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ELECTION 2004:

Vanished jobs may be issue; Many angry, unsure what to do

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Boston --- As the Democratic Party convenes here, Jeannene Welch, who recently collected her first paycheck in more than two years, will be watching.

After sewing rivets and buttonholes on blue jeans for 22 years, Welch was forced to restart her life in 2002, when apparel giant Levi Strauss & Company shuttered its plant, an economic wellspring for Blue Ridge and its North Georgia environs.

"I felt used, violated, worthless, unappreciated," said Welch, 44, who was among 400 employees whose jobs went south of the border. "I blame the government to some extent for encouraging American companies to go out of the country."

Welch, now an office coordinator at a Union County senior center, said the "little people" stung by foreign job migrations in the manufacturing and textile worlds will be paying close heed as Democrats map out core economic policies this week.

Richard Ray, a Georgia delegate and president of the state AFL-CIO, recognized there are no easy answers to "fair trade" issues and joblessness. "There is probably nothing that will bring those jobs back, Not even John Kerry," he said. "But there has to be a plan to protect workers."

Today in Boston, a national coalition of labor, consumer and environmental groups is hosting a shadow convention exploring trade issues. Among the speakers are Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr. of Illinois and James Hoffa, president of the Teamsters.

The Democratic platform, yet to be approved at the convention, spells out the party's economic goals in plain terms. "We will fight for American jobs and we will fight for American workers."

Vice presidential candidate John Edwards pushed trade issues with his campaign message of two Americas divided by wealth. During the primaries, he attacked then-rival John Kerry for supporting the 1993 North American Free Trade Agreement that removed most barriers to trade and investment among the United States, Canada, and Mexico.

Kerry blamed American joblessness in part on "Benedict Arnold companies who ship jobs overseas." He has since toned down his language somewhat, describing himself as an entrepreneurial Democrat who would stop rewarding firms that took their jobs overseas.

The Democratic rhetoric resonates with voters reeling from the impact of globalization, an economic process that marries the dollars and know-how of the developed world with the abundance of cheap labor in poor nations.

Textile plant closings hit Southern states particularly hard. Between 1997 and 2003, 30 plants were shuttered in Georgia alone. In that time, almost 15,000 folks had to start over.

For 16 years, Mark Tolbert, 44, hauled yarn at the Chipman-Union hosiery mill in Union Point. When the owners closed shop shortly after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, Tolbert was left with part-time work at a liquor store.

"Instead of helping rebuild that country over there, George Bush needs to be rebuilding our country over here," Tolbert said of the war in Iraq. "Trade should be a huge issue in this campaign."

Zelma Robbins, 46, operated a machine that paired socks at Chipman-Union. Now she works two jobs --- as a short order cook and a substitute school custodian.

She hears private jets fly over her modest brick home on Greensboro's Airport Road. In April, one of those planes carried President Bush, who came to thank the GOP's biggest fund-raisers at the Reynolds Plantation resort a few miles down the road.

"He probably looked down on our house when he flew in," Robbins said. "I want to ask him why he wants to take jobs out of America when we need jobs right here."

F. Sibley Bryan, 66, owner of the mill, which employed 700 people when it closed, said, "I fought hard to keep our socks [production] from going overseas."

Now, the self-described Republican said, the trade issue is no longer black and white for him. The challenge, he said, is how to creatively adjust to the new trends.

"All I hear is campaign rhetoric about how we need to protect jobs," Bryan said. "Well, who in the world disagrees with that?"