

# Watsonville Canning acquires Texas plant

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WATSONVILLE — Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food Co., struck by more than 1,000 of its workers since September, has announced it has taken over marketing and production of a Texas processing company.

The acquisition was preceded by the layoff of 10 senior management workers at the Watsonville plant, according to a union spokesman.

The assumption of operating control of Bannworth Frozen Foods in La Jolla, Texas, puts Watsonville Canning into an area where wages are significantly lower than the company's longstanding offer to strikers.

Pay in the Rio Grande Valley, where Bannworth is located, is usually minimum wage. Assembly-line workers at Watsonville Canning, the largest frozen-food processor in the United States, were paid \$6.66 an hour before the strike.

The company's "final" offer has been \$5.05 an hour.

Minimum wage is \$3.35 an hour.

Watsonville Canning officials have

said they expect to make similar management contracts with other frozen-food processors.

Bannworth produces about 60 million pounds of frozen food a year, a fraction of the total produced at Watsonville Canning. The present owners of the company have indicated they plan to continue to own the plant and farmland in Texas and Mexico that supplies vegetables for the company.

The Texas acquisition preceded the laying off of at least 10 Watsonville Canning senior management employees, said Sergio Lopez, leader of Teamsters Union Local 912, which represents the workers on strike from Watsonville Canning.

The recent layoff was corroborated by one of those employees who had been working at the company for more than 20 years. This employee, who asked that names not be used, said the company told the workers the layoff was the result of slackening production.

But, said the employee, no such layoffs of management workers with seniority had occurred in the past two decades, as far as the employee knew.

Watsonville Canning Personnel Director Larry Vawter did not respond to a phone call.

Lopez said among the 10 laid off were Bobby Gonzales, plant engineer; Helga Snyder, the night floor leader; Desente Mendez, polybag supervisor; Ismael Rodriguez, a production supervisor for broccoli; Robert Hult, lab supervisor; and Elvira Corral.

The union leader said he felt the company, which has not engaged in negotiations with the union in months, either is losing money or trying to replace higher paid workers with cheaper help.

"It's true to their M.O.," said Lopez.

In an unrelated action, another Watsonville Canning senior management employee, Helen Eidemiller filed suit against the company on April 23 charging she was wrongfully discharged. Eidemiller declared she was fired after 10 years with Watsonville Canning, most recently as assistant personnel director, because she was going on vacation to the Soviet Union with a peace group.

Eidemiller is asking \$1 million in damages.