

Picketing continues at frozen-food plant

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Striking workers continued picketing Norcal Frozen Foods this morning, while Teamster officials sought new talks with the company.

On Friday, striking workers voted for a week's delay in voting on a contract offer from Norcal, the new company which is taking over from defunct Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food Co.

The tentative contract with Norcal had been worked out last Tuesday.

The company responded to Friday's vote by announcing it would begin hiring today without regard to union affiliation and would pay the same wages as those proposed in the tentative contract — \$5.85 an hour for line workers and up to \$10.39 for mechanics. During the 18-month strike, Watsonville Canning was paying \$5.05 to \$5.15 to line workers.

About 150 people gathered outside the plant this morning, occasionally chanting "No contract, no work." The restraining order limiting picketing is no longer in effect



Striker Gloria Betancourt made her feelings known to Norcal Frozen Foods officials. To her left (in scarf) is Cuca Lomeli.

Chip Scheuer

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because it was secured by Watsonville Canning, not Norcal, police said. Police watched the crowd from parked cars near the plant and on frequent patrols.

A mood of hesitation pervaded the groups of strikers as they clustered around the gates. If a car approached one gate or attempted to turn into the plant, dozens of strikers would converge there, running from one gate to another.

"Half a dozen" mechanics applied for work this morning, said Norcal vice-president Ron Trine, who held a brief press conference inside the plant

gate. Striking workers said none of their members had crossed the picket line.

In a letter passed to strikers this morning, local Teamster leader Sergio Lopez urged members not to apply for work.

"We are attempting to negotiate further with David Gill (Norcal president) and are confident you will all be able to go back to work together very soon," Lopez wrote.

On Friday, Lopez had urged Teamsters to ratify the contract rather than wait a week.

Lopez was in San Francisco

this morning; he could not be reached for comment. Gill was not at the plant; other company officials said they didn't know where he was.

The Strikers' Committee also held a press conference outside a Walker Street home across from the plant, where a tent has been erected.

Striker Chavelo Moreno said strikers will continue to guard the gates to deter applicants until a settlement is reached.

"Those would be our jobs they are applying for," he said. "That is the plant our work

built, and we have a right to keep our jobs. We are still united and we will be united until we have a settlement."

Meanwhile, six strikers and two supporters kept up a hunger strike which began Friday afternoon.

"They will keep up their strike until we get the benefits we seek," said Moreno.

Health benefits have become the pivotal issue in the current dispute. Full-time workers will not be eligible for coverage until they have worked 1,400 hours—the equivalent of about

eight months—in one year.

A gathering of about 80 workers outside the hunger-strike headquarters on Walker Street were told to keep a peaceful, strong presence around the plant. They were told repeatedly by strike leaders to remain calm to avoid conflict with the police, and that any arrests could affect a striker's seniority with the new company.

Trine said the strikers' actions are "a hell of a way to repay David Gill" for his efforts in starting the company.

Of the crowd outside the

plant, Trine said, "I don't see a lot of our former employees (from Watsonville Canning days) out there."

Smiley Verduzco, who was executive vice-president of the holding company for Watsonville Canning, showed up at the Norcal plant this morning. Gill had said last week that Verduzco was not a part of Norcal.

A cordial Verduzco said he was part of the transition effort between the old and new companies; he wouldn't say if he would continue to be a part of Norcal.