

Cannery dispute: year one

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WATSONVILLE — It has become known as The Strike and it has lasted for one year, with no end in sight.

The walkout by workers from Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food Co. has developed into more than a labor dispute.

It has become a catalyst for political causes and what may be an enduring battle for control of the city of Watsonville's destiny.

It began Sept. 6, 1985:

Workers on strike at two largest canneries From a Sentinel headline, Sept. 9, 1985., More than 1,700 workers at Watsonville Canning and Richard Shaw Frozen Foods walked off the job Sept. 6 after contract negotiations between the management of those two companies and Teamsters Union Local 912 broke down.

Cannery talks break down, Sept. 11, 1985 The first of many such stories. Watsonville Canning, already paying assembly-line workers 40 cents an hour less than other processors, tries to cut wages another 30 percent, with benefit cuts.

Shaw, paying \$7.06 an hour to line workers, seeks parity with Watsonville Canning, the largest processor in the United States. The union does not respond to management's pleas

of financial hardship.

Strikers charge police harassment Sept. 25, 1985 Many of these stories would reappear, month after month. In this case, strikers and pickets

accuse the Watsonville Police Department of cracking down on their efforts, while escorting company re-

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Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Striking Watsonville Canning employees protest against non-union workers at a October 1985 demonstration in Watsonville.

Cannery strike

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placement workers across picket lines.

No end in sight to Watsonville strike Sept. 26, 1985 "We would not have given the proposals we gave that led to the strike if it was not absolutely and unequivocally necessary" — Smiley Verduzco, then-president of Watsonville Canning.

"There's no way I can work for \$4.25 an hour. If I want to make that, I'll got to McDonald's" — Margarita Martinez, striking worker from Watsonville Canning.

1,500 supporters at rally Oct. 7, 1985 Police in riot gear line Watsonville streets as strikers and supporters march peacefully past the two struck plants.

Six arrested as strike unrest grows Oct. 11, 1985 Watsonville Police Chief Ray Belgard views the aftermath of a night's violence and arson and compares it to a "minor Watts scene."

Final offer rejected by strikers Oct. 29, 1985 Striking workers from Watsonville Canning vote 800-1 against the company's "last and final" offer of \$5.05 an hour for assembly-line workers, plus benefit cuts. Companies continue to insist foreign imports and out-of-state competition has put them in financial peril.

Watsonville Police oversee uneasy peace on picket line Nov. 3, 1985 In an interview, police chief Belgard says, "If I were offered \$2 an hour less for this job, I'd probably be out in front of City Hall with a placard. Not throwing rocks, but I'd be pretty vocal."

2,000 join strike march Nov. 4, 1985 "As the cry of *Huelga* reverberated like a thunderclap down this city's working-class streets, nearly 2,000 marchers paraded peacefully past two struck frozen-food plants Sunday afternoon."

Teamsters mull boycott Nov. 6, 1985 United Farm Workers President Cesar Chavez temporarily

Teamster leaders begin to formulate a plan to end the stalemate. The boycott, however, will prove difficult to implement, perhaps impossible on a consumer level, where products cannot be readily identified.

Strike confrontation in Salinas Nov. 7, 1985 Violence breaks out as strikers and supporters confront company vans picking up replacement workers

Strikers have plenty of time now for family life Nov. 10, 1985 "Nine weeks after the strike began, nine weeks after the company proposed cutting her wages 45 percent, Rosa Maria Ventura certainly has time to see her family. Not that it was ever that difficult. With six children, her husband and herself living in three tiny rooms in back of a house on a central Watsonville street, she rarely lacks for company."

Watsonville rebuttal embitters strikers Nov. 13, 1985 The Watsonville City Council is angrily confronted by strike supporters after the council refuses to take a stand on the strike and evictions of workers from their homes.

Tension high as mediation begins in strike Nov. 18, 1985 State Sen. Henry Mello and U.S. Rep. Leon Panetta are successful in bringing federal mediator Robert Crall into faltering negotiations.

Agencies struggling to help striking workers Nov. 24, 1985 Social service agencies reel trying to meet needs of strikers, who live on \$55 a week in union benefits plus food donations.

Growers hit hard by strike Dec. 4, 1985 Produce goes unharvested, bills go unpaid . . .

Lopez expected to take charge of Teamsters Local 912 Dec. 15, 1985 Sergio Lopez prepares to take over leadership of union from Richard King, the local union chief for 33 years. King's long-time friendships with company owners dissolved in the bitter atmosphere of the strike.

marily Hispanic membership.

Christmas 1985, on the strike lines Dec. 22, 1985 "Not a Feliz Navidad or a carol could be heard anywhere — only the whirring of the giant refrigerators inside the plant and the growl of the tractor trailers as they sidled in through the security-guarded gates."

Ceasefire ends on strike line Jan. 7, 1986 Shooting incidents, rock throwing, company outrage . . .

Strike Support Committee — Accuser and accused Jan. 26, 1986 Strike supporters organize Mexican community and assail Watsonville police and city government.

