

Former 'frozen-food capital of the world'

Strike signaled beginning of decline of Pajaro Valley's canning industry

*Last of a series of articles on
Watsonville frozen-food strike,
10 years ago.*

LANE WALLACE

STAFF WRITER

WATSONVILLE — The Pajaro Valley used to be called the "frozen-food capital of the world," but the term doesn't apply any more.

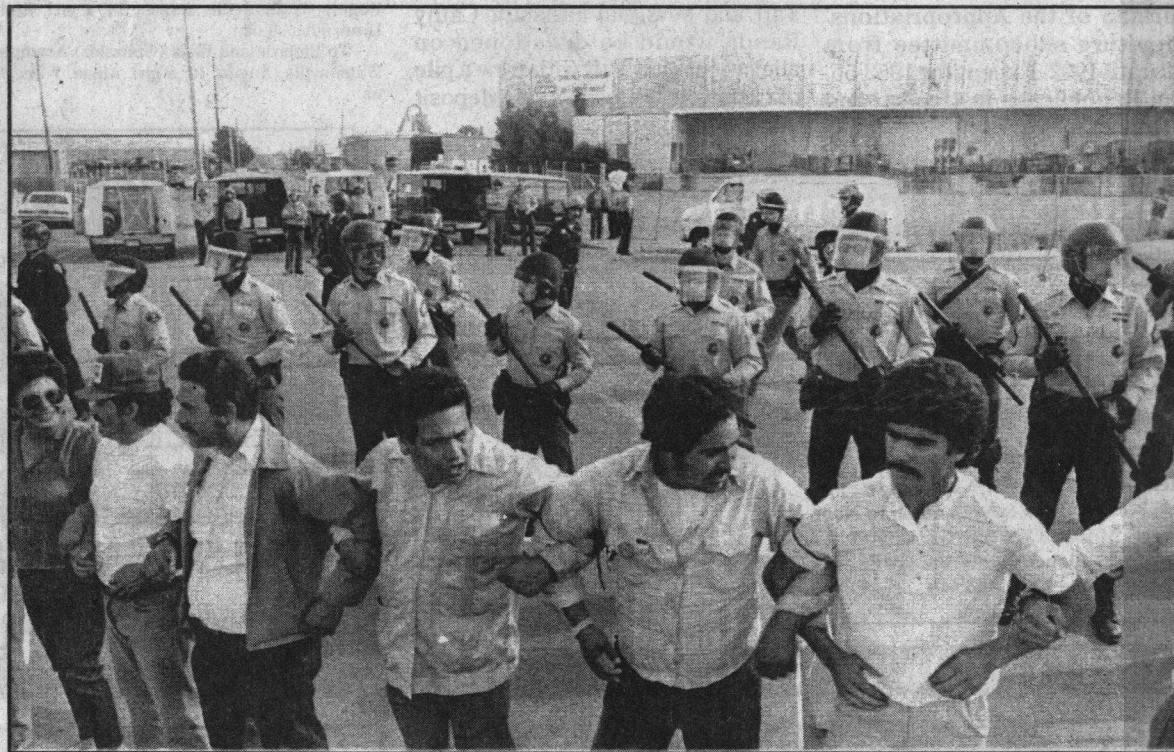
When workers at the Richard A. Shaw and Watsonville Canning plants went on strike Sept. 9, 1985, it was because the companies offered lower wages, saying they were losing money in the face of increased competition from Mexico.

In the 10 years since the strike began, the foreign-grown vegetables have kept coming, and the companies have been going.

Where there were four frozen-vegetable companies and four plants in the area when the strike began, there are two plants and one company now.

Norcal, formed to replace

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R-P file photo

Demonstrations like this one were common a decade ago during the strike against Watsonville's frozen-food plants.

STRIKE

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bankrupt Watsonville Canning at the end of the strike in 1987, merged with Crosetti Frozen Foods six months later.

Pillsbury Green Giant, which was not part of the strike, closed its Watsonville plant four years ago and moved its operation to Mexico, leaving some 500 people out of work.

Two months ago, the financially troubled Norcal Crosetti was bought by Chicago-based Dean Foods, which bought out Shaw several years after the strike.

Dean's purchase has raised new questions about the industry's future.

Sergio Lopez, chief officer of the Teamsters Union in Watsonville, said he's sorry to see the independently owned firms like Norcal Crosetti go.

But given the nature of business today, "the best chance to keep jobs is being employed by a multinational" such as Dean Foods, Lopez said.

"There's no question that there will be some job loss in management" with the merger, Lopez said. "The rest of it will be determined by market forces.

As rumors float around town about possible loss of line-worker jobs, Lopez said Dean Foods "has not decided what they're going to do and how they're going to do it."

Dean Foods "didn't get to be a big company by doing stupid things,"

Lopez said.

Dean Foods officials have not responded to calls from this newspaper since the sale a month ago.

There are about 1,700 employees at what are now two Dean plants, about the same as there was when the workers went on strike.

The workers, who took a pay cut from \$7.06 an hour to \$5.85 when

the strike settled, are now up to \$7.15.

Whether the workers are better off depends on your point of view, Lopez said. "You can make the argument that the pay has not kept up with the cost of living," Lopez said. On the other hand, he said, the union's willingness to keep wages where they are has helped keep the industry here, he said.

Strike brought political change to Pajaro Valley

WATSONVILLE — For Oscar Rios, the 1985 frozen-food strike was more than a struggle between company and union — it helped bring about political change in the Pajaro Valley.

"It was the foundation of political change" that brought more government attention to the needs of Latinos and the poor, Rios said.

The strike started about the time the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund filed suit against the city in an effort to force election by district, saying the at-large system weakened the voting power of Latinos.

"That strike woke people up," said Rios, who came to Watsonville because of the strike and benefitted from the political change. He's been on the City Council since the first district elections in 1989 and served two years as mayor.

Rios, a former Teamster in San Francisco when he drove a UPS truck, came to Watsonville a month after the strike started to head the Cannery Workers Project, a non-profit social-service agency now called La Alianza.

The strike made people aware that "they have political voices," Rios said. Rios is one of three Latinos on the City Council — only one had served before district elections — and there are more Latinos on city boards and committees than ever before.

Without the strike, "there would have been no Oscar Rios as mayor," Rios said. And without district elections, Rios figures there is "no way" he would have made it to the City Council.

— Lane Wallace