

Norcal to hire despite vote delay

By LANE WALLACE
and JESSE CHAVARRIA
STAFF WRITERS

On the day the strike was supposed to end, it didn't.

Striking frozen-food workers voted yesterday for a week's delay on a contract vote at Norcal Frozen Foods, and the company responded by saying it will begin hiring Monday without regard to union affiliation.

After a three-hour debate, striking Teamsters voted 283-193 to delay for a week voting

on the contract offered by Norcal, the new company that took over last week from the defunct Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food Co.

The vote came at 1 p.m. Three hours later, the company issued a statement saying it would begin hiring Monday and would ignore union affiliation. Watsonville Canning had been using non-union workers since the strike started in September 1985.

Had the contract been ratified, the company would have been calling people back to

work based on their Watsonville Canning seniority.

The company is offering the wages and benefits that were in the tentative agreement signed Tuesday by union officials and the company. The contract, which pays \$5.85 an hour, is essentially the same as the one in force at Richard A. Shaw Inc. and Crosetti Frozen Foods, Norcal's local competitors. Because Norcal is a new company, workers would not immediately qualify for medical and vacation benefits.

The Norcal statement said

that if a majority of those hired are former Watsonville Canning workers, the company will continue to recognize the Team-

Women vow to fast until contract's accepted.
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sters as the bargaining agent.

Alex Ybarrolaza, of Teamsters Union Joint Council No. 7 in San Francisco, said this morning union officials would

try to persuade Norcal executives to continue negotiating with the striking workers.

But Ybarrolaza said the strikers had lost their legal rights to continued negotiations when they failed to vote on the tentative agreement yesterday. Nonetheless, union officials have a strong commitment to the "courageous" strikers, he said.

Ybarrolaza said it was imperative the strikers separate their 18-month labor dispute with Watsonville Canning from their negotiations with Norcal, a new

entity. He said he felt the strikers were having a hard time separating the issues, largely because of a "disinformation campaign" being waged by "those who want to continue the problem."

Ybarrolaza said he thought it would be difficult to persuade Norcal to continue negotiating because the company was also pressured by the urgent need to begin processing produce.

Dick Maltzman, an attorney for Norcal, said he and com-

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pany owner David Gill were "deeply disappointed" by the vote. He said union officials assured them the workers would approve it.

If the company eventually winds up hiring non-union people to fill the majority of the jobs at the plant, Maltzman said, it will be under no obligation to enter into a contract with the Teamsters.

He said company negotiators will meet with union officials soon, but that increased benefits for workers, one of the concerns that held up the vote, will not be negotiated.

Maltzman wouldn't say where or when the negotiations will be held.

Some workers were upset that under the new contract, they wouldn't qualify for health benefits until they'd worked 1,400 hours.

Norcal will not get rid of non-union people it hires beginning Monday, even if the union approves the contract next week, Maltzman said.

Norcal is under pressure to produce and cannot wait a week, Maltzman said.

"The growers have crops in the ground and we can't tell them to stop growing," he said. "They're coming in to market and we need to freeze it."

He said 12 to 15 mechanics will be hired immediately; it will take the plant two weeks to begin processing broccoli and spinach. Line workers will then be hired and the work force will increase to 60 to 80 people. Within a few weeks, the work force will go to 250, he said.

Applications for all categories of work will be taken Monday, including from those who won't begin right away.

The company hopes to employ 700 workers by the fall, Maltzman said.

Yesterday's vote came after an argument on the method of voting that was to be used in the ratification vote.

Sergio Lopez, leader of Local 912, and Joe Fahey, one of the local's business agents, engaged in a lengthy and often personal debate.

