes traumatic, impact on workers and their families. To lose a job after twenty years in a plant, to lose the economic and social security that it represented and to face looking for work in a new and strange job market create enormous stress on those affected.

While it is important to understand the destructive impact plant closures have on many workers and their families, it is equally important to recognize the courage, insight, and creativity that working people demonstrate in responding to this crisis situation. There is a tendency in much of the research to paint workers as helpless victims (Liem, 1986). That is a misrepresentation of a complex set of responses that contain elements of self-blame as well as elements of self-assertion.

The political, economic and psychological issues facing dislocated workers are extremely complex. To help them understand and deal with their situation effectively, they need services that are based on an under standing of working people and their families. These services must be provided in a way that uses pre-existing strengths and further empowers workers to act on their own behalf both individually and collectively. Provided in this context, services act to undermine the self-blame and isolation that intensify the practical and psychological problems faced by dislocated workers.

Many of the traditional models of counseling and service delivery cannot provide this empowerment. In fact, they may undermine the basic strengths of working people by making them dependent and by taking away their dignity. The kind of mental health intervention needed in these situations is one that is based on an assumption of the inherent strengths and health of people who are faced with a crisis not of their making. Other types of interventions may prove to be necessary and appropriate, but the initial intervention should be based on an assumption of workers' basic strengths and health. This tends to give back a sense of dignity, pride and worth that may have been eroded in dealing with this crisis. For example, if you address people as part of the unemployed, you will get very different responses than if you approach them as workers who have had their jobs taken away from them. One formulation places them in an anonymous statistical group that reinforces a sense of powerlessness. The other maintains their dignity as workers and identifies them with a known group of people sharing a common experience and taps a sense of injustice that can mobilize an attitude of fighting back.

To be fully effective, interventions must be class, gender and race appropriate and must take place in a non-threatening environment that makes services physically and psychologically accessible. For a variety of reasons, working through the union, in the plant or in the union hall, enhances the credibility and accessibility of the services and contributes to the overall success of services. The goal of such services should be to assist the workers and their families deepen their understanding of the practical and psychological impact of dislocation and to help them cope with the transition from being employed to the search for work and the adjustment to a new job.

This article is based on work with dislocated workers in the United States at General Motors, Caterpillar Tractor and Peterbilt Truck plants in northern California. Additional information has been drawn from a series of nationwide workshops, trainings and consultations with unions and through the Human Resource Development Institute of the AFL-CIO.

Profile of the Dislocated Worker

In the United States, the dislocated worker is typically male, in his 40's or older, married with children. He has 20 years seniority in heavy industry and his jobs have been unionized with high wages and good benefits. According to Department of Labor Statistics, between 1983 and 1988, 9.7 million workers lost their jobs due to plant closures and layoffs (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1989).

The dislocated worker is a phenomenon of the eighties and the structural changes that are taking place in the economy. This differs from the previous periods of unemployment characterized by cycles where jobs were temporarily lost, and then regained when there was an upswing in the economy. These cyclical shifts usually affected the newest workers, often women and minorities, and left those with high seniority at work or only briefly laid off. Layoffs due to structural changes in the economy affect everyone, and have the greatest impact on high seniority older workers with families and limited prospects for rehire.

This situation has occurred because the economy has shifted from one based on heavy industry to one increasingly dominated by service and information industries (Bluestone and Bennett, 1982). The previously held jobs have disappeared, and the new jobs that have become available require different skills and offer low wages and fewer benefits. For many dislocated workers, no new work will be available. The prospects of hiring into a new occupation for a fifty-year-old worker are very low.

The Psychological Impact of Plant Closures

The psychological impact of a plant closure goes far beyond the simple shock of losing a job. For many, it is the end of a way of life. The process of adjustment can be complex and difficult, stretching the economic and psychological resources of those affected.

Plant Closures as an Experience of Loss

A plant closure is a life event of major loss, comparable to a death in the family or a divorce. There is a profound sense of grief over the loss, a loss of the past and the future, though this mourning is seldom validated (Krystal, 1983; The Committee on Psychiatry in Industry, 1982). A plant closure represents the loss of the dignity and pride of productive work, the loss of structure in daily life (the loss of a place to go every day and a reason for going), and, because self-esteem is so closely tied to work, the loss of status and identity as well (Hill, 1978; Cobb and Kasl, 1977; Tiffany, 1970).

