

Another round of talks in frozen-food strike

By HERON MARQUEZ ESTRADA

Sentinel Staff Writer

WATSONVILLE — With the end of the broccoli-packing season approaching, there might not be sufficient incentive to end a three-month strike by 1,700 frozen-food processing workers, an official of Teamsters Union Local 912 said today.

The statement by Sergio Lopez, business agent for the striking local and one of two candidates for the local's soon-to-be vacated top leadership position, came as the union prepared for another round of talks today with the Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food Co. and Richard Shaw Inc.

Lopez, running for position of secretary-treasurer along with Armando Morales, a rank-and-file worker, said there is only about another month in the packing season.

Once that window closes, Lopez said, the companies could conceivably wait until March, when the season begins again, before they are pressed to reach a settlement with workers.

Because the companies have held out for three months, and with the season dwindling, Lopez said he sees no incentive for them to settle the at-times violent strike.

"We are apprehensive because the season is over in three to four weeks and ... by that time the issue will be moot until next March," Lopez said.

For the workers, Lopez said, it would mean a winter with no income and no unemployment benefits. He labeled the possible wait by the companies as an attempt to starve the workers out and break the union.

Calls to Shaw and Watsonville Canning for comments on this and on

the negotiations were not returned because management personnel were reported to be in meetings preparing for the negotiating sessions.

Lopez said he believed the talks, scheduled for 1 and 6 p.m. at an undisclosed location, are to be full negotiating sessions but they are also part of a conciliatory gesture designed to get the two sides talking again.

The meeting was suggested by local elected officials, although the union has not changed its position of refusing proposed wage cuts that led to the walkout in September. Robert Crall, the federal mediator in the strike, is expected to attend the sessions.

Lopez said workers still refuse to accept proposals by the companies

asking them to take wage reductions ranging from 40 cents to almost \$2 for the assembly line work of cutting broccoli and sorting cauliflower and other vegetables.

The companies maintain that the wage reductions are needed to keep them competitive in frozen-food markets with out-of-state and international concerns, but union officials see it as an attempt to bust their union.

Lopez said he did not know how the change in leadership at the local would affect the negotiations, but did not anticipate a change in the union's position.

The elections in December took on increased significance when it was learned that Richard King, longtime head of the local, had decided against seeking another term as its secretary-treasurer, the position with the most power and influence.

King, 63, has been in leadership roles with the local since the early '50s and has been the secretary-treasurer since 1969. Until this year,

the relationship between the union and employers had been relatively quiet.

Recently, however, King had voiced displeasure and distaste with the bitter nature of this strike and had reportedly been ready to step down in order to devote more time to his family.

When that decision became official this week, Lopez said he decided to run for the position.

Lopez, who speaks Spanish and English, said if he is elected by the 4,000 eligible voters in the local Dec. 30, he would seek to increase the number of bilingual field representatives and also increase the number of meetings between workers and their leadership.

"Mr. King has to be given credit for keeping the labor (peace) for 34 years," Lopez said. "If I can duplicate that I will consider that my mission in life will have been served."

Ballots for the elections will be going out in early December, and Lopez said votes will be tabulated by Dec. 30.