

Inside Norcal

It's hard work, but ex-strikers say they're glad to be on the job

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A tour of Norcal Frozen Food Int. on its fourth day of production confirmed one thing: A job on the spinach or broccoli line is darned hard work.

The company hosted a media tour yesterday and reporters and television cameramen roamed the cafeteria during lunch hour, interviewing workers.

Today marks the first full week of operation in more than four months of the former Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food Co. plant.

It's the first week of normal operation since workers went on strike in September 1985.

Workers were less than ecstatic about returning to jobs that require them to stand for eight hours a day in chilly, wet buildings bent over conveyor belts. But the 10 people interviewed expressed pride in their work and the new company.

"It's good to be back," said Jacqueline Derrick, a 14-year veteran of line work with Watsonville Canning, as she sipped a cup of soup. "But my hands are a little stiff and my back is sore from standing."

Judging by the strong aroma in the lunch room of the sore-muscle medication Ben-Gay, most workers were rebuilding muscles to handle old routines.

For hundreds of broccoli-line workers, that routine includes standing, reaching, tossing, bending and sorting — all while keeping a firm grip on a small knife to trim bunches of vegetables.

The spinach line is more automated, with huge blanching machinery plopping measured amounts of cooked spinach into small boxes like green oatmeal.

At the plant, remnants of the Watsonville Canning era still linger.

The lunch room includes "Reuben's 2," an extension of a Main Street Mexican restaurant which kept non-striking workers fed inside the plant during the strike. One wall was decorated with items from Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food Co. Displayed in a glass case



Kurt Ellison

Workers concentrate on broccoli line.

were a tote bag with the old company logo and a 1985 calendar, items once offered as premiums for hard-working employees.

Resentment lingers toward the handful of mechanics or floor leaders who stayed in the plant when the majority walked out. Some workers admit the emotion is hard to live with, but try to laugh it off, saying "everyone will have to learn to get along."

There were complaints about managers timing visits to the bathroom and about 10-minute breaks being rushed.

Company officials say they expect there will always be a few complaints, adding that more attention will be given to working conditions once the plant is operating more

normally. Ron Trine, president of Norcal said the 400 workers now in the plant are cooperating very well and are helping to "put operation ahead of schedule."

Overall, stamina prevailed among the workers and there was no complaint about the dank atmosphere, the smell of boiled vegetables, the noise, the standing puddles or the continuous sprays and drips of liquids.

Some things are simply accepted as part of the job that pays \$5.85 an hour.

It is for this monotonous, strenuous work that almost a thousand workers struggled through an 18-month strike. It is for these same jobs that they kept saying yesterday they are grateful.