Another major loss, seldom recognized, is the loss of a work family that has been a critical support system. Over the years more time is spent with the work family than with the home family. It has provided both a sense of camaraderie and a sense of collective identity and strength. Now, unless concrete steps are taken to keep that work family intact, this collective identity is replaced with increasing isolation and alienation.

This loss of meaning, the structure of daily life and personal identity is one of the most psychologically damaging effects of a plant closure (Hayes and Nutman, 1981). Preliminary findings of a Swedish research project that combines political and social self-help groups that include a structure of daily activities have shown that these concrete interventions can minimize the negative consequences of unemployment (Levi et al., 1984).

In addition to this sense of loss, dislocated workers must face a whole new series of psychological stressors not based on the loss of a past structure in their lives but on future uncertainty. These include not knowing what to expect next, the prospect of rejection in a strange and tight job market, the anxiety of returning to classroom retraining after years away from school, dealing with unresponsive bureaucratic structures and the fear of starting over.

Work, Identity and Self-Worth

Because work is a basic psychological need, a central and defining part of life for most people (Yankelovich, 1974), the loss of work has an important impact on feelings of self-worth and identity. Many workers are able to hold on to their sense of pride, while others experience depression and express feelings of diminished self-worth. "I don't know who I am anymore, I used to be an auto-worker, and now I'm nothing."

Any protracted period of unemployment will seriously affect self-esteem and can lead to self-blaming and destructive behavior that may be directed at the individual or at family members. This finding is substantiated by statistical evidence that shows the increase in physical and psychological problems that accompany any rise in unemployment (Brenner, 1973).

Self-Affirmation and Self-Blame

Many workers respond to the crisis brought about by a plant closure with self-directed and self-affirming behavior. They are able to identify those responsible for their situation, often pointing to changes in the economy, bad management decisions and national trade policy. Some, especially women and younger workers, redirect their careers, get further training or go back to school.

For others, however, there is a tendency to blame themselves for the situation they now find themselves in. This may take the form of feeling that their performance and their demands may have caused the closure, or they may feel that is their fault they ended up with limited skills and were not prepared to deal with the problems they now face. A third form of self-blame involves projecting blame onto those who are closest and most accessible, fellow workers and the union.

Self-blame is a learned response arising from the emphasis put on meritocracy, competition and individual accountability in the dominant North American culture. There is a correlation here to issues of class in society and the assumption that working people are inferior to managers and owners. This social message may be internalized by workers as a message that they are getting what they deserve, and that success and failure are the responsibility of the individual alone. This internalized self-blame, anger and feelings of powerlessness are important clinical issues (Lerner, 1979).

Psychological Issues for Displaced Workers and Their Families

Each presenting problem rising out of a plant closure reflects a multiplicity of practical and psychological issues that must be dealt with. It is neither possible, nor desirable, to separate the problems of daily life faced by displaced workers and their families from the fear, anger and frustration that they engender.

A dramatic event like a plant closure often has the effect of uncovering psychological issues. For some "borderline" workers the pattern and structure of work has allowed them to function. When that structure is removed, they are no longer able to contain the psychological disruption. An example of this was an agoraphobic auto-worker who was able to function as long as the plant stayed open, but as soon as it closed and took the structure out of his life, the agoraphobia left him unable to leave his house without experiencing extreme anxiety.

This latency is true for many family problems as well. Established family patterns have often buffered the tensions and conflicts that were present. In this situation, the everyday cues and coping mechanisms are disrupted, and people become vulnerable to a whole series of feelings that might otherwise remain buried. Depression, anger and feeling that their lives are out of their control are common emotional issues that trigger old hurts and latent problems. Anger and frustration, rooted in a sense of abandonment and betrayal, may find its expression in family violence or increased drug and alcohol use.

Much of the confusion that exists in this period is the result of a radical change in family roles and family patterns. In effect, the family is being restructured during a period of great uncertainty. Workers, often men who have had limited or no responsibilities in the home, may now find themselves taking that role as their spouses become primary wage earners. For the spouses, often women, many find themselves with significantly increased responsibilities. Because of this, it is often hard for either partner to give the other the support that is needed in order to re-establish the family as a functioning unit. This is particularly true in cases where communication has broken down and there has been no active process of rebuilding.

