



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Watsonville Police Chief Ray Belgard

## Watsonville Police oversee uneasy peace on picket line

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By **DON MILLER**

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**WATSONVILLE** — Nothing in Police Chief Ray Belgard's 31-year career as a cop can compare to this.

A major strike involving 2,000 workers and two of the largest employers in his town is entering its ninth week and no resolution is even remotely on the horizon.

Sporadic violence and incidents of

arson occur on the strike lines as workers grow increasingly frustrated.

The struck companies — Watsonville Canning and Frozen Foods and Richard A. Shaw, Inc., which want workers to take pay cuts from \$7.06 an hour to as low as \$4.25 an hour — hire replacement workers and take out full-page newspaper advertisements seeking help.

The Teamsters Union — whose Local 912 represents striking workers — begins to bring in out-of-town help, lending credence to the notion that the powerful union is

finally ready to put some muscle behind its local.

Weekend strike support rallies draw thousands of marchers and protesters, including 46 UCSC students who are arrested for violating a restraining order limiting the number of protesters outside the struck companies. County law enforcement agencies are called in for backup support for these rallies.

"I used to say it about other departments," Belgard muses, "but now I'm the guy about who they're saying — 'Ray's got a helluva problem.'"

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Problem, yes. But unmanageable? Never, says Belgard, an open, friendly man who seems, outwardly at least, unruffled by the pressure.

"I don't have a lot to complain about," he says, referring to the violence he says he has read about in other large strikes. One major case of arson is thought to be strike-related, and one man was arrested for throwing a Molotov cocktail at a bus carrying cannery workers, but most local incidents have been of the rock or bottle throwing variety.

The past week, after a Watsonville Canning proposal was voted down 800-1 by union members, has been rather quiet, the chief says. The company offered \$5.05 an hour to workers, up 80 cents from their bottom offer of \$4.25. Halloween night, which had Belgard a little apprehensive, turned out to be more of the same — quiet.

But nothing is forever. "You've got to know the frustration level of striking workers is really high," Belgard says. Striking workers are getting \$45 a week in union benefits. For most, that's all they're getting and Belgard says he realizes \$45 doesn't pay the rent or utility bills.

"We don't like it but we understand that people are venting their frustrations," he says. "We've been accused of being heavy-handed, of violating the constitutional rights of the workers. It's absolutely not true.

"It's akin to the old adage — 'Kill the messenger!' You vent your anger toward the person who brings you the news."

He says he personally checks both strike lines each morning and night to make sure he's abreast of whatever's happening out there.

Belgard says his department is in an unenviable position, trying to maintain peace. He says, "I doubt if either the union or the companies would want to be in our position."

He believes "98 percent" of strikers are "just good old everyday hardworking people like the rest of us." Only a small percentage would commit crimes.

The number of residential burglaries in Watsonville is up by about 25 percent since the strike began on Sept. 9. Other crime statistics have remained about the same during that period.

While he hears from a lot of people these days — a television crew interrupts this interview for a quick cameo featuring the chief — Belgard says the only times he hears from

cannery officials is when a new restraining order is put into effect. When that happens, Belgard goes over it with union and cannery officials and lets them know how the police department is going to interpret the order.

The increasing need for aid from other law enforcement agencies worries Belgard. He's aware of the political pressure (see related story Page A4) on the county Sheriff's Department to explain the cost of such mutual-aid. Capitola's police chief was recently told to prepare a report detailing his department's expenses incurred in aiding the Watsonville Police Department.

"I don't have the answer to what will happen if the strike goes on," he concedes.

The main thing is being prepared. "Things happen. Property damage. Destruction. Our position is to be prepared ahead of time," Belgard says. "We always let the demonstrators know what they can do and what they cannot do. Things they're told they cannot do, we're prepared to back up."

His own operating budget is beginning to stretch thin. Belgard says at the rate expenses are going, he'll be out of money by April, three months before the end of the budget year. He says, "We didn't budget for this. We didn't know it was coming."

Overtime, he says, is running high. To combat it, and to provide a coherent schedule, a tactical unit of 8-10 officers was formed, and the unit was directed to concentrate on nighttime activities outside the canneries, the time when most illegal acts seemed to be happening. These people were given staggered starting hours and regular days off.

In addition, three detectives and three persons from the traffic unit were put in uniform.

Belgard says if it is noticed the stress is getting to someone, that officer is pulled off the unit and put onto regular patrol for a while or sent to a one-day seminar somewhere.

Reports that the regional joint council of the Teamsters is sending in help for the Local doesn't worry Belgard. The national reputation of the union initially did. But the situation is different, he says, than in urban areas, and the strikers this time are not truck drivers, but "a lot of females and young guys" who are not as prone to strike-related violence.

"They do believe they can walk up and down and yell, stand outside the gate and stop people from going to

work," Belgard says, "which is understandable. But the court order says they can't do that."

The only good for his department he can see coming from the strike is procedural — Belgard says the planning time for control of rallies has been cut from two-thirds of a day for the first one to little more than an hour for the one scheduled today at Callaghan Park. He hopes the documentation and research the department is doing might aid other cities facing similar labor disputes or even provide future guidelines for Watsonville itself.

Belgard, who says it is difficult to imagine a day when there won't be a strike, admits to a fair share of anxiety over the turn of events in Watsonville. "But am I worried about something happening to me, or the situation? No," he says. "I accept the possibility. I do what I have to do and I'm not likely to change that."

He talks about his mother once working in the canneries, but about how in those days, such work was thought to be supplemental to a family's income and seasonal. Now with unemployment benefits — unavailable to striking workers — things have changed.

It's hard to say what anybody can do to bring the two sides together. The city doesn't know the union's position nor does it know the companies' financial picture.

"The wage cut was too drastic in the minds of the workers," he says. "If they had it to do over again, maybe the companies would've asked for only half of what they did. But who knows, maybe they weren't financially able to do that."

Belgard stops and thinks for a moment. "If I were offered \$2 an hour less for this job," he says, "I'd probably be out in front of City Hall with a placard. Not throwing rocks, but I'd be pretty vocal."

"I'm like everybody else — I wonder, 'What would I do?'"