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Military conversion could happen — here at FMC

BY AMY B. DEAN

It's probably Silicon Valley's biggest buzzword after "information super-highway" — "military conversion."

Politicians flock to closed missile plants and predict those empty buildings will soon be churning out electric cars and buses. Business leaders nod their heads and frenetically jockey for conversion grants.

But California — and the nation as a whole — can point to precious few cases where a defense plant has actually, successfully converted to peacetime production.

Now we have a perfect chance to create such a model here in the valley — with the dwindling FMC facility in San Jose.

FMC has been one of our area's biggest employers for decades, building the country's number one tank, the Bradley Fighting Vehicle. Just a few years ago when the Cold War still raged, it provided high-quality jobs for 7,000 local people.

So much of the future of our valley depends on making military conversion a reality.

Today it employs fewer than 2,000 — and those jobs, too, are threatened as the company considers more layoffs.

Let's turn the rhetoric about conversion into reality — right here, right now.

That's the thinking behind an unusual coalition of trade unionists, environmentalists and FMC employees that is trying to come up with a plan to create 21st-century jobs at FMC's San Jose facility.

Our coalition — called UPSIZE — wants to see high-wage high-skill jobs. We want to see jobs that help, rather than hurt, our valley's environment.

We want to see jobs that draw upon the skill base, productive capacity, and intellectual resources that FMC has built up here over the years.

And we want to see jobs that are generating real profits in a growth industry

— a win-win situation for FMC shareholders, workers and neighbors alike.

What will this FMC of the future look like? Will it be producing electric vehicles? Pollution control equipment? Optoelectronics equipment that can sort anything from green-and-white recycled bottles to green-and-red tomatoes?

We don't know, but we're trying to figure it out.

If this sounds like a strange turn of events for trade unionists and environmentalists, it is.

We're more accustomed to holding rallies and passing petitions than studying emerging markets or schmoozing with venture capitalists.

But we've put on this new hat because so much of the future of our valley depends on making military conversion a

reality.

And we're looking for others to put on new hats, too. We're looking for local business leaders to share their start-up expertise with us. We're looking for local FMC employees to help us figure out how best to take advantage of existing skills and resources.

Mostly, we're looking for top FMC management to join us in a commitment to convert — efficiently, environmentally and profitably.

And our message to FMC management is that this plant is one that's worth saving and expanding — not just from our local point of view, but from a corporate point of view.

Now let's make it really happen, by turning FMC into a model for what can be done throughout this valley and this country.

We can make it happen with this factory. We can make it happen with these jobs. We can make it happen here.

Amy B. Dean is chief executive officer of the South Bay AFL-CIO Labor Council.