One of the underlying psychological issues that dislocated workers face is the absence of any acceptable way to deal with anger. While they were in the plant, their anger had a focal point — conditions in the workplace, management and the company. This direction and redirection of frustration and anger is one of the few socially — accepted forms of expressing anger. When that outlet is removed, at a time when there is an intensifi-

cation of those feelings, anger is redirected at more immediate targets. Validating people's anger and helping them express it in non-destructive ways reduces some of the pressure and makes conscious functioning more possible[1].

A Model for Dislocated Worker Counseling Programs

The specific circumstances surrounding plant closures vary considerably. Experience with a number of closures has led to the development of a basic model that can be adapted to the particular situation. Some of the key elements and philosophical foundations are:

1) Make Services Accessible

Many of the problems involved in serving a blue-collar population require getting them to use available services. For many workers there is a stigma attached to using mental health services. Using them is seen as a tacit admission that they are not able to cope with their problems. With identity and pride eroded by the impact of the plant closure, it is very hard for people to seek help. Because of this, it is necessary to provide counseling in a form that does not require people to identify themselves as "sick" or "weak". Ways to get services to workers who need them include:

a) **Location.** Counseling services should be available where dislocated workers would naturally come for some other reason. A union hall that is a gathering place is ideal. Retraining sites and job placement service sites are also good. Being in a plant presents some problems because the program may be perceived as being part of management.

b) **Integration into other services.** Counseling must be seen as taking place in the context of other services being offered as part of retraining or job placement projects. It should not be seen as a completely separate service that workers are referred to if they have a "problem". The source of counseling contact should be through giving information or doing routine evaluations or needs assessments. There also needs to be some natural and easy way of making connections with people from other parts of the program who need counseling.

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1. While the description of the dislocated worker in this section is based on work done in the United States, very similar findings have been reported in Lebeau, Desmarais and Perrault (1987). See also Liem and Liem (1979).

c) **Destigmatizing contact.** Counseling services need to be available without being named to avoid the stigma that is attached to counseling in working class culture. There must be other reasons for seeing a counselor besides a formal counseling appointment, and the initial session must be informal with ample opportunity to deal with later drop-in appointments.

d) **Use of union counselors**. Using trained union personnel as a point of initial contact is very important. These counselors may be stewards, union officials, or alcohol and drug abuse counselors. They provide the known and trusted link between the professional staff and the workers. Having a familiar face from the plant or union hall as a first contact makes access to the services much easier.

e) **Confidentiality**. Confidentiality must be assured. This is particularly important if the counseling environment is an open one. More formal sessions need to take place in closed rooms with files visibly locked. It is important to constantly restate confidentiality to workers, to the company and to other agencies.

2) *Fundamental Operating Assumptions*

Based on work with thousands of dislocated workers, some fundamental operating assumptions about providing effective and empowering counseling have emerged.

a) **Dignity.** One of the most common responses of dislocated workers is to feel that their dignity and their basic value as productive human beings have been placed under attack. All counseling contacts, from the most casual to the most formal, must be animated by a clear affirmation of the worth and dignity of the people involved. This affirmation should be explicit.

b) **Validation of anger**. A very powerful and legitimate response to a plant closure is anger. That anger reflects decades of work going unrewarded and unappreciated, the feeling of having been discarded and, in some cases, made to feel useless. People have a right to be angry, but almost nowhere is the expression of that anger validated. If there is no appropriate place to vent this anger, it often gets redirected as self-anger or anger toward family or friends. The wife of a dislocated worker put it this way, "My husband is so angry and full of hate, and we're the only place he can show it. It's hard to feel that hatred". By validating this anger and allowing its expression, the damage of displaced anger can be minimized.

c) **Undermining self-blame.** Counselors can intervene to reduce self-blame by helping the workers to understand that what they are

experiencing is not a personal and individual failure to cope with a situation, but an experience shared by many displaced workers. They need to know that they are facing a major crisis over which they have little control. It is also important to help them understand what is happening in relationship to the closure. One worker put it this way, "I know what's behind this: they're trying to put us in our place, to break the union and cut our wages". Many workers understand this but they are also filled with self-doubt. Helping them to deepen, and trust, their understanding of the situation while helping them express and redirect their anger is an important way to reduce self-blame.

d) **Building social support systems.** Social support is feeling that you belong to, and are esteemed and supported by, groups of people that are important to you (Liem and Liem, 1979). The effect of social support on buffering workplace stress is well-documented (Kobb, 1976), and its importance in helping people cope well with dislocation is equally important. The individual strength of workers is significantly enhanced when they are brought together in social support systems. In this respect it is important to encourage people to stay in touch with their former co-workers. Social support systems can be developed in families, the work family, unions, churches and community groups.