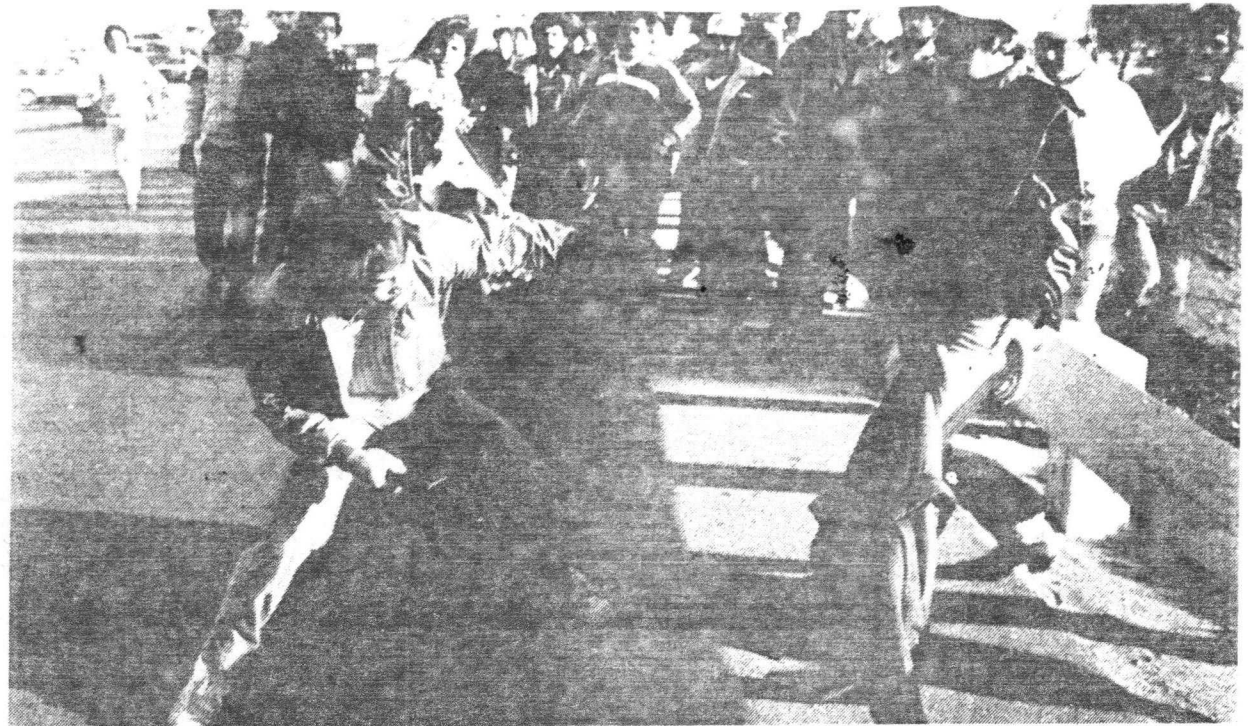
Striking workers ratify Shaw pact Feb. 14, 1986 After stormy session, workers at Shaw agree to a new contract calling for \$5.85 an hour for assembly-line workers — part of a \$1.21 an hour cut for all workers there. Benefits are not cut, however, and workers get profit-sharing program. Strike supporters accuse the union of selling out workers. Watsonville Canning continues to hold to \$5.05 offer.

Police, protestors blame each other for violence Feb. 18, 1986 Worst violence yet in strike erupts. President's Week "Shut It Down" demonstrations lead to window-breaking spree down Main Street, overturned vehicles, police-protestors confrontations.

'We are under siege' Feb. 23, 1986 Watsonville Canning President Ron Trine describes how he has been attacked by strikers and supporters and blames union for escalating violence.

Pay cuts spread among food processors March 12, 1986 Smaller processors ask for and get wage concessions from union.

Innocent verdict returned in Watsonville strike rallies May 9, 1986 Five strike supporters found not guilty of charges relating to President's Week violence, after highly politicized trial in which prosecutor asks jury to find two of the defendants innocent. Three weeks later,



Dan Coyro/Sentinel file

A non-union worker swings a club at striker in November 1985 incident.

of protestors innocent of similar charges.

Jackson exhorts justice for all June 30, 1986 More than 4,000 gather to hear Rev. Jesse Jackson liken plight of strikers to that of southern blacks during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Jackson, however, is unable to offer instant solution to the now 10-month-old conflict.

Crosetti workers vote again; decide to accept cut in pay July 17, 1986 Workers at J.J. Crosetti, the third-largest frozen-food processor in the Pajaro Valley, vote to reject then later vote to accept offer of \$5.85 an hour for line workers. Contract and votes spark dissension within Teamsters.

Watsonville's frustrations aired Aug. 6, 1986 A city council-sponsored "town meeting" allows residents, strikers, supporters, merchants, businessmen to describe worsening financial climate, especially in downtown area.

Two sides claim win at cannery Aug. 15, 1986 Certification election to

continue to represent workers at Watsonville Canning becomes almost hopelessly snarled after both union and company make numerous objections and challenges. National Labor Relations Board, which supervises election, says results could be years off.

Strike negotiations break down Aug. 29, 1986 After eight-month hiatus, talks begin between Watsonville Canning and union — only to fall apart again after two meetings. Union blames company for sending low-ranking officials, while company says it wishes to talk about challenged certification election before negotiating.

Watsonville Canning faces boycott Sept. 4, 1986 Teamsters say long-delayed boycott against growers, lenders and customers doing business with Watsonville Canning is moving full speed ahead. Watsonville Canning's Verduzco says, "They can do anything they want. A boycott will do absolutely nothing to

Strike rally set today

WATSONVILLE — A rally and barbecue marking the one year anniversary of the Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food Co. strike will take place from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. today at Ramsay Park, a spokesman for the Watsonville Strike Support Committee announced.

Scheduled speakers include Santa Cruz Mayor Mike Rotkin, Teamster officials, and representatives of various student and Latino groups.

Mariachis will provide entertainment. The gathering is informal and organizers said they do not expect any security problems.