

Strikers charge police harassment

By KEITH MURAOKA

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WATSONVILLE — More than 200 striking processing plant workers jammed the City Council chamber here Tuesday night to complain about police actions along the picket lines.

Charges of abuses and over-aggressiveness by police were prevalent. Striking workers complained that police were harassing and provoking them. They demanded the "complete withdrawal" of police and also urged that the "illegal" court order that limits the number and location of pickets should be overturned.

Mayor Ann Soldo promised that the city will look into the complaints. A subsequent motion by Councilman Vido Deredich, seconded by Councilwoman Betty Murphy, directed Police Chief Ray Belgard to investigate the charges.

Soldo refused, however, to order police to stop enforcing the court order. She told the jam-packed crowd to seek an appointment with the judge to change the court order's restrictions.

Murphy said later if police were not to enforce the order, they would be in contempt of court.

Belgard told The Sentinel after the meeting that he will review the council minutes and respond to each particular charge in writing.

"I don't plan to do anything different from what we've done so far," he added, noting that police were in a "no-win situation," and simply were attempting to enforce the court order.

"I think the hearing was beneficial," Belgard added. "They (strikers) needed someone to hit on. It was a good release."

A dozen workers at both Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food Co. and Richard Shaw Frozen Food — the two largest plants in the city whose near 2,000 workers have been on strike for 17 days — marched to the podium to testify.

Speaking in Spanish, with an English interpreter, the strikers told horror stories of their arrests while on the picket lines.

"The police have demonstrated they are always against the side of the people," maintained Antonia Caballero, a striking worker from Watsonville Canning. Added Shaw worker Aurora Trujillo, "I don't think it's fair you only take into account the wishes of the powerful."

Frank Bardacke called it a "state of siege" around the plants. He said the "clearly unconstitutional court order" was depriving citizens the right to even walk on the street.

"As long as this strike goes on and they try to reduce our wages to \$4.25 an hour, people in this town cannot be expected to follow this illegal court order," he said, to loud applause.

That court order, from Santa Cruz County Superior Court Judge William Kelsay, limits to four the number of pickets at each entrance to the plants — totaling 54 outside Watsonville Canning and 52 at Shaw's. It was an unawareness of that court order that resulted in the arrest of 17 Watsonville High School students and a teacher last Friday afternoon outside Watsonville Canning.

That teacher, Delia Mendez, and two of the students, testified before council members.

Mendez maintained police didn't warn them they were breaking the court injunction when they walked along the street carrying a banner. Police let them walk down the street and arrested them when they came back, she said. Mendez also was upset at the "poor treatment" they received. "They treated us like common criminals," she said.

Added student Patty Medina, "They treated us like animals. They put us all in a van and made us sit there for 15 minutes. It was awful hot and no windows were open. When I asked to open the window, police turned the heater on instead.

"Before, I had the conception that police were here to protect us," Medina said. "Now, I think the opposite."

Jose Lopez, a striking Watsonville Canning worker, testified that police "are constantly harassing and provoking us." He said numerous strikers have suffered from brutality.

"As workers, we have the right to be out on strike," Lopez added. "This should be strictly a matter between workers and management — not police."

Attorneys for the striking workers said after last week's court hearing that the number of allowable pickets were "less than we had hoped." Attorneys for the processing plants felt Kelsay should have reduced numbers even more.

Watsonville Canning President Smiley Verduzco said later, "We're going to make damn sure that it's (court order) is upheld."

Soldo reiterated to the strikers that police were simply upholding that order.

In a related matter, the first official tally of striking workers has been made by the Teamsters Union Local 912, which is representing them. Some 1,727 striking workers lined up at the union hall Tuesday to pick up their first strike payment of \$45.

Payments were issued to 1,003 strikers from Watsonville Canning and 724 strikers from Shaw's. Strikers are to receive \$45 for the next four weeks, after which time payments will increase to \$55 per week, according to Richard King, secretary-treasurer of Local 912.

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