

Watsonville Canning, union set first talks since December

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WATSONVILLE — Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food Co. will negotiate with the Teamsters Union Aug. 19, the first talks between the two sides since Dec. 17 in the almost year-long, frozen-food processing strike.

The announcement of the negotiating session comes on the heels of an announcement that strikers and their replacements will vote Aug. 14 whether to retain the Teamsters as their bargaining agent at Watsonville Canning.

The two announcements this week mark the first signs this year that an end to the long, bitter strike might be in sight.

Teamsters Local 912 President Leon Ellis said the Aug. 19 talks also will include federal mediator Robert Crall.

Ellis said it would be "speculation" to infer that Watsonville Canning was willing to come to the bargaining table because it thought workers would choose to retain the union in the impending recertification vote.

The recertification election agreement was hammered out Monday in San Francisco in a session presided over by representatives of the National Labor Relations Board.

The strike began last Sept. 9 and involves 1,000 workers. Prior to the recertification-election agreement, the union had accused Watsonville

Canning of dragging its heels in negotiations in hopes of holding an election one year after the strike began.

If the election were to be held after that date, only workers currently on the job at Watsonville Canning would vote, conceivably for a non-union shop.

Watsonville Canning is holding to a long-standing offer of \$5.05 for assembly-line workers, who were paid \$6.66 an hour under terms of the old contract.

The union has settled with other Pajaro Valley processors for \$5.85 an hour. Workers at Richard Shaw Inc. settled for such a cut earlier this year after walking out at the same time as Watsonville Canning workers.