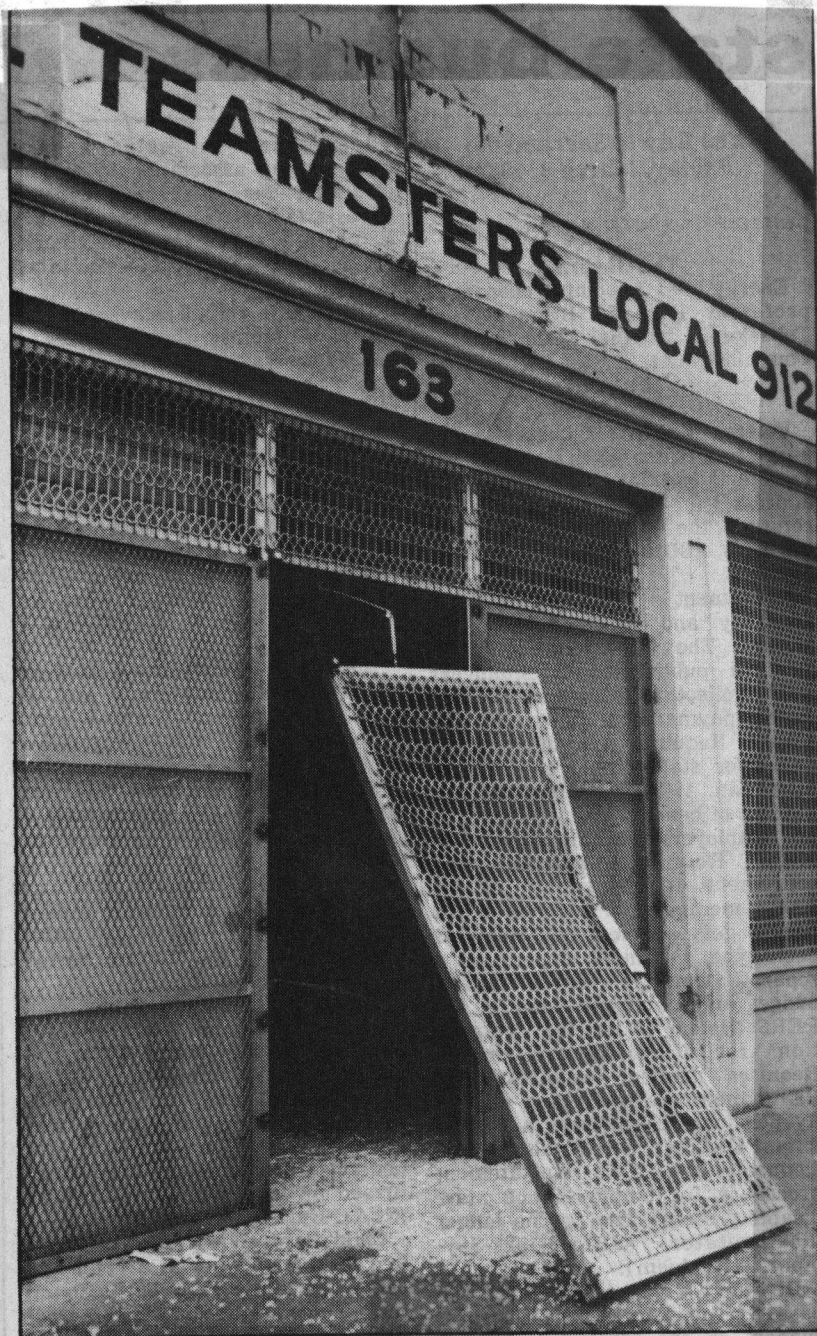
Fahey, a leader of those asking for a delay, said people wanted to know more details of the contract before committing themselves. They also wanted their leadership to try to get a better deal on benefits.

"Many said they've been out on strike for 18 months for a decent contract, so they can wait one more week," he said.

Fahey said there was a legal question about the vote the union was requiring on the agreement.

Fahey contended that a majority vote is needed to approve a contract to resolve a strike.

Lopez and Alex Ybarrolaza, of Teamsters Joint Council 7, said the Teamster rule that only a one-third vote is needed on a final offer applies here. The strike is over, they said, and rules about voting to end a strike no longer apply.



Chip Scheuer

In a series of violent incidents last night, door to Teamsters headquarters was torn off. Story, page 1.

Lopez emphasized that the company's offer was good only until Monday and that a week's delay could jeopardize the offer.

Lopez also said that because the Teamsters consider the strike over, the \$55-a-week strike benefits will stop after Tuesday's checks. The food giveaway program will continue.

Strikers interviewed after the vote said they wanted to see actual copies of the tentative agreement, rather than summaries, before voting on it. They said they also wanted their leaders to use the week to try to negotiate further for a better deal on benefits. Their main complaint was the provision that those working fewer than 1,400 hours annually will have to wait three years for health benefits.

Strikers said they would prefer that their benefits be brought up to the level they had earned in their time working for Watsonville Canning.

"We want our benefits before we go in," said Esperanza Torres, a striker who worked at Watsonville Canning for five years.

Striker Fidelia Carrisoza said she wanted a week to get things clear in her mind.

"It is necessary before voting. We want to see the contract and sit down and read it," she said.

There was even opposition from the strikers' negotiating committee, which had supported the tentative agreement. Committee member Carlos Hernandez made the motion for the week's delay.

"We are following what the strikers want," said committee member Gloria Betancourt. "If the people don't like the settlement, it is not our position to come back and say 'Take it.'"