

# Strike dominated the year

It affected practically everybody

By ELIZABETH SCHILLING  
STAFF WRITER

The strike that began nearly four months ago at two frozen-food plants continues to smolder at year's end and neither the union nor the companies see an end in sight.

More than just being a significant event of 1985, it may also mark a turning point — the year Watsonville went from being a prospering, well-balanced community to a town plagued with obvious symptoms of an unstable economy, and hard feelings that will not heal.

As 1985 concludes, more than 700,000 hours of work, and the wages resulting from that labor, have been lost by permanent and temporary workers from the plants. Indirectly, the toll is reflected throughout the county, and the sense of loss has often been expressed in acts of vandalism and violence.

Members of Teamsters Local 912 authorized their negotiators to call a strike against Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food Co. and Richard A. Shaw Inc. in early August. At that time employees were presented with contract offers from the companies that asked for wage reductions and 45 take-aways in benefits and work rules.

Under the original offers, line workers, who make up 90 percent of the plants' employees, would have absorbed cuts of between \$2 to \$3 an hour, with their hourly pay dropping to \$4.75. Companies also sought a two-tier wage system that would start new employees at \$4.25.

Teamster negotiators returned to the bargaining table with a strike vote they really didn't want. Despite cautions from union officials that a walkout would be long, hard and costly, the rank and file had voted overwhelmingly to strike.

Negotiations between the Teamsters and seven frozen food plants in Watsonville started last January. The old three-year master contract was set to expire on June 30, 1985. When it did expire, all the plants continued operating on day-to-day extensions. Eventually, the other plants renewed their union agreement for one year, ensuring a secure 1985 season.

Shaw was the first to break the extension, and implemented

Watsonville Canning  
AND  
Frozen Food Co.

COLD  
STORAGE  
WAREHOUSE



Picketing began in a light rain in September and continues now in the end-of-the-year cold. Diane Varni

wage cuts on July 8. Union officials delayed the walkout until the peak of harvest season, but on Sept. 9 the strike was called.

At dawn on the first day, hundreds of workers began to picket, despite a light rain.

About 300 workers demonstrated peacefully along Walker Street outside Watsonville Canning. About 200 pickets surrounded the Shaw plant with a line that extended one-third of a mile along Riverside Drive toward the Highway 1 overpass.

By nightfall company lawyers had obtained temporary restraining orders which limited pickets to a handful at each plant.

Premonitions of the strike came in April when Shaw issued a press release laying bare its strategy to reach wage parity with Watsonville Canning.

For the previous three years Watsonville Canning had been

operating with a wage advantage of 40 cents an hour less than the other six unionized food processing plants in Watsonville.

As negotiations proceeded through the spring, Watsonville Canning officials declared they intended to lower wages even more in an attempt to reach parity with non-union plants in Texas and Oregon.

Negotiations continued at a snail's pace, and sometimes slower, during September and October.

On Oct. 5 Shaw negotiators walked out of talks with the union, rejecting a federal mediator who they claim was biased toward the union.

Talks between the union and the companies ceased and violence began an upswing.

Four cases of strike-related arson occurred in mid-October. The worst fire caused \$500,000 damage to Farmers Cold Storage, a freezing facility immediately adjacent to Watsonville Canning.

REFERENCE

WATSONVILLE  
REGISTER-PAJARONIAN  
December 31, 1985

Incidents of tire slashing, windshield smashing and harassment of non-striking workers became a daily event. In an attempt to curb the violence, the Watsonville City Council offered to act as mediator between the union and

the companies. Its offer was rebuffed by the companies, but eventually state legislators joined forces with the council to encourage to two sides to talk.

Finally, in November all parties agreed to a new federal mediator, and talks are now being held on a regular basis.

Watsonville Canning and Richard A. Shaw have managed to keep production going at a reduced level by hiring non-Teamsters workers. Most of these workers have been imported from Salinas, Soledad, Gilroy and other outlying areas.

Business owners say trade has been down. The seasonal depression which hits Watsonville during the winter sunk in early, with business owners noting a decrease in sales beginning in the autumn.

(Since workers are often escorted by the companies to and from Watsonville to prevent violence, they have no chance to patronize local merchants.)

Joining retail sales in their downward spiral were related industries such as farming, cold storage and trucking.

City government tried to leave the controversial aspects of the strike to the private sector, despite several appeals from groups of striking workers. Early in the strike the council refused to take action to ban the circulation of buses transporting non-striking workers within the city limits.

Last month the council voted down a request for a resolution urging landlords to not evict striking families. Councilmembers softened their stance somewhat two weeks ago when they offered to help find housing for strikers in danger of losing their homes for lack of money for rent.

The council also would not direct the police force to decrease surveillance of the picket lines after strikers claimed officers were too strict in enforcement of the restraining orders.

Local police were pushed beyond their limit during three weekend events in the fall. In three separate marches, thousands of workers and visitors from throughout the state poured onto the streets of Watsonville to show their support for strikers.