

2,000 march in strike rally here

Event is
generally
peaceful

By JESSE CHAVARRIA
STAFF WRITER

Aside from scattered incidents of rock throwing, a rally and march organized by striking workers of Watsonville frozen-food companies yesterday was conducted in a gentlemanly manner.

There were no arrests, no citations and no head-knocking as an estimated 2,000 people gathered in Callaghan Park for a "Solidarity Day" rally.

Most of the people at the rally also took part in a parade-like march that wound down Main Street and, eventually, to the gates of Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food Co. and Richard A. Shaw Inc.

A few rocks, sticks and a 7-Up soda can were thrown when marchers reached the gates of Shaw's and were met by barricades and rows of police and sheriff's deputies.

The rocks narrowly missed deputies, while the soda pop can hit one, Monterey County Sheriff's Deputy Ray Patterson, 35, splattering his shirt as it bounced off his chest. He was not injured.



The crowd at Sunday's rally marched down Walker Street en route to the picket line at Watsonville Canning.

Kurt Ellison

A couple of rocks were also thrown at the police barricade at Watsonville Canning.

However, Police Chief Ray Belgard said the five-hour rally and march went well from a law-enforcement viewpoint.

The chief — who had from 80 to 100 officers from Monterey and Santa Cruz counties, Santa Cruz and Watsonville working the protest — said what pleased him the most about the rally were the teams of strike monitors (captains) formed by organizers.

The monitors linked arms and formed lines in front of the police barricades to keep the protesters from getting too close to the law-enforcement people.

The same monitors also worked hand in hand with the California Highway Patrol, which dispatched a unit to serve as a pace car at the head of the procession.

Officers and monitors also helped block off side streets to keep the marchers on the pre-arranged course.

The monitors also patrolled the crowd and weeded out troublemakers, like the ones who tossed the rocks and the soda pop.

"I'm glad the marchers took care of that," Belgard said. "It's a big help, really. They have policed themselves inside. If they do not, it is monkey-see, monkey-do."

Belgard said he believes that

since the rally was organized by local people, it was easier to keep control.

"I really do believe they want to make it peaceful," he said. "I didn't think they want to push us into anything. I think it is simply an outlet for anxiety."

One strike monitor, Oscar Rios, said he was also pleased with the way the event turned out, although he was sorry about missing the 49ers game.

"See, this is well-organized by the strikers themselves, not outside people," he said. "It shows we are able to organize ourselves. Besides, I can always read about the game in the paper."

Marcher Joe Fahey, a member of the Teamsters for a Democratic Union, who helped put together an earlier rally, said this rally was better organized than the one that was held two weeks ago in conjunction with a rally against alleged abuses of the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

The police chief said that even a group of 250 supporters — mostly students — bused in from San Jose-Santa Clara and San Francisco areas didn't cause much problems.

"When I saw the five busloads of student types, I thought, 'Oh, brother,'" he said. "But they mixed in well."

He said the rally organizers themselves let their Bay Area supporters know that if they were thinking about starting trouble, they should just stay home.

Reese Erlich, a free-lance writer who acted as spokesman

for what he called the Northern California Watsonville Strike Support Committee, said the supporters consisted of, among other groups, MECHA clubs — an activist Hispanic student group — Berkeley graduate students and Oakland postal workers.

One of the marchers was Delia Mendez, a Pajaro Valley schoolteacher who last month was arrested along with a group of students. She commented: "It's great to see the university students from the Bay Area coming out in force. It shows that we are not alone."

Belgard did criticize one band of eight of so out-of-town marchers who tried to get the rest of the marchers to rush police lines.

The chief was also a bit perturbed by a memo written by Santa Cruz County Supervisor Gary Patton, asking the county administrative officer whether there's a legal basis for sending sheriff's deputies to Watsonville as part of a mutual-aid agreement.

Patton, who was at the rally Sunday, questions whether it is legal for Sheriff Al Noren to send deputies in the case of a labor dispute.

Belgard said Patton is likely responding to political pressures and to people who have gone before the Board of Supervisors to complain about the sheriff's involvement.

Belgard added he thinks the sheriff has the power to do whatever he has to do to keep the peace.

"People like Gary Patton can bitch and moan all they want," said Belgard. "The sheriff can do what he wants in that situation."

He explained that deputies are not sent to enforce the court ordinance or to patrol strike areas, but are used to keep the peace and are available in case things get out of hand.

Belgard said that, while this rally was low-key, he is worried about a rally planned for next Sunday, which will apparently draw Teamster locals from throughout the state. The chief estimates about 5,000 will attend. Despite his worries, Belgard said he would go with the same number of officers he had this weekend.