

# THE STRIKE'S OVER

## Landslide vote ends bitter fight

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The strike is over.

On a vote of 543 to 21, members of Teamsters Local 912 approved a contract with Norcal Frozen Foods Inc. and put an end to their 18-month strike.

Union members acted as if they couldn't vote fast enough this morning when they convened at 9 a.m. at the Veterans Hall on East Beach Street. They were all smiles for the first time in a long time as they filed into voting booths to cast ballots that were to put some of them back to work this afternoon.

The appearance of Norcal owner David Gill at the hall 15 minutes after the vote was announced added an even higher note to the crowd's jubilation.

Norcal is the new company that two weeks ago took over from now-defunct Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food Co.

"This is a new company and a new beginning I hope we can pull together and start over," Gill told a cheering crowd.

"We've got a lot of problems to overcome."

He said getting new customers and working on the problem of foreign competition are some of the top priorities.

"If you guys will dig in and help, we can do this together," Gill said. "I'm willing to rebuild the relationship between the workers and the company. The people in the plant also have the message that they are going to rebuild it."

Gill said employees will be called back to work this afternoon. Lines will be tested tomorrow and processing will begin full-bore on Monday with about 200 employees.

Gill's challenge was met with equal spirit from union members who say they are anxious to get back to work.

"We need to get going," said Elsie Villanpando, a 14-year veteran of the Watsonville Canning food-processing line. "We need to get the company and this community back on its feet — and we can do it."



Chip Scheuer

Emotions ran high when the vote was announced and a Teamster leader said, 'It's time to go back to work.'

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REFERENCE

Villanpando was a leader in the food program that kept strikers and their families fed through the long and bitter dispute. She said Gill appears to be a great person to work for and said she will be as committed to the new company as she was to the strike effort.

Other union members said the risk involved in putting off the ratification vote from last Friday was well worth it, because the five-day delay yielded workers an improved contract.

The contract offers the standard industry wage of \$5.85 an hour. The big improvement in today's offer came in health benefits. Instead of having to wait three years to become eligible for benefits, as originally proposed, full-time workers will now be covered after three months.

The mood prior to the voting today at the Veterans Hall was quite different from the mood last Friday. From the outset it was clear workers were ready to accept the contract and get back to work.

Friday, opponents were handing out literature to strikers; today there was no such leafletting and no one inside or outside the hall voiced any objection to Norcal's offer.

Sergio Lopez, secretary-treasurer of Local 912, spent about 20 minutes going over details of the contract, but an uproar from the crowd calling for a vote cut short any discussion.

Teamsters leaders who last week called the initial contract offer "amazing" said today's offer was "more than we could have hoped for."

John Blake, an official with the Western Conference of Teamsters credited Gill with better negotiating skills than the plant's former owner, Mort Console.

"We got a better offer because we were dealing with rational people in these negotiations," said Blake. "Clearly David Gill cares about people and wanted to provide for them."

The long strike reverberated throughout the Watsonville community, twisting and turning into one of the nation's lengthiest strikes.

In the end Watsonville Canning folded, hundreds of people lost an aggregate of millions of dollars in wages and untold damage was suffered by the city's businesses and morale.