

1,000 workers on strike at two largest canneries

By KEITH MURAOKA
Sentinel Staff Writer

WATSONVILLE — More than 1,000 workers at the two largest canneries here grabbed picket signs this morning rather than produce — striking over proposed wage and benefit cuts.

Both sides at Watsonville Canning and Richard Shaw Frozen Foods are gearing for a long fight. Watsonville Police Chief Ray Belgard reported

one incident of a picketer throwing nails in front of a produce truck, but no arrests were made. Police are maintaining what he called "occasional surveillance."

Teamsters Union Local 912 spokesman Richard King told The Sentinel this morning, "I have never seen workers this adamant, and I've been here 32 years." He said no new negotiations are scheduled with either Watsonville Canning or Richard Shaw Frozen Foods. The two sides have been at an impasse for several weeks.

Watsonville is the largest frozen vegetable-producing city in the nation. At present, employees at other canneries including Green Giant and J.J. Crosetti have not been affected.

Management at the two canneries have taken out full-page ads in local newspapers calling for replacement employees in the event of a strike. While it is not known how many, if any, new workers have been hired, a spokesman at Watsonville Canning said the plant is operating today.

King is not worried about the call for replacement workers. He said canneries were not going to get "experienced people" to work for \$4.50 an hour. "They're also not going to get experienced workers to cross the picket lines."

King added that employees would probably be willing to accept a "salary freeze" for a year, but will not stand for a cut in wages and benefits. Reductions in the 30 percent range have been reported at the two canneries.

Richard Shaw Frozen Foods



Workers picketed at Richard Shaw Frozen Foods this morning.

Pete Amos/Sentinel

worker Pete Ramirez charged this morning that the companies are attempting to "bust the union." He said the canneries would rather hire illegal aliens, willing to work for \$4.50 an hour.

Patrick Guevara added, "They want to go back to the way it was in the '50s." A more somber George Perez noted, "We don't want to go on strike, but we have to secure ourselves for the future."

The strike comes at a particularly critical time since the "fall pack" or heaviest production time for the local industry is starting. Broccoli, spinach, Brussels sprouts and beans are being harvested now.

Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau Manager Jess Brown called it an "important time." He noted that a lot of crops are coming in now — not only locally, but also from King City and much of Monterey County.

Larry Vauter, personnel manager at Watsonville Canning, had no comment regarding the strike this morning. Last month, however, he said the last contract proposal rejected by employees would have retained current salaries, with cutbacks in a number of benefit areas.

Norman Kingsley, controller at Richard Shaw Frozen Foods, said their final contract proposal would have rolled back salaries an average of 40-cents-an-hour.

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