

Watsonville
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VOTING FOR A CHANGE

The Politics of Participation for Watsonville's Latinos



Community organizer Cruz Gomez

By Bob Johnson

Watsonville City Hall is surrounded by Hispanic workers crowded into the aging wooden homes of the final blocks before the bridge over the river to the rich fields of Monterey County. At least half the people in Watsonville are Hispanic but that figure jumps to 80 percent in the downtown neighborhood occupied by thousands who toil in the fields, canneries and nurseries of the Pajaro Valley.

While field workers lean against 12 **THE • SUN** September 1, 1988

lamp posts outside Main Street bars and banter into the night in Spanish, they seldom find their way up the block to the city council chambers where the business of Watsonville is conducted in English. Until the election last year of successful realtor Tony Campos no Hispanic had ever served on the Watsonville City Council. And on those rare occasions when Hispanic workers have come to city hall in large numbers—to protest redevelopment of their neighborhood, interrogation by immigration agents, or massive wage cuts—they have left

reaffirmed in a centuries-old despair that government is not supposed to work for people like them.

The system that has made Watsonville City Hall a white island in the Hispanic downtown, however, has been declared illegal under the federal voting-rights act originally enacted to ensure southern blacks the right to vote. The Ninth District Court of appeals ruled on July 27 that election of the Watsonville City Council at large, rather than from districts, disenfranchises the Hispanic voters concentrated in the downtown.

"Discrimination against Hispanics in California and the Southwest has pervaded nearly all aspects of public life," Judge Dorothy Nelson wrote in the unanimous three-judge decision overturning a lower court ruling against the Watsonville voting rights suit. "This discrimination has touched the right of Hispanics to vote and to participate in politics."

The Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) filed the Watsonville voting-rights suit in 1985 after former YWCA Director Maria Bautista became the latest in a series of Hispanics who ran well downtown but failed miserably among the majority of Anglo voters. MALDEF asked in its suit that Hispanic representation be encouraged by electing the city council in seven districts—two of them with overwhelming Hispanic majorities.

"It's going to change Watsonville," exulted community organizer Cruz Gomez after the decision. "We're going to have candidates who represent low-income people—before, it was hard to get people to run because it was such an uphill battle." Gomez served as director of the Salud Para La Gente health clinic, was more recently active in support of the Watsonville frozen-food strikers, and is now involved in helping area Hispanics cope with the new immigration regulations. In 1983 Gomez ran for city council and was defeated badly, with virtually no support from Anglo voters. Two years later she joined as a plaintiff in the MALDEF suit.

Political despair and cynicism run so deep, however, that it is not a foregone conclusion that Hispanics will

comprise a majority of the voters in districts where they comprise four-fifths of the residents and two-thirds of the citizens. In the last presidential election fewer than 40 percent of the low-income Hispanics eligible to vote nationwide went to the polls, accord-

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ing to the U.S. Census Bureau. That trend holds true in Watsonville, where voter turnout is so low that U.S. District Court Judge William Ingram, who first heard the MALDEF suit last year, concluded there are too few Hispanics voting to determine wheth-

er or not they are politically cohesive.

"We're dealing with hundreds of years of people getting nothing out of the process," said Gomez, who hopes the possibility of winning will finally bring Watsonville's Hispanic workers to the polls. "We're not expecting a magic answer here—but the change, when it comes, will be dramatic."

Watsonville city leaders, believing the change had already begun, were wounded by the court ruling. In the four decades since Mexican immigrants began arriving in the Pajaro Valley in large numbers some have climbed their way to comfort and a handful have reached the highest levels of Watsonville society. And the federal court rebuke of ethnic discrimination in Watsonville came less than 15 months after the city's voters elevated the first Mexican-American ever to hold a seat on the town's governing body.

When Tony Campos was a youth he worked by his father's side picking lettuce in the fields of the Pajaro Valley. He graduated to packing lettuce at the Union Ice plant in Salinas for 14 years. But the energetic and ambitious Campos began, during his years at the packing plant, night classes in real estate that would propel him toward a small fortune while he was still a young man.



Watsonville City Planning Commissioner Robert De La Cruz (left) and Tony Campos, on the night Campos was elected as the first Hispanic to ever sit on the Watsonville City Council

BOB JOHNSON



Watsonville Mayor Betty Murphy

Campos, at age 44, has accumulated interest in 34 Watsonville properties and is committed to adding another property each year as a hedge against his eventual retirement. He has been chosen to serve on the city planning commission and is a respected member of the Watsonville Chamber of Commerce and Agriculture. Campos will mention with pride, early in a discussion of his resume, the chamber's Hispanic Affairs Committee, of which he has been a guiding spirit. Last year Campos crowned those accomplishments by becoming the first Mexican-American ever elected to a city council in Santa Cruz County.

"I can work with all sides—I never forget where I came from," Campos said after his victory in the May 1987 Watsonville City Council election. "I can work with all sides."

