

Watsonville Workers Get Union's Dues

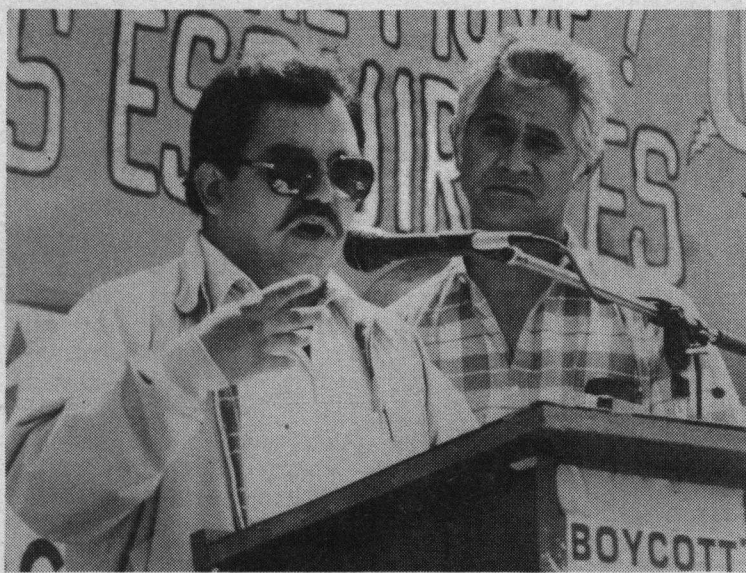
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Bob Johnson

The Teamsters hall on West Lake Avenue in the heart of Watsonville's industrial district has a cast iron front door that testifies to the legacy of sometimes bitter conflict between the officials of the largest union local in the county and the overwhelmingly Hispanic workers from the frozen food plants of the Pajaro Valley.

Over the course of the 1980s the frozen food workers who comprise the large majority of the members of Watsonville-based Teamsters Local 912 have built a powerful protest movement against union leaders who literally did not speak their language. The men who speak English have seen their decades-old grip on the union steadily weaken through a series of rank-and-file challenges to their authority. After one particularly heated union meeting early in the frozen food strike that began three years ago one top Local 912 official emerged from the hall to learn that the tires on his Cadillac had been slashed. The cast iron door was put in place a few months later.

Although the cast iron door remains as a reminder of the quarrelsome recent past the protest has moved inside from the parking lot to occupy



After working for 26 years as a mechanic at a Watsonville frozen food plant, Chavelo Moreno, (left) with Salinas Teamster official Raoul Hernandez, was elected last month as a top official of the largest union local in Santa Cruz County

some of the highest offices of Local 912.

Chavelo Moreno lives in Castroville and has worked as a mechanic at the largest frozen food plant in Watsonville for the last 26 years. He is a quiet, even shy man, but when 1,000 workers at the Watsonville Canning & Frozen Food Company endured an 18

month strike that ended in March, 1987, Moreno emerged as an undisputed leader among the strikers. While the union's leaders sold employees at other plants a pay cut from \$7.06 an hour to \$5.85 an hour as the price for keeping their jobs, Moreno and hundreds of other strikers protested that the pay cuts were not needed. In elections held last month Moreno was chosen by the members as a business agent for Local 912, one of the four top positions within the 4,000-member strong union.

More publicity has been given to the election last month of activist Joe Fahey to the number two position in the Local. Fahey is a former United Parcel Service worker who became the first representative of the rank-and-file movement to gain office when he was elected as a business agent in 1985. During the strike Fahey, who is bi-lingual, effectively argued against the wage cuts during a series of contract ratification meetings among the frozen food workers at plants throughout the Watsonville area. In last month's election Fahey gambled and won—giving up his position in the union for a successful run at the job of president.

Until 1982 every election in the 30-year history of the Watsonville Teamsters had gone uncontested. To move from having no voice to challenging for control of the local in just six years is an impressive accomplishment by Watsonville's immigrant workers in the arena of union politics that they will not soon match in the arena of city politics. Even the continued reign at the top of Local 912 of Sergio Lopez, a longtime official who became secretary-treasurer in 1985, testifies that the only union traditionalists who can survive are those who speak Spanish and make an effort to listen to the language of the workers.

But the reform of the Watsonville Teamsters may turn out to be a case of closing the barn after the horse is gone.

The 17 percent pay cuts sold by the union leaders in 1986 and 1987 are already being felt with devastating

(continued on page 8)

(from page 6)

consequences by more than 3,000 workers at local food processing plants. The frozen food contracts cover so many workers that they set the trend for manual labor throughout the Pajaro Valley and pay cuts have also been dealt to uncounted numbers of field and packing shed workers in the wake of the frozen food concessions.

The pay cuts were supposed to save jobs—or at least that was the public claim of Teamster officials, editorialists and others. If this claim was genuinely believed—which I doubt—some of these folks flunked economics. In the months since the frozen food workers saw their standard of living drastically reduced one major frozen food plant closed its doors and hundreds of workers found themselves without jobs.

The strike and the pay cuts did not save jobs but they did set the parameters for frozen food negotiations for years to come as neither the workers nor the companies are anxious to endure a repeat of the 18 agonizing months of bitter conflict.

The rank-and-file at Local 912 has finally made its voice heard but the union is no longer talking about serious issues. Three years ago, when the activists were on the outside, the issue was a series of contracts that reduced the budgets of thousands of working class families by 17 percent. Now that those families have a voice the next negotiations, to begin this month, will literally bring them penalties for their thoughts.