

No end in sight to 16-month-old strike

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The strike at Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food Co. continued through 1986, with its myriad effects reverberating in the courts, the streets, the homes and businesses of Watsonville.

At this time last year, union members predicted their walk-out would mean economic ruin for Richard A. Shaw and Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food Co. But early in the year, the strike against Shaw was settled, 5½ months after it started.

That left only Watsonville Canning strike-bound. But it is the largest of the food-processing plants that make up Watsonville's principal non-farm industry, employing more than 1,000 workers at peak season. More than 16 months after it began, that strike appears as far from solution as ever.

The year began on a bright note when representatives of the union and Shaw began serious negotiations.

At the end of January, Shaw opened its books to a neutral fact-finding committee. The committee found the company to be in true financial distress and after six days of nearly non-stop talks between the company and the union a tentative contract was drawn up.

By a 2-to-1 margin Shaw workers voted Feb. 14 to accept that contract, which included a \$1.21-an-hour wage cut from \$7.06 to \$5.85. The deal was sweetened with a profit-sharing program for employees. But critics of the contract said

future Shaw employees were "sold down the river" by a clause which approved a two-tiered wage system that starts new line-workers at \$5.35 an hour.

On Feb. 18, a rally which began at Callaghan Park as a show of support for the Watsonville Canning strikers to "hold firm in their fight for fair wages," escalated to a rock-throwing, tear-gas-punctuated riot.

In the drizzle which fell all afternoon, about 150 demonstrators marched from the park to the Watsonville Canning plant on Walker Street. Riot squads of police moved in to protect the plant. The crowd was ordered