Job Clubs: An Example of Social Support

Job clubs are informal structures that allow people looking for work to get together in group meetings in a way that is supportive of their efforts to find work and deal with a variety of problems they are facing. They are informal social support systems that help to recreate the work family that has sustained them through the years. In the plant the work family was a source of collective strength and support among people who had shared the joys, dangers, and frustrations of the work over the years and could be counted on to give support. The job club is a much more transitory support structure, but it serves some of the same functions and also is a reminder of the strength that comes when people are together rather than isolated. Because the union is identified with the work family, it is highly desireable for job clubs to meet under union sponsorship and in union facilities.

By sharing concrete job leads and information, as well as support for the difficulties and frustrations both in their job search and at home, people feel less alone and better about themselves. This feeling of enhanced self-worth comes both because they realize that they are not the only ones

experiencing these difficulties and because they are acting concretely and collectively to deal with their problems.

People may simply respond on the level of sharing information about where the jobs are, or they may offer to share childcare so that others can get to a job interview. They also react to the stress that others are feeling with support and suggestions on how to cope with the situation. By helping each other, they are able to regain some sense of their own power to act. Though the examples are small, the impact is great because, in many cases, it is a question of overcoming the inertia that can grip people in situations that feel too large for them to deal with individually.

The Importance of the Union as a Collective Base

Working through the union is important for a variety of reasons. The union is clearly identified as a worker-oriented institution, not an extension of management or the company. To the extent that the union is strong and functioning well, it is a powerful and unalienated institution that workers control. It is also identified with the work family that has been so critical to the strength and well-being of members over the years. If something happens through the union, or in the union hall, there is automatically a basis of trust felt by workers. The worker can identify with the union as something that he / she has a right to expect support from because it is theirs. This helps overcome the stigma of receiving help and the distrust and discomfort that many working people feel in dealing with agencies.

The union is also a place where people are treated as whole people. Agencies are often interested (or not interested) in seeing that members get a specific service. They are usually not concerned with a person's whole pattern of well-being. Even though the union cannot address all the needs of its members, that is where professional skills and experience are needed, it is still concerned about their overall well-being. The importance of this is that the member can relate to the union officers, and the people providing services through the union, as being concerned about her / him as a whole person with worth and dignity facing not just a fuel shortage, for example, but a life crisis.

Another critical function that the union can play is in breaking down isolation. The members are all in the same situation, and because of that it is easier to reach out and help each other without being ashamed or embarrassed by it. The isolation of going to various agencies or programs run through management is also avoided.

When people know that they are not the only ones going through this crisis, it is possible to go beyond the recognition stage, in itself a powerful antidote to isolation and self-blame, to formal and informal ways of working together to deal concretely with the situation. That may mean working on a food bank project, or sharing skills, or lobbying for legislation or stronger contract language around plant closings. Whatever the activity is, working together and not succumbing to a feeling of being powerless is a healing and empowering act and creates an important social support system.

In the larger context, the union is both the symbol and reality of the collective strength that workers have experienced through the years. While unions have been under attack in recent years and have lost some of their effectiveness, they still represent the historical reality of the power of worker solidarity and an institution that is capable of fighting for people's rights and for economic justice.

A Union-Based Counseling Project with Dislocated GM Workers

In 1981, with three weeks notice, 2500 workers from the General Motors assembly plant in Fremont, California, were put on indefinite layoff. This was a *de facto* closure, and in the first few months after the announcement, there were eight suicides. It was very clear that some mental health intervention was necessary to reduce the risk factor for those suddenly out of work after more than 20 years in the plant.

The initial phase began with one counselor available one day a week at the union hall. It was necessary to establish a presence there and develop the trust of the union officers as well as the rank and file. Counseling contact often began with a simple conversation about a problem with benefits, the latest rumors about a possible re-opening or mandatory transfers to plants in other states.

A simple question about how the family was reacting often was all that was necessary to evoke an outpouring of all the problems that the workers were facing. The contact might be limited to that single encounter, or it might lead to talking with a spouse in individual or couples sessions. For many it was the first time they had ever "talked about myself this way to a stranger". These informal counseling contacts were continued on both a drop-in and an appointment basis.

The presence of a counselor in the union hall was not familiar to the union officers either, and it was important to blend into the activities of the

union hall by providing assistance to them in their attempts to respond to the needs of the members. This meant answering the phones, helping to get a mailing out and being available to the union officers themselves as a source of counsel and support.

