

Watsonville strike all but over

Vote on ratification scheduled for Friday

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SAN FRANCISCO — After 19 months, the strike against Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food Co. appears to be over. All that remains now to end the bitter dispute is ratification of a tentative agreement signed Tuesday at the headquarters of Joint Council 7, the Teamsters' Northern California ruling body.

Signing the pact were Teamsters union officials, a committee of strikers, and the owner of NorCal Frozen Foods Inc., David Gill.

The ratification vote is scheduled for Friday.

While the agreement came too late to save Watsonville Canning, it was warmly embraced Tuesday by Gill, union officials and the strike committee.

Final details of the tentative contract were worked out Tuesday morning, four days after Wells Fargo Bank foreclosed on Watson-

ville Canning and Gill took control of the plant.

The contract will be put to a vote of Watsonville Local 912 strikers at 9 a.m. Friday at the Veterans Hall on East Beach Street.

Among its provisions:

- \$5.85 an hour for assembly line workers, which is identical to wages set forth in contracts signed last year at other Pajaro Valley processors.

- "Productivity incentives," which were called comparable to profit-sharing plans put into force at several other processors. The incentives, according to Teamster officials, are not based on individual performance, but on overall plant productivity. Another incentive would pay bonuses if workers' compensation claims are less frequent.

- Workers will be treated as "new" employees. Strikers with

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Teamsters' leader Sergio Lopez offers strike mementos to new company owner David Gill.

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Strike

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seniority will be called back first, but once they are back on the job, they will have to earn seniority, vacation time and other benefits anew. Joe Fahey, Local 912's business agent, indicated Tuesday that union dissidents will urge rank-and-file union members not to ratify the agreement because of this provision.

- The Teamster pension plan will be in effect; other fringe benefits will be similar to the other contracts.

- The union and company will renegotiate the contract in February 1988, the same month as new negotiations will begin with Richard Shaw Frozen Foods, currently the biggest frozen food company in the Pajaro Valley.

- Replacement workers still employed at the plant will be fired and not rehired.

The Teamsters-NorCal pact also contains another directive: that the union will reverse the damage done by its economic boycott, which was aimed at cutting off Watsonville Canning's credit, customers and suppliers.

Both sides predicted that an estimated 500 of the more than 1,000 strikers will return to work within six weeks. If the contract is ratified, the plant could be in operation within two weeks, said a NorCal official.

The press conference was the union's show all the way. A committee of strikers, Local 912 Secretary-Treasurer Sergio Lopez, President Leon Ellis, Joint Council 7 President Chuck Mack, economic boycott chief Alex Ybarralozza and John Blake, who has been the eyes and ears of Teamsters International boss Jackie Presser during the strike, all gathered around a table as Lopez and the strikers signed the agreement.

Gill, smiling, flourished a pen as



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From left, Lopez, Mack and Gill sign tentative agreement. In the background at right is Gill's lawyer, Richard Maltzman. Other Teamsters in background are, from left, Carlos Hernandez, Gloria Betancourt, Cuca Lomeli, Jose Antonio Maciel and Leon Ellis.

well. He was joined by Ron Trine, formerly president of Watsonville Canning and now General Manager of NorCal, and by attorney Richard Maltzman.

Mack called the agreement a "tremendous victory for ourselves and for organized labor."

Lopez, who took over a bankrupt, demoralized Local 912 nearly four months into the strike, said it was "gratifying" to have the strikers' committee in attendance, since strikers "have endured all the pain and suffering."

He called the speed with which Gill and the union came to an agreement a "tremendous feat" that hap-

pened "just when everything looked lost" and after the union had "defeated Watsonville Canning."

Earlier, Ybarralozza spoke about how Watsonville Canning could have been "saved" by signing a similar contract after the union settled in February 1986 with Shaw.

Mack announced that the tentative agreement was the major step toward ending the "longest active strike in the country."

Gill, who inherited a \$19 million debt to Wells Fargo — run up by Watsonville Canning and its owner, Mort Console — said he was "surprised" at how quickly the two sides had reached an agreement.

Gill, a King City resident, represents 14 Salinas Valley growers, not all of whom will be connected to NorCal, he said. Gill farms or harvests nearly 3,000 acres of broccoli, cauliflower, lettuce, onions and peppers.

Gill reiterated that growers owed money by Watsonville Canning will be repaid out of existing inventory, which he valued at between \$6 million and \$6.5 million. He said growers are owed a total of \$7.3 million. Console also left behind millions more in debts to unsecured creditors, which he is responsible for paying, according to Wells Fargo.

"I'm just glad this whole thing is

over," said Gill, who negotiated for months to take control of Watsonville Canning, which owed him \$5 million.

If any part of the tentative contract will prove troublesome for strikers to accept, it will be their status as "new" employees, said Local 912 business agent Fahey, who has been allied with dissident forces within the union. Fahey said that because workers will be denied seniority, they will not receive health and welfare benefits for three years. He predicted that the membership would not vote to ratify.

Lopez angrily said, "What's the alternative? To continue the strike?

For what — recognition?" He said that some workers — mechanics and other tradespeople — will qualify within 90 days. Many workers will qualify within one year, Lopez said.

The tentative agreement was the culmination of a series of events that began in January when Console walked into Lopez's office seeking a settlement to the divisive strike.

Within a few weeks, though, the plant was closed down and Console was on his way out.

And then, swiftly, Watsonville Canning was gone, NorCal was here, and the longest strike in the history of Santa Cruz County, one of the longest in the nation, was over.