

'We are under seige'

Says Watsonville Canning's Ron Trine

By PAUL BEATTY

Sentinel Staff Writer

WATSONVILLE — He comes to work every morning to a plant where guards with attack dogs patrol the perimeter on the company's side of the fence.

He leaves the asphalt parking lot and tin buildings of Watsonville's industrial center late in the evening, escorted by police.

His car has been demolished and once he was caught by strikers, or their sympathizers, and beaten.

He sits in his office as women strikers walk the picket line, 30 feet away, across the street. They can be seen from the company's windows.

"We are under seige," says Ron Trine, president of Watsonville Canning and Frozen Foods Company, as his company and 1,000 of its workers endure into the sixth month of a violence-scarred strike.

At the age of 38 and filled with the experience of past months, Trine has the presence of a high-tension wire — taut and flowing

with a controlled energy.

As the interview begins, he turns on a tape-recorder, after asking if it's alright. The recorder runs.

"I'm mad as hell over the violence," Trine said. "The thing that's very disheartening is the union wants to blame the left-wing, the Communists, but when I drive up the street, it's former employees who are throwing the rocks at me.

"And it's children, seven and eight to 15-years-old who nearly demolished one building on the grounds. An employee was hit in the chest by a steel ball thrown by a child.

"The union is responsible. Why do they condone these acts of violence, even by children. Why doesn't the union come down and control the violence. They say no officials are involved. I've been at the scenes and seen officials promote the violence."

Trine says Teamsters Local 912 President Sergio Lopez's statements in the press "increase the violence."

Over the telephone, Lopez says

it's the "Communist groups" who are using the strike to "push their own social programs.

"We have nothing to do with those Communist groups — the Peoples Labor Party and the International Congress Against Racism — and I think it's despicable, it's sinful, they've come and incited little kids.

"We have nothing to do with those idiots."

Lopez says the employees Trine blames are not responsible for the acts of violence. "Some of them out on the street now have been employees of the company for 33 years, a number of them for 20 years. Now they're out on the street."

Early last week, the violence escalated into the downtown area of Watsonville when strikers, frustrated by police who used tear gas to break up an illegal rally, rampaged through town, breaking store windows.

"The strike is getting out-of-hand, growing more violent and going about the way, I believe, the union wants it to go," Trine says.



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Watsonville Canning's Ron Trine

"Look at downtown Watsonville. The merchants have supported the strikers from day-one with food and clothing. Now see how they were repaid. The police cleared the strikers out of here and they went downtown on a rampage and broke windows out at several merchants."

Lopez insists the primary fault lies with Communist provocateurs. A Watsonville Canning security guard leader said the left-

wing groups that have established headquarters at one or two homes near the canning plant are from Berkeley.

Last week, a leaflet bearing the insignia of Teamsters Local 912 was distributed calling for strikers to shut down Watsonville Canning: "stop the work, stop the scabs, stop production," the leaflet proclaimed.

Lopez says, "The leaflet could make people believe we are behind the violence but it is totally bogus. It is not a Teamster 912 leaflet and we are investigating who's responsible."

The strike threw 1,700 people out of work on Sept. 9 when workers rejected pay cuts from \$6.66 an hour to as low as \$4.25 for beginning workers. One thousand of the employees worked at Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food Co. and 700 at Shaw Food Company where the strike ended a week ago.

The union settled for the unskilled labor rate of \$5.85 an hour and profit sharing after examining the company's books to determine it could not compete when paying higher wages than paid in Costa Rica, Guatemala, Mexico and Texas.

Watsonville Canning's offer is a base unskilled worker rate of \$5.05 an hour.

Trine says, "I think the overall impact (of the Shaw settlement) has been minimal. The biggest influence is out on the street, it pushed a little more violence. But that's not Shaw's fault.

"I think our employees are extremely disturbed our contract hasn't been settled.

"Something that has always amazed me is that the first offer we made was a freeze and they voted to strike. Our next proposal after reviewing the books was a reduction and obviously they rejected that.

"The thing that is confusing is that back in March, we offered our books to the union and they didn't want to look at them. Smiley (Watsonville Canning owner Smiley Verduzco) had outlined for them the areas where we needed relief and what the dollar amount was (the company needed to survive).

"The books have always been open and the fact they have not been viewed is the union's fault. I guess a good question is why now all of sudden they say 'we won't negotiate until we look at the books.'"

Lopez says it didn't happen that way at all.

He said initially the company offered to open its books but by

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SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL
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Panetta offers help in strike

By HERON MARQUEZ ESTRADA
Sentinel Staff Writer

SANTA CRUZ — Rep. Leon Panetta, D-Monterey, offered Saturday to use the auspices of his office to intervene and reach a possible settlement in the six-month strike at Watsonville Canning Co.

