



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Watsonville fireman Ed Banks surveys fire scene at Farmers Cold Storage warehouse.

Warehouse burned as strike violence mounts

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WATSONVILLE — The worst violence in the 36-day-old food-processing plant strike here hit early this morning when a large cold-storage warehouse was set on fire.

The warehouse, Farmers Cold Storage, is located on Kearney Street, near Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food Co. — where most

of the violence has occurred the past four nights.

About one-third of the warehouse, an estimated 60-by-100-foot portion, was burned, according to Watsonville Fire Capt. Jim Norwood. He had no dollar-damage estimate this morning.

The fire, which was reported at 12:20 a.m. and brought under control at 3 a.m., is believed to be strike-related. Police Capt. Terry Medina

said Farmers freezes and stores produce for Watsonville Canning — produce that is later re-packed in the cannery.

Medina said local police and fire officials were meeting with the state fire marshal and the Santa Cruz County Arson Task Force this morning to investigate.

Since Thursday night, violence has

escalated in the strike which has 1,726 workers at Watsonville Canning and Richard Shaw Frozen Foods — the two largest frozen-food processing plants in the county — out of work. Watsonville is the frozen-food processing capital of the world with seven plants in operation.

Damage has been estimated at \$2 million from the numerous arson-set pallet and cardboard fires outside the two plants. Some two dozen people were arrested, mostly on violations of a Santa Cruz County Superior Court order.

A striking worker, who asked not to be identified, said there's a "feeling of desperation" among many strikers. He said many are just now getting evicted from their homes since the strike is in its second month.

Teamsters Union Local 912 President Fred Heim this morning said that most of the violence is being done by "outsiders." However, Medina replied that the Teamsters are the "only responsible party."

Medina maintained, "They have to get these people under control. We understand it's a tough situation and people are getting frustrated. But, they can't burn themselves into a better situation."

Heim said the Teamsters are "trying everything we can (to quell the violence)." He added, however, "They even threw rocks at me the other night and broke the windows of my truck when I tried to stop the violence."

Watsonville Mayor Ann Soldo told The Sentinel this morning that the strike is "polarizing" the citizenry. She agreed with police and City Manager John Radin who say the city is

doing all it can to control the violence.

Soldo reiterated what Police Chief Ray Belgard said in noting, "The problem we're facing is that we are to enforce the court order. We are to protect the property and we are to protect the people. Because the court order is so stringent, it's really making it difficult for all of us. Unfortunately, it makes us look like the bad guys."

That court order limits both the number of pickets and their location to the two plants. Any others walking within 100 yards of the plants are in violation of the order. The city has already been named in a \$5-million lawsuit by the Teamsters regarding its enforcement of what Teamsters call an "unconstitutional" court order.

Workers at the two plants have refused to accept wage cuts ranging from 33 to 56 percent. The cuts are necessary, according to management, in order to compete with lower-paying plants in Texas. The majority of assembly-line workers faces cuts from \$6.66 an hour to \$4.25. In addition, medical benefits would be cut for most employees.

Medina said police are "re-evaluating our deployment of manpower for that area." He conceded that a "large police presence" decreases violent activity. "The problem is maintaining that kind of police presence all the time. It's quite difficult and extremely expensive."

Belgard has already said more arrests will be made. Up to now, police have primarily been issuing citations for violations of the court order.

"It seems that many of them think these citations are souvenirs," said Belgard.

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