

Watsonville Canning, union meet



Diane Varni

To Watsonville Canning strikers Gabriela Gutierrez (left), Maria

Ramos and Carmen Torres, it was just another day on the picket line.

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WATSONVILLE
Register-PAJARONIAN
January 16, 1987

Reaction: Disbelief and hope

Response to the news of productive discussions between Teamsters leader Sergio Lopez and Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food Co. owner Mort Console ranged from disbelief to high hopes that the talks might be a sign of a pending settlement.

One union member, Angie, who asked that her last name not be used, said she doesn't understand what would prompt the company suddenly to have an interest in negotiating.

"They said they had plenty of workers and they got through the worst with their finances and now they want to talk — it doesn't make sense," she said.

Angie said she's given up hope — she stopped picketing after the first year, and, although she pays union dues, she no longer picks up benefit checks.

"Most people will be like me and think this is just another runaround," she said. "People don't believe this can be settled anymore."

More optimism comes from Chavelo Moreno, a former Watsonville Canning employee who is still active in strike activities.

"News of the talks is very good news to us," said Moreno. "People are happy, but we're not sure what this means. Nobody is making any plans because these so-called negotiations have happened before."

Strikers have had bad experiences in the past when they were asked to hope for a settlement, Moreno said. People have been very disappointed in the past, Moreno said, and suspect Console's overture to the union could be "just another one of his tricks to get us off the picket line."

"All we've heard is that Console wants to end the strike, but we haven't heard anything about wages and benefits," he said. "Strikers want it to end too. We are tired and want to go back to work. We can't be too optimistic yet, but if it is true, it's beautiful."

Watsonville Police Chief Ray Belgard called the news "a most pleasant surprise."

"Like a thousand workers and other people, I would be happy if it ends this afternoon," he said. "It has been manageable from a police standpoint. I would just like to see people get back to work ... It's been a long disruption."

The police department has been caught in the middle during much of the strike, being called upon to help control the violent outbreaks against strikers, non-striking workers and company officials.

The police have also received criticism from all sides, being called everything from too lenient to too forceful.

Bruce Shaw, of Richard A. Shaw Inc., said today, "I hope they settle."

Several other people in the

Console, Lopez call talks productive

By LANE WALLACE
STAFF WRITER

The leaders of Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food Co. and the Teamsters union have begun meeting in what Teamsters official Sergio Lopez calls "the most positive position I've seen from the company" in the 16-month strike of 1,000 frozen-food workers.

Lopez, secretary-treasurer of Teamsters Local 912, and Watsonville Canning owner Mort Console met Jan. 7 and again yesterday to discuss the strike.

Lopez said there's good reason for optimism, but said, "It's very, very early to predict the strike will end. Certainly nobody can put a time on it."

In a prepared statement, Console said, "Yes, I did meet (with Lopez), and the meeting was productive." His statement yesterday was the first time he's commented publicly on the strike. He was not available this morning.

After yesterday's meeting, Console said he would get back to Lopez next week, according to Lopez.

The Teamster-represented workers walked out on Sept. 9, 1985, in a dispute over wages, and have been picketing the Ford Street plant ever since.

The leaders of both sides have traded verbal jabs throughout the strike, with occasional "truces" for infrequent negotiation sessions, the most recent session taking place last summer.

Lopez said he called Console last week and was "pleasantly surprised" when Console invited him to talk at the corporate offices on Penny Lane.

"I met with Mort and we discussed the strike and the longevity of the strike," Lopez said. "We both agreed that we should try to put an end" to the stalemate.

Console initiated the second meeting, which went on for more than an hour at Lopez's office yesterday. The meeting

continued by candlelight when the power went off.

"We never got into any specifics," Lopez said.

For the strike to be settled, there would have to be formal negotiations between representatives of the two sides.

"There's a lot you need to do before you get into the contract itself," Lopez said.

Lopez declined to speculate on Console's reasons for agreeing to meet.

Immediately after the meeting with Console yesterday, Lopez went to San Francisco to meet with state and regional Teamsters officials.

Lopez acknowledged that the strike was one of the matters discussed, but wouldn't give details.

Lopez will update Teamster members on the strike situation at 9 a.m. tomorrow at the Watsonville High School gym. The meeting has been planned for a month.

A leaflet distributed at the union hall urges strikers to attend the meeting and support a motion urging the International Teamsters to withdraw funds from Wells Fargo Bank, which lent money to Watsonville Canning. The Teamsters have almost \$1 billion of pension funds in Wells Fargo.

The leaflet is signed "Strike Committee." It did not come from the union, Lopez said.

Four months ago, Watsonville Canning abruptly closed for two weeks amid reports of financial problems. Console deeded some of his personal land holdings to Wells Fargo as collateral for at least \$5 million in outstanding loans.

In December, the company reached agreements with three of its major vegetable suppliers to pay off debts over a 12-month period. The debts reportedly totaled more than \$5.5 million.

The company's future "is looking brighter every day," Smiley Verduzco, executive vice president of Conco, the parent company for Watsonville Canning, said last month.

Line workers at Watsonville Canning had been making \$6.66 an hour until their contract expired in mid-1985. They rejected the idea of a pay cut, as did workers at Richard A. Shaw Inc. frozen foods.

In October 1985, workers voted down a \$5.05 pay offer, the same rate their non-striking replacements were making. There hasn't been a formal offer since.

Shaw workers accepted \$5.85 an hour in February 1986 and returned to work.