The pattern that emerged was that the union officers, overwhelmed with the depth of the problems some of the members were facing, would walk people over to the counselor and tell them that they had other things to do, but that there was someone who had time to talk. Because they were brought into the counseling contact by someone they knew, the counselor was perceived as having legitimacy, and the counseling contact was destigmatized.

In this way, something of a counseling "style" was established at the initial point of contact. There was no stigma attached to talking to someone who was part of the union hall environment. People who would never have considered talking to a counselor were able to establish a trusting relationship that allowed them to enter into a more formal counseling arrangement as time went on. The effects of word-of-mouth advertising also brought in more people directly asking to see "the lady who is here to talk".

This informal arrangement in the union hall was successful and, at the union's insistence, counseling services were included in the joint UAW/GM/State of California Retraining Project that was negotiated. The project was located at three different sites, the "feel" of the union hall was maintained by incorporating union peer counselors in the counseling program. Two union officers became part of the counseling team. They were crucial to the success of the program as they were familiar trusted figures and it was easy for people to approach them and talk to them. They were the direct link between the professional staff and the workers. Their knowledge of individuals and of conditions in the plant supplemented the skills of the professional staff and made them much more effective.

Counseling functions included individual and couples counseling, and the entire team served as advocates for the workers who were dealing with bureaucracies that were confusing and unresponsive. Because of their lack of experience with getting help from agencies and because of the existing tendency to self-blame that has an immobilizing effect, counseling with dislocated workers cannot be neutral and must include an advocacy stance that empowers them and reinforces their dignity.

In this context counselors acted as liaison with the court system, helped people develop budgets and arranged or provided tutoring when it was needed. In this process it was possible to address the mental health issues that were also present.

Over the course of the project 1500 workers were seen in short-term counseling contacts ranging from one to six sessions. Twenty-five individuals and families were seen in long-term counseling lasting between six and 18 months.

Building on the trust and acceptance that was built up in the first phase of the project, the counselors continued to be active in helping the union establish self-help projects that served as social support systems as well. They also helped get a small grant that made it possible to set up a skills exchange, have potlucks, and organize flea markets and baseball games.

Concluding Remarks

In providing counseling and mental health services it is critically important that the underlying strengths and competence of workers be recognized and enhanced. Even though dislocated workers may experience great difficulties in adjusting to the upheaval in their lives that often results from plant closures, they are neither unaware of what is happening to them and why, nor are they powerless to act in their own behalf. The provision of services should always occur in ways that do not undermine these basic strengths. The class, gender and racial bias of many mental health interventions have the unintended consequence of weakening, not strengthening, the capacity of working people to respond to the real crisis they are facing. If mental health workers are to serve this population effectively, we must reformulate our methods and services to bridge the gap between ourselves (primarily representatives of the dominant middle class culture in background and training) and the sub-culture we hope to serve. It should not be incumbent on those in need to cross over into a foreign culture to seek help.

The use of union-based, destigmatized counseling services provided in a non-alienating and supportive environment can enhance the strengths of working people by restoring dignity and pride and overcoming the sense of isolation that is fundamentally dis-empowering. However, our responsibility as counselors and therapists does not end there. The economic decision-making processes that lead to plant closures do not use **social cost** as a factor. That social cost is reflected in individual tragedies, family disruptions and the erosion of communities. The ripples that spread out from the collapse of previously existing patterns of production ultimately engulf the whole society.

As counselors, mental health workers and therapists, we have a responsibility to make known the effects of plant closures and economic

restructuring on the quality of life of working people. As people who have had direct experience with the dark side of plant closures and industrial down-scaling, we must find ways to educate the general public and politicians alike about the effects of current economic and social policy. We must also work to help shape new, humane, policy to replace it[2]. In addition to more comprehensive plant closure legislation that protects the rights of workers, fundamental to any humane policy is a demand for full employment. Retraining programs, however humane and effective, are simply window dressing if there are not satisfying, secure, well-paying jobs available for those who are trained. The disregard for workers and their well-being that characterizes public policy, particularly in the United States, is a short-sighted and selfish one reflecting deep wounds and divisions in the body politic. As social workers, for our work to be complete, the society as a whole must be healed.

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2. For a discussion of the role of Canadian social workers in shaping national unemployment policy see McKay and McBride (1988).

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