



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Strike ends 'The people have won'

"El pueblo, unido, jamas sera vencido."

"The people, united, will never be defeated."

— Watsonville Canning strikers' chant.

By DONALD MILLER

Sentinel Staff Writer

WATSONVILLE — For the record, the strike at Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food Co., the county's longest labor dispute, ended a little after 10 a.m. Wednesday when the votes were counted ratifying a new contract with the defunct company's successor, Norcal Frozen Foods Inc.

But for the strikers, none of whom crossed Teamster union picket lines for 19 months and five days, the strike perhaps actually ended at 10:45 when Norcal's David Gill strode up the aisles of the packed Veterans Hall.

The principal owner and president

of the new company was there to tell the Watsonville Canning strikers that their days of despair and suffering were over and that March 11, 1987 marked a new beginning for the work force and for the company.

Teamsters Local 912 Secretary-Treasurer Sergio Lopez had left the hall while the votes were still being counted. He went to the plant to ask Gill to return with him to address the crowd.

People stood on their chairs and cheered as the King City farmer entered the hall.

"It's a new company and a new beginning," said Gill, who began his remarks in Spanish to the primarily Hispanic workers. "I hope we can all pull together and start over. We have a lot of rebuilding to do."

The strike was history and the people were celebrating a victory.

Teamster officials described the strike as the longest active dispute in

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Teamster Secretary-Treasurer Sergio Lopez and followers were walking on air after the vote Wednesday.

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the country and the first of such long duration to be won by labor.

The contract offer, Norcal's second since taking over from the now-defunct Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food Co., was ratified overwhelmingly by the rank-and-file, who voted 543-21 to accept it.

The contract was identical to one tentatively accepted last week before strikers refused to bring it to a vote, with two changes:

- Seasonal workers will get medical and other benefits after 90 days;
- Norcal will be allowed to withhold payments to the Teamster union pension fund until February 1988.

Production workers will be paid \$5.85 an hour, the same wage as at other processors.

All the economic aspects, including vacations and benefits, of the new contract will be renegotiated in February of next year — a significant difference from contracts signed at other Pajaro Valley processors, where only wage levels will be renegotiated.

Norcal fired the replacement workers it had hired in recent days and began calling union workers Wednesday afternoon to come to work today.

Gill estimated 200 workers will

return by Friday or Monday, with 500 to 600 within a month or so.

The ratification meeting itself was in marked contrast to the one held in the same hall last Friday. The voting this time began without dissent or lengthy speeches and only 15 minutes or so after the meeting began.

Striker Margarita Martinez, who would later get up on stage and thank Gill for taking control of the company, said, "We waited 19 months for this and we got what we wanted." Then, referring to the fact that workers will be returning at lower wages than when they walked off the job, she said, "Well, not really, but we got the benefits. It's a new company and a great chance for us."

Martinez worked at the now-defunct Watsonville Canning for 17 years. She said her grandparents and parents worked there and "my kids probably will go to work there. It's a great feeling."

Martinez predicted that returning workers will "try to make Norcal a great company. David Gill is a smart guy for not starting his company with scabs but with experienced people."

Strikers' Committee member Chavelo Moreno said, "The people have won. It was worth waiting."

John Blake, a Teamster official representing union boss Jackie

Presser, said the union will keep a food bank and job-placement program going for workers who have still not returned. Blake said he was not "nervous" last Friday after the workers decided to delay voting on a contract already touted by the union as a great victory for organized labor.

"We knew we could come back and get a ratification vote," Blake said, adding that many workers voted for the delay, or didn't vote at all, because of "intimidation" by union factions and non-strikers.

Nevertheless, Blake said, the union had come back with a better contract.

"This could turn into a rallying point to turn labor around and to get workers out of their complacency and started on the road back," Blake said.

Another Teamster official, Alex Ybarraloza of the union's Joint Council 7, said he will begin working immediately to try to "reverse" any damage done by the Teamsters' economic boycott against Watsonville Canning. He also said he will work with Norcal officials in seeking legislation that would require frozen-food imports to bear a prominent label on packages indicating their



Bill Lovejoy/Sent

Teamsters' Sergio Lopez and worker Margarita Martinez cheer the announcement from David Gill, right, that ex-executive Smiley Verduzco of Watsonville Canning is no longer working at the plant.