

Christmas, 1985, on the strike lines

By DONALD MILLER
Sentinel Staff Writer

WATSONVILLE — One cold morning last week, somebody stuck a picket sign in the hand of a plastic inflatable Santa Claus.

"ON STRIKE EN HUELGA" said the sign. Santa Claus bobbed up and down from his temporary sleigh on top of a city fire hydrant on the sidewalk outside a frozen food plant.

Down the block, somebody had decorated a Christmas tree, and it too had been put up on the sidewalk. People stepped around the tree and around plastic Santa as they went through their ritual pacing along the sidewalk.

Nobody was saying Merry Christmas, though. Not a *Feliz*

Navidad or a carol could be heard anywhere — only the whirring of the giant refrigerators inside the plant and the growl of the tractor trailers as they sidled in through the security-guarded gates.

Christmas, 1985, on the strike lines seemed at that moment grim and wintry.

The "people" are mostly women, young and old, all of them on strike for the past 14 weeks against Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food Co. and Richard Shaw Inc. over proposed wage and benefit cuts offered by the companies.

The picket lines have been the frontlines during the lengthening strike, the place where repeated violence has occurred — episodes of

rock throwing and tire slashing, arson and an occasional firebomb — and the place where companies have successfully limited the number of pickets who can march in the cold wind.

They have been the crucible where the temporary workers — scornfully called "scabs" by the pickets — must pass through.

It is 7:30 a.m. and about 38 degrees outside. "Freezing," says picket Mercedes Gutierrez, on strike against Watsonville Canning. A slim woman who appears to be in her late 20s, Gutierrez has two children and a husband who is working. She's been out in front of Watsonville Canning six days a week — taking Sundays off — since the strike began.

"We don't like it very well, but it's our duty to be out here, rain or shine," says Gutierrez.

She's lucky, she says, what with her husband's job and a mother who takes care of her pre-school-age child.

An older woman walks up and introduces herself: Lupe Concepcion, a Teamsters Union member since 1955 — "when wages were 25 cents an hour," she says — and on strike from Watsonville Canning. With no children left at home, she can be out here on the line every day of the week.

"We'll be here till everything is settled," she says, echoing a re-

siliency expressed time and again by both sides in the strike. "If it takes another year, we'll be here. We hope it doesn't, but we will be."

The two women are asked about the reports of violence. Both say it is not all the fault of strikers, that temporary workers and company officials egg on the pickets and that it is frustrating to see the temporary employees pass by them day after day, night after night.

They both would be pleased with one fanciful Christmas gift — going back to work — but as Concepcion says, when and if the strikers return to their jobs, "there will be a lot of hard feelings."

Concepcion says she finds it hard to believe the companies' claims of losing money, that she saw new machines being brought in, machines that replaced workers, like an automatic spinach packer that arrived, she says, while she was still working the assembly line.

What is believable is that the workers are losing money. With Christmas but a week and a half away, "it will not be like other Christmases," Concepcion says, recalling halcyon days of overtime and \$400 weekly paychecks. Now, strikers receive \$55 a week in union benefits and biweekly bags of donated food.

Both Concepcion and Gutierrez say, however, that Teamsters Local 912 is doing all it can to solve the strike issues. Concepcion praises Sergio Lopez, the local's business agent who is running unopposed for secretary-treasurer of the local, the top job.

Gutierrez coughs and gathers up her coat around her. The scene takes on a Dickensian cast. "We're hoping for the better," she says.

Later in the day, the pickets' Christmas tree figures in a strange little Christmas story.

A sign on the tree wishes a Merry Christmas to Watsonville Canning owner Mort Console. This sign angers Console's 79-year-old mother, Kathryn Console. She walks up to the tree and tries to remove the sign.

In the process, she knocks over the tree and two bulbs are broken.

The pickets ask that the owner's

mother be arrested for violating the court restraining order regulating activities on the picket line. Police do not arrest Kathryn Console, but later compile a lengthy report about the incident, which they forward to the District Attorney's office.

All the while, the pickets are watched by the Watsonville Police, warned when too many congregate too closely together in violation of court injunctions, cited and sometimes arrested when rocks freefall through the night air.

"We're looking at a real frustration level," says Police Chief Ray Belgard. "The Christmas season has a higher stress level than normal anyway, and if you can't go shopping for presents and if you're not able to pay the rent, the level has got to be a lot higher."

Back in the union hall, two women in their early 20s sit on folding chairs in front of burning candles and a shrine honoring the Virgin of Guadalupe. The Virgin appeared 400 years ago to an Indian peasant named Juan Diego in the mountains outside Mexico City. She is revered as the mother of the Mexican people and honored every Dec. 12.

The sorrowful Virgin peers down upon Irma Murillo and Patricia Ornelas, who say that three days ago, after falling behind in rent pay-

ments, they lost the home on Rodriguez Street they shared with another woman. Both are single parents with two children and both are on strike from Watsonville Canning.

Murillo says she was making \$280 a week at Watsonville Canning and that being cut back to \$55 a week has made buying Christmas presents a fable.

Ornelas says she feels "sad" as the holiday approaches. "No one will be able to help us," she says in Spanish.

But then, a phone call comes through from a social worker telling the two women that Aid to Families with Dependent Children will be able to help them find shelter. They leave quickly, off to the welfare office.

Not everyone feels so fortunate.

"I'm very disgusted," says striker Vicky Munoz. "And it's not only me, but a lot of people this time of year."

It's very hard, especially for single mothers."

Munoz has six children, but is married and her husband is still working.

Munoz is another worker who publicly at least refuses to criticize the union. "Fifty-five dollars is not enough, but the union can only afford so much," she says.

Munoz says she will not return to her old job at Watsonville Canning for \$5.05 an hour (the "final" company proposal, rejected Oct. 28 by an 800-1 union vote). "Not when I was making \$6.66 an hour plus benefits. And we weren't asking for a raise."

She says she knows many of the temporary workers the companies



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Maria Mello on the strike line in Watsonville.

are bringing in to replace her and her co-workers. "They're strawberry pickers and field workers and they'll move on. The companies are crazy if they think they can keep (production) going with them."

Munoz looks around the crowded union hall. "Christmas is going to be pretty sad for a lot of families," she says.

Back in his office, Sergio Lopez sighs. He hears the union members' troubles all day long and his hollow, tired eyes show the strain both of listening and of the long strike.

His Christmas, he says, will be spent "right here in the union office."

Lopez says the union is organizing drives to provide food and toys to families of strikers and, perhaps, a Christmas party.

Last Tuesday night, he went before the Watsonville City Council to plead for help in finding shelter for the growing list of families evicted from their homes. He said at least 30 strikers' families have been forced to leave their homes because they can't pay their rent.

The council agreed to ask the county Housing Authority for use of the Buena Vista migrant worker's camp to house the evicted families. Council members also said that if the problem "got out of hand," they would consider housing the families at the city's Veteran's Hall.



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Ruben Heredia III at the decorated Teamsters Union Hall.

"We're trying to do everything we can to make it a joyful day," Lopez says, "but there is no way we can make it a real Christmas for people without a contract and without getting them back to work. Unfortunately, that's not on the horizon."