

Watsonville rebuff embitters strikers

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WATSONVILLE — The City Council chose Tuesday night not to respond to a committee representing striking frozen-food processing workers when the group asked the council to help keep strikers from being evicted from their homes.

The lack of response turned the council meeting into a heated, often bitter forum pitting strike supporters against council members and Mayor Ann Soldo.

Police Chief Ray Belgard warned strike leaders they would be arrested unless they either behaved peacefully or left the building. Belgard's warning came after Watsonville Strike Support Committee members refused to leave a microphone and after Soldo had warned them about interrupting state Assemblyman Sam Farr, D-Monterey, who was addressing the session. The mayor also had called two recesses.

Finally, after discussing outside the council chamber whether they wanted to be arrested or not, the group decided not, and after loudly chanting strike slogans, left the building as four policemen stationed outside watched them go.

About 150 people, most of them connected with the strike or the support committee, crowded the council chamber as the meeting began. Karen Osmundson of the support committee presented the council a petition with 1,250 signatures asking the council to establish and approve an ordinance placing a moratorium on evictions and foreclosures of workers on strike from Richard Shaw Inc. and Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food Co.

The moratorium would end two months after the strike is settled.

The Strike Support Committee claims widespread community involvement. It has been active in organizing rallies and demonstrations, filing lawsuits against the council and Police Department on behalf of strikers and challenging the court injunction limiting picketing outside struck companies.

Osmundson said the committee was getting many calls from strikers with problems paying rent. "Landlords will not hold off six months — if that's how long the strike lasts," she said.

Aurora Trujillo, one of the more than 1,700 workers on strike over proposed wage and benefit cuts, then said, "We are good citizens and have paid our taxes. We feel we should be given a hand."

Trujillo, a single parent, began weeping as she described how she may have to pull three of her children out of school so they can work to support the family.

Committee member Frank Bardacke then read newspaper accounts of the strike, including comments by processing-plant owner Richard Shaw that companies, in effect, can no longer afford to be the sole source of income for employees.

"He's saying canneries don't have to pay a living wage anymore," Bardacke said. He then read published quotes by Ruth Carpenter, a federal labor mediator whose attempt to mediate the dispute ended in failure several weeks ago.

Carpenter was quoted as saying the companies were attempting "to starve the people out" and that they

wanted to go non-union at whatever cost.

Bardacke said the issue was not just between strikers and management but between the whole community of Watsonville and the struck frozen-food plants.

He asked for a rent fund to be established, where strikers unable to pay rent or mortgage payments could borrow money at no interest.

Committee organizer Cruz Gomez said that reports of violence committed by strikers were misleading. "The real violence in this community is being perpetrated by the companies with these cuts in wages and by their unwillingness to negotiate a decent contract." She said strikers include 500 women who are heads of households.

Soldo, in response, cited the meeting Monday that she attended, accompanied by company and labor officials plus state and federal legislators. As a result of the meeting, all sides agreed a new federal mediator should be named as soon as possible and that violence must stop.

"I'm sure all of us are concerned about the strike," she said, "... but at the same time the City Council members cannot be involved in any particular sides of the strike.

"We have to remain impartial." Soldo said she realized people are experiencing financial difficulties, but that the City Council did not have the power to pass a moratorium on evictions, nor did it have money in its budget to use for loans.

City Attorney Donald Haile then spoke about the legalities of the petition, which he said took "little time" to research. It was clear, he said, the city had no jurisdiction in rent disputes. People facing eviction, he said, were protected by law and should use the court system to seek redress.

Gomez, who had been translating many of the speakers' words into Spanish, then said, "This is an illustration again of how the City Council does not respond to the needs of the community."

John Silver, who had been filming part of the proceedings for his group, Migrant Media Education, then took the podium and said he was "upset" that every time an issue arose affecting Mexican workers, the council said it could not do anything.

He said he believed if the city had a commitment to help workers it

could find a way to get some money for that purpose. He used flood disasters as an example of how a city could find resources in times of emergency. Silver asked the council members that if they would not pass the moratorium, at least to adopt a non-binding resolution calling on landlords not to evict strikers.

After a few shouted comments from strike supporters in the audience, Soldo called a recess.

When the meeting resumed, about half the crowd had left, to attend a union meeting, Silver said. He reentered the council chamber and nervously waited near the podium as Farr addressed the council about legislative matters.

As Farr neared the end of his presentation, Silver stepped forward and asked Farr to use his office to deal with issues connected with the strike.

Farr replied there was "not much we can do," but cited the "historical meeting" that took place Monday between legislators, labor and management. "We will do whatever we can," he said.

A man in the audience shouted, "We would like to see that concern translated into action!" The man then stood and began speaking to the crowd in Spanish, asking, among other things, for council meetings to be bi-lingual.

As Silver began to speak again, Soldo angrily cut him off, saying he was interrupting Farr.

After some more shouts from the audience, Soldo thanked Farr, who, as he left the podium, said his office was open to the strike committee.

Bardacke then stood up and asked the council "a simple question — do you or do you not support evictions during the strike?"

Councilman Vico Deretich said, "I do not."

Soldo said she would not respond to the question.

Councilman Roy Ingersoll testily asked Silver and Bardacke to meet with him after the council meeting.

Soldo ordered the meeting to continue.

Silver took the mike again and said, "You have not responded. We want some action on the part of the council."

Soldo then called another recess. Soldo, Haile and council members Rex Clark and Betty Murphy then met with Gomez and attorney and committee member Sherry Lessen in a heated discussion about the committee's demands.

Belgard then joined the group and warned Gomez that the committee would not be permitted to further disrupt the meeting.

As the session reconvened, committee members and strikers gathered in the corridor outside where they decided to pursue the issue at the next council meeting in two weeks rather than risk a confrontation that night.

With a loud chant of *El pueblo unido jamas sera vencido* (the people united will never be defeated) the group broke up and left the building.

REFERENCE