

Fourth act of arson keeps tension high in Watsonville

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Arsonists struck early Tuesday for the fourth time in five days in Watsonville, setting a fire at the back entrance of the Beach Street Cafe, in the 400 block of West Beach Street.

The fire broke out just after 1 a.m., and although the extent of damage was undetermined Tuesday, owner Jeff Hansen said it was moderate, and he expected the cafe to be open for business again tomorrow.

The blaze follows the destruction of Farmers Cold Storage Sunday night, and apparent incidents of arson at Watsonville Canning and Richard A. Shaw frozen-food plants Friday night.

According to police, a passerby spotted flames coming from behind Beach Street Cafe at about 1:15 a.m. today, and then saw a man — with his sweater pulled up to cover his face — running from the area.

Whether the fire is related to a strike at Watsonville Canning and Shaw's, now in its sixth week, officials would not speculate.

"There's no way of knowing until we make an arrest," Fire Chief Gary Smith said.

Smith said the investigation into the Farmers Cold Storage blaze is continuing, but he would not speculate as to whether any of the fires were the work of professional arsonists. He did say, however, that "any time you get a fire burning that quickly (as the one at Farmers on Sunday night), it's a good job."

Hansen, who was doing repair work at his cafe Tuesday morning, said he had "no idea" why anyone would want to torch his business.

"Maybe someone (involved in the strike) saw policemen and firemen eating here," Hansen said, shrugging his shoulders.

The cafe owner was able to display a bit of humor amid all the turmoil, however. When asked if he had any enemies that might want to burn his cafe down, he replied, "None that know how to strike a match."

Police Chief Ray Belgard was taking a more serious approach, saying he was "very

concerned, to the point where we are now conducting a number of surveillances."

"These fires give us some indication that there are some people who have come to town who seem to play with fire," Belgard said.

And, he said, there is an apparent pattern, starting with street and dumpster fires Thursday night, to large pallet and cardboard fires Friday night, to the destruction of Farmers Sunday night.

Belgard, as did Fire Chief Smith, said he has no evidence that Tuesday morning's fire at the cafe was strike-related.

"But, it (arson) seems to be increasing," he said.

Belgard did say that other than the fires, there has been little trouble with the strikers the past few days.

He repeated his promise, however, to make more arrests and issue fewer citations on the picket lines when court orders are disobeyed.

"They (the strikers) are looking at them (citations) like souvenirs," the police chief said. "They think the citation charges will not be brought up (when the strike is over.) They are wrong. There will not be a mass dismissal when the strike is over. We intend to prosecute."

Belgard also said he was worried that the arson attacks might be just the beginning of strike-related violence.

"What we worry about next is the arming of camps," he said. "But we hope our surveillances will bring results."

Both sides of the labor dispute were blaming the other for the fires.

Teamsters officials say they instruct their members not to engage in violence or vandal-

ism. Richard King, secretary-treasurer of Local 912, said he does not know who is setting the fires, but does not believe it's any of the pickets.

"Our people are watched so closely by the police there is no way it could be us," said King. "The companies have so many security guards behind the fence and on the other side the police watch us 24 hours-a-day (so) that there is no way a striker could have snuck into Farmers Cold Storage."

King stopped short of accusing anybody in particular of setting the fire, but he said that whoever set the fire was careful to not endanger the facilities of the adjacent Watsonville Canning Co. plant.

"This thing is bigger than it looks," said King. "The fire at Farmers was thought out. It wasn't a mad drunk going off to do this. It had to be a professional."

Smiley Verduzco, president of Watsonville Canning, said his company was hurt by the Farmers Cold Storage fire and that his people would have no reason to set the blaze.

"Although we lease the building and the freezer from Farmers, we had done a lot of improvement at their facilities and owned the line there," said Verduzco. "The strikers knew we employed 60 to 100 people there."

On the picket line Tuesday morning, many union members expressed suspicion that the fires had been set by people who wanted to damage the strikers' cause by turning public sentiment against striking workers.

"I do not believe a striker set the fire," said a 15-veteran at Watsonville Canning, who walked the picket line Tuesday.

REFERENCE

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