Panetta made the offer when approached by a group of striking workers from Watsonville Canning Co. who spoke with the Monterey Democrat about what they allege are civil rights abuses by the Watsonville Police Department.

The workers told Panetta that police over the past four days have been dispersing groups of three or more whenever they gather near Watsonville Canning.

The policy was announced by Watsonville Police Chief Ray Belgard Tuesday in response to two days of rioting that resulted from demonstrations called by striking workers and their supporters.

The rallies were also attempts to shut down or disrupt the operations of Watsonville Canning and Richard Shaw Frozen Foods. Shaw reached a settlement with Teamsters Local 912 employees more than a week ago.

The Shaw settlement, which resulted in a 17 percent wage reduction for more than 200 employees, was seen by Watsonville Canning employees as detrimental to their own negotiation efforts.

The two rallies last week were called in efforts to pressure Watsonville Canning to settle the strike, but turned violent when police arrived to enforce a court injunction against assemblies near the plant.

The resulting violence left several people injured and others arrested for tossing rocks and bottles at police and passing motorists. Numerous business estab-

lishments were damaged in the downtown area of the city.

Belgard decided to initiate tighter vigilance of the area and police have saturated the streets around the two canneries since Tuesday night although Belgard acknowledged earlier in the week that it might be an infringement of civil rights.

That was the opinion of the Watsonville group who addressed Panetta Saturday afternoon. They identified themselves as Teamsters and strikers when they asked for Panetta to intervene in the dispute and also attempt to have police loosen their patrols.

Panetta, who said he had been monitoring the situation, offered to call in negotiators from both sides in the dispute. He told the group he and Assemblyman Sam Farr had done the same thing in working towards a settlement between Shaw Frozen Foods and its employees.

lations Board."

Trine says that even though some of his employees "have been beaten, threatened and their children's safety violated, it makes us all the more determined to make sure this company survives. No one has dropped out."

Lopez thinks Trine's stance is a ploy. "Mr. Trine makes it sound as though everything is hunky-dory but it's surface bargaining and he's trying to turn public sentiment against the union."

The same day, Thursday, after Trine said no worker has been intimidated into quitting, a worker at the plant said a truck driver quit after he was followed to his hometown of Salinas where he was beaten and his car windows broken.

Trine says of hiring replacement workers, "Early on, it was difficult getting employees and to some extent that is true now. But there are many out there."

"We can't increase business without more employees but we can survive at the level we're operating now."

Trine was reared on a dairy farm in Upstate New York and has spent his adult working life in food-processing. Before coming to Watsonville Canning two years ago, he spent 19 years with United Foods at Modesto.

"Agriculture has been my life, forever," he says.

"Now we are under seige. It's put many of us in the position of working 24 hours a day; sleep when you need to sleep and the balance of the time is devoted to keeping the operation going."

Lopez talks of the 1,000 union members without a job, the long-term employees of Watsonville Canning who have spent nearly half a year walking the picket lines outside the plant where they used to earn their living. Now, they survive as best they can.

"The people have suffered long enough. All the company has to do is call us to the bargaining table and we'll hammer this out. It's gone on long enough."

At his desk inside, Trine says, "We are determined to make sure this company survives. That is a position we have to maintain."

He reflects for a moment, then quietly says, "No one wins but some survive."

the time negotiations began "over a contract the company had gutted," the company "said it was too late."

"Either Mr. Trine is forgetting the facts or he doesn't know the facts, or he's bending the facts."

Lopez continues, "Now the company wants an agreement of confidentiality that states if anyone discloses any information from the books, they have a \$500,000 liability."

"How can I attempt to keep that information from the membership? How could any auditor live with that?"

Trine says, "Now they say 'yes' to the books and they have trouble with the confidentiality. I don't think they want to negotiate. They want to run us out of business."

He says that if the union would accept the confidentiality agreement "on Monday, we would be ready to negotiate on Tuesday."

Lopez counters, "We are ready to negotiate this afternoon. We'll do it tonight, as tired as I am, we'll do it tonight. I admonish them to put an end to this, it's gone on long enough."

Trine says, "Our goal, very frankly, is to continue operation with permanent replacements to provide our customers the quality and quantity they are accustomed to at a price that is competitive."

The company, he says, has hired 750 permanent replacements (at peak times) and "we've been able to keep up with our sales agreements."

"We expect to operate at full-capacity in March with permanent replacements (at a beginning \$5.05 an hour) and they are permanent replacements as approved by the National Labor Re-