

Huge fires set at food plants



Firefighters were busy last night trying to douse fires that lit the night skies above two frozen-food plants.

Sam Vestal

Pallets and cardboard destroyed

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Arsonists struck at two Watsonville food-processing plants last night, using Molotov cocktails to set at least five fires that burned an estimated \$2 million worth of packaging materials and scorched nearby grasslands.

The fires and violence marked the second night in a row police have been called to squelch small riots and fires at Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food Co. and Richard A. Shaw Frozen Food. Both plants are currently in the sixth week of a strike by their Teamsters union employees.

Ten people were arrested in separate incidents last night and this morning, including a man who allegedly threw a fire bomb at a busload of non-striking workers as they left one of the plants (no one was injured).

Amador R. Betancourt, 23, of 109 Stanford St. was arrested after police said they saw him throw the bomb at a bus carrying 26 Watsonville Canning workers home at 1 a.m. today.

The bus was traveling down Harkins Slough Road when it was hit on the side by the bomb, which scorched part of the bus and some brush at the side of the road. Police chased a man through Ramsay Park and arrested Betancourt near the Main Street entrance.

Several arrests for rock-throwing preceded last night's fires, which began with a pallet fire at Watsonville Canning around 10 p.m.

Police reported that another fire began at 10:45 in a grassy area near Rodriguez and Main streets just one minute before a fire started up in some pallets at Shaw's.

About 10 minutes later, another fire was reported burning storage bins and pallets in another location at the Shaw's plant.

The first blaze at Shaw's, on the south side of the property, was small enough to be extinguished by police, Assistant Watsonville Fire Chief Dave Williams said. The second, on the north end of Harvest Drive, burned about half of a 100-foot-by 200-foot-wide pile of pallets

and cardboard.

The flames from the fires brightened the night sky with an orange light, and could be seen from as far away as Mt. Madonna.

The only reported injury was a bruise on the leg to reserve fireman Pete Knego, who was hit with what he said looked like a chunk of cement. Knego was riding in the second fire engine that arrived at Shaw's. Both of the first two engines were the target of rocks thrown from the direction of about 50 people lining the east side of Harvest Drive, said Fire Captain Jerry Keith. Police were called in to disperse the rock throwers.

Knego said the rock-throwing "surprised and shocked" him.

"We're the good guys, not the bad guys," he said. "We're trying to do our job, too; we're not trying to hurt anybody."

Five engines and one truck from the Watsonville Fire Department were used to fight the fires, Fire Captain Jim Norwood said, as well as one fire engine from the Freedom Fire Department. One fire engine from Aptos and another from Salspuedes manned Watsonville's two fire stations during that time, he added.

"We're not looking forward to tonight," said the fire department's Captain Keith this morning.

The department plans to increase its manpower and will call in other fire departments, as it did last night, he said. "Once they start spreading it around town (the fires), then we start spreading our resources pretty thin," he said.

A reward of \$10,000 immediately was put up by officials at Watsonville Canning for information leading to the arrest and conviction of anyone responsible for the arson.

Watsonville Canning's Ron Trine said, "The people who set the fires knew exactly where to do it; the materials were extremely flammable."

Watsonville firemen received eight or nine calls reporting fires in different areas during that stretch of the evening, but the only major fires were the pallet fires, Assistant Fire Chief Williams said. The fire at Watsonville Canning burned most of a 100-foot-by 300-foot-wide pile of pallets and cardboard.

The fires at both Shaw's and Watsonville Canning were under control within 15 minutes, but firemen worked on the clean-up until about 2:30 a.m., he added.

Police said last night's incidents, which attracted several groups of jeering strikers and strike supporters at each fire, were the most serious vandalism attacks on the two plants since union workers walked off their jobs Sept. 9 protesting wage cuts. A small riot and several fires occurred Thursday night.

With the increased violence, police have been making more arrests on the picket lines. Police Chief Ray Belgard said this morning his officers will continue to make more arrests and issue fewer citations. In past weeks, police have issued the citations to strikers violating a court order that limits picket activity in front of the plants.

"In view of what's been happening in the area, we're probably going to be making more arrests than we have in the past," he said. Belgard also said police may find themselves making arrests for even minor infractions that had previously resulted in citations.