

Norcal ready to hire

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STAFF WRITER

Norcal Frozen Foods Inc. has taken over the operation of Watsonville Canning and Frozen Foods Co. and is seeking new employees without a union contract, according to a written statement by the new company.

A contract between the new company and the Teamsters union is still a possibility, however, according to Sergio Lopez, secretary-treasurer of Local 912. He said picket lines will continue outside the plant and no union members will apply for work until an agreement is reached.

Lopez and Norcal's president, David Gill, were to meet at 3 p.m. today in San Francisco. Lopez said although a formal contract wouldn't necessarily be required before union members went to work for Norcal, he is at least expecting an "agreement in principle" that would pay the prevailing industry wage of \$5.85 an hour.

A statement issued by Norcal legal counsel, the San Francisco law firm Titchell, Maltman, Bass, Ohleyer, and Mishel, said that Norcal has "acquired the operating assets of Watsonville Canning and California Freezing and Cold Storage Company pursuant to an interim operating agreement and will immediately commence preparing the facilities for operation."

The new company declared its intention of "hiring employees on a non-discriminatory basis immediately. Norcal will hire based on years of experience and will not discriminate on the basis of union affiliation or strike participation. Former workers of Watsonville (Canning) and California Freezing and Cold Storage Company with seniority will have an advantage in the hiring process."

Lopez said strikers will not apply until the union has an agreement.

"It's important to point out that even though they have announced to the media they have taken over, there is no production going on at the plant," said Lopez. "There is no raw product going into the plant and no one has gone to work there. To my knowledge no new employees, except management, have gone into the plant."

Lopez said the statement from Norcal concerned him, but that

he "didn't want to make a big deal about it" since so much is yet to be determined about Norcal's future.

"What I do like about their statement, if it reflects their attitude, is that they will not discriminate against strikers," Lopez said.

The union leader said he would approach today's talks with "good faith ... I am not going in disgruntled about anything yet," he said.

The Norcal statement also said that Russell Egan, a long-time leader in the frozen-food industry, will become chief financial officer of the new company. Egan was employed with Richard Shaw Frozen Food Inc. from 1977 to 1983.

Other management includes former Watsonville Canning president, Ron Trine, according to union officials. Former Watsonville Canning executive Smiley Verduzco reportedly has no role in Norcal. The status of Watsonville Canning owner, Edward 'Mort' Console, is unknown.

Phone calls to the plant early this morning were answered "Watsonville Canning," but by mid-morning a receptionist began answering the phone "Norcal Frozen Foods." Messages left for Trine and Egan were not returned.

One of the first actions of Norcal will be to sell off Watsonville Canning's inventory to pay off debts to growers. Norcal's statement said:

"The inventory of frozen food products formerly owned by Watsonville Canning has been transferred to Watsonville Canning's former growers and Norcal has been appointed agent of those growers and will sell that inventory at such time as it obtains its appropriate license from the California Department of Food and Agriculture."

George Reese, chief of marketing enforcement for the state department, said he expects the license to be issued soon and would not object to allowing Norcal to operate the Walker Street plant under Watsonville Canning's license in the interim.

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