Campos traveled with other city leaders to San Jose when the MALDEF suit was first heard in court and he testified in defense of the political treatment of Hispanics in Watsonville. He still opposes district elections in Watsonville and joined with the council's unanimous decision to file an appeal of the court's voting rights edict. "I feel we have candidates out there who can win in at-large elections," Campos told a reporter. "We're getting to know each other and breaking down barriers, I've opened a lot of doors. Are we going to do something now that's going to turn people against people?"

In the four years before Campos's election Hispanics were appointed to virtually every city commission during the tenure of former Mayor Ann Soldo. And the future looks bright for Hispanic success stories who have gained admission to Watsonville's inner circles—among them Campos's close political associate Robert De La Cruz who is a grade-school principal, a chamber of commerce activist, the chair of the planning commission, and a likely candidate for the city council

next May.

During the trial last year in Judge Ingram's court the city tried to show that Watsonville is integrated, with Hispanics residing throughout the community. Demographer Peter Morrison flew in from Pacific Palisades to testify that Watsonville Hispanics are not concentrated in one neighborhood and that they "can be characterized as a broadly middle-class population." (Morrison's research apparently did not include a Saturday-night trip to the working-class bars of lower Main Street.) More to the point, however, Morrison also showed that if the city were divided into the seven districts proposed by MALDEF, most Watsonville Hispanics would live outside the two heavily Hispanic downtown districts.

"Watsonville is pretty small for district elections," Mayor Betty Murphy said after the court ruling. "We had district elections until 1953 when the people voted them out—we called it the old ward system." Community leaders in Watsonville hold on to a pride, or self-deception, that their small agricultural town has, or can, overcome the divisions of the outside world. When Murphy called court-ordered district elections "disheartening" it was not because she resists increased Hispanic representation—she would welcome it—but because she fears it will divide and fragment her community.

The debate over fair play or discrimination in Watsonville politics disintegrates quickly because the two sides are literally asking different questions. Established city leaders point with pride to the acceptance of Campos and others as proof that the Anglo majority is color-blind in rewarding success, and they are confused and angered by persistent charges that the large community of low-income Hispanics has been disenfranchised.

"The [Hispanic] candidates have not been viable candidates who could

appeal to both Hispanics and whites as in the best interest of the city," Watsonville City Attorney Don Haile said before Campos was elected. "They have not been people who have been involved in city and community affairs—on boards and commissions, the chamber of commerce, and other community affairs."

But the 4,000 Hispanics who work in the canneries of the Pajaro Valley and a larger number who work in the fields and greenhouses, are not likely to look for their leaders in the chamber of commerce. The question raised by Watsonville voting-rights activists is whether these people, too, will be represented.

Nearly 150 Hispanic women who sort, clean and cut broccoli on the line at a local frozen food plant huddled together at the west end of the Watsonville Seniors Center one summer evening two years ago as the community assembled to discuss their future at a town hall meeting. The women were among the more than 1,000 workers who had stubbornly remained on strike against the Watsonville Canning & Frozen Food Co. for 11 months rather than accept a pay cut from \$282 a week to \$202 a week.

As massive wage cuts swept through the frozen-food industry of the Pajaro and Salinas Valleys both Santa Cruz Mayor Mike Rotkin and Santa Cruz area activists offered their support to the strikers. And Watsonville-born State Senator Henry Mello also tried to help in his own way—by lining up potential new owners to buy the largest frozen-food plant in Watsonville from Mort Console, who was locked in a death dance with his workers.

The Reverend Jesse Jackson also made an appearance in Watsonville—to honor the strike as a continuation of the great civil-rights marches of the 1960s and to exhort the workers to join his political congregation of the dispossessed by registering to vote. (Jackson's personal visit to Watsonville, and appeal to participate in the political system, helped triple his Watsonville support from 11 percent in 1984 to nearly 30 percent this year.)

But it seemed before that night at the Watsonville Seniors Center that the momentous strike of 1985-1987 would be another chapter in the story of Watsonville's working-class Hispanics receiving no help from political leaders in their own town.

• In the late 1970s downtown residents protested at city hall against a redevelopment project that would have demolished much of their neighborhood. Santa Cruz tavern proprietor Chris Matthews, then a Watsonville resident, rose to appointment to the county board of supervisors in part through his involvement in this protest, and Matthews's associate Mario Carabarin emerged from the movement as an unsuccessful city council candidate.

The redevelopment project has gone ahead, however, albeit on a reduced scale, and the neighbors have long since given up coming to city hall to protest.

• More than 1,000 Pajaro Valley residents signed petitions in 1984 protesting alleged abuses by immigration agents. More than 100 of the protesters came to testify to the Watsonville city council that the *migra* were

singling out Hispanics for uncivil—and illegal—interrogations and were even entering homes without authorization.

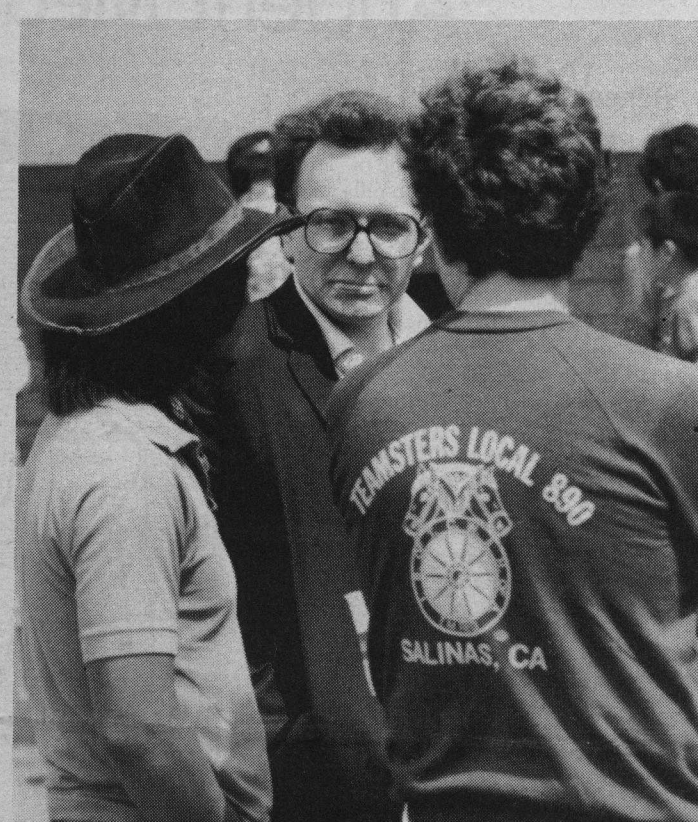
The protesters were unceremoniously directed to take their gripes to Santa Cruz County, which took the lead in establishing a task force that regularly brings together Santa Cruz County, Santa Cruz City, and Immigration and Naturalization Service officials, along with Representative Leon Panetta and critics of the immigration service, to discuss allegations of mistreatment of area Hispanics.

The town meeting that brought 400 residents to the seniors center, including the 150 cannery workers, was suggested by then-councilmember Betty Murphy in the hope that the devastating strike would be one time that city leaders would find a way to

do something for Watsonville's Hispanic workers.

It was not to be.

The workers at the west end of the room listened through headphones to Spanish-language translation of the English-language speeches made by a score of councilmembers and civic leaders on stage—all of them Anglo except carnation grower Harry Fukutome and Teamster leader Sergio Lopez. Nothing came of the evening except the decision to hold annual town meetings that have drawn overwhelmingly Anglo crowds to discuss Watsonville's general plan or the future of area business. The frustrated workers slipped quietly into the night after that 1986 meeting—and it has not since been necessary to translate the business of Watsonville into the language that cuts the broccoli. •



Salinas attorney Jesse Sanchez believes his city, too, could soon be pressured into adopting district local elections

Stirrings in Salinas

Twenty miles of strawberry fields and flower nurseries down the road from Watsonville the Mexican-Americans of the Alisal neighborhood in East Salinas are likely candidates to be next to achieve district local elections. Although 40,000 Hispanics live in Salinas, out of 100,000 residents, there has never been a Mexican-American on the Salinas City Council.

"The Salinas case is even stronger than the one in Watsonville," said Salinas attorney Jesse Sanchez, who serves on the Alisal School Board and attended the recent Democratic convention in Atlanta as an elected delegate for Jesse Jackson. When Sanchez ran for the Salinas City Council three years ago he was supported by two-thirds of the Alisal voters but still lost because he did not appeal to Anglos in middle-class North Salinas or in the older agricultural south end of town.

When the Watsonville voting-rights suit was filed in 1985 more

than one-fourth of all the cities in California had at least 10 percent Hispanic populations but no elected Hispanic local officials. "We are looking at a number of other local governments—county boards, city councils, and school districts," said MALDEF attorney Denise Hulett, who believes the precedent-setting Watsonville case could take this state the way of Texas, where scores of local governments south of the Mason-Dixon line were pressured into adopting district elections and Latinos emerged as a force in state politics. "We are looking at the entire state of California."

Rather than march a fourth of the cities in California through the courts, negotiated settlements are a more likely strategy for voting-rights activists: "I would like to see us sit down and come to some agreement on districts," Sanchez said about Salinas, "so we can all avoid the time and expense of a lawsuit."

—Bob Johnson

HISPANIC WATSONVILLE CITY COUNCIL CANDIDATES IN THE 1980s

Year	Candidate	% Support Downtown	% Support in the rest of Watsonville
1981	Mario Carabarin	40.2	24.1
1983	Cruz Gomez	38.4	19.9
1985	Maria Bautista	43.4	18.7
1987	Juan Morales	61.8	34.6
	Tony Campos	53.9	65.2
	Leo Estrada	34.1	33.9

Source: Watsonville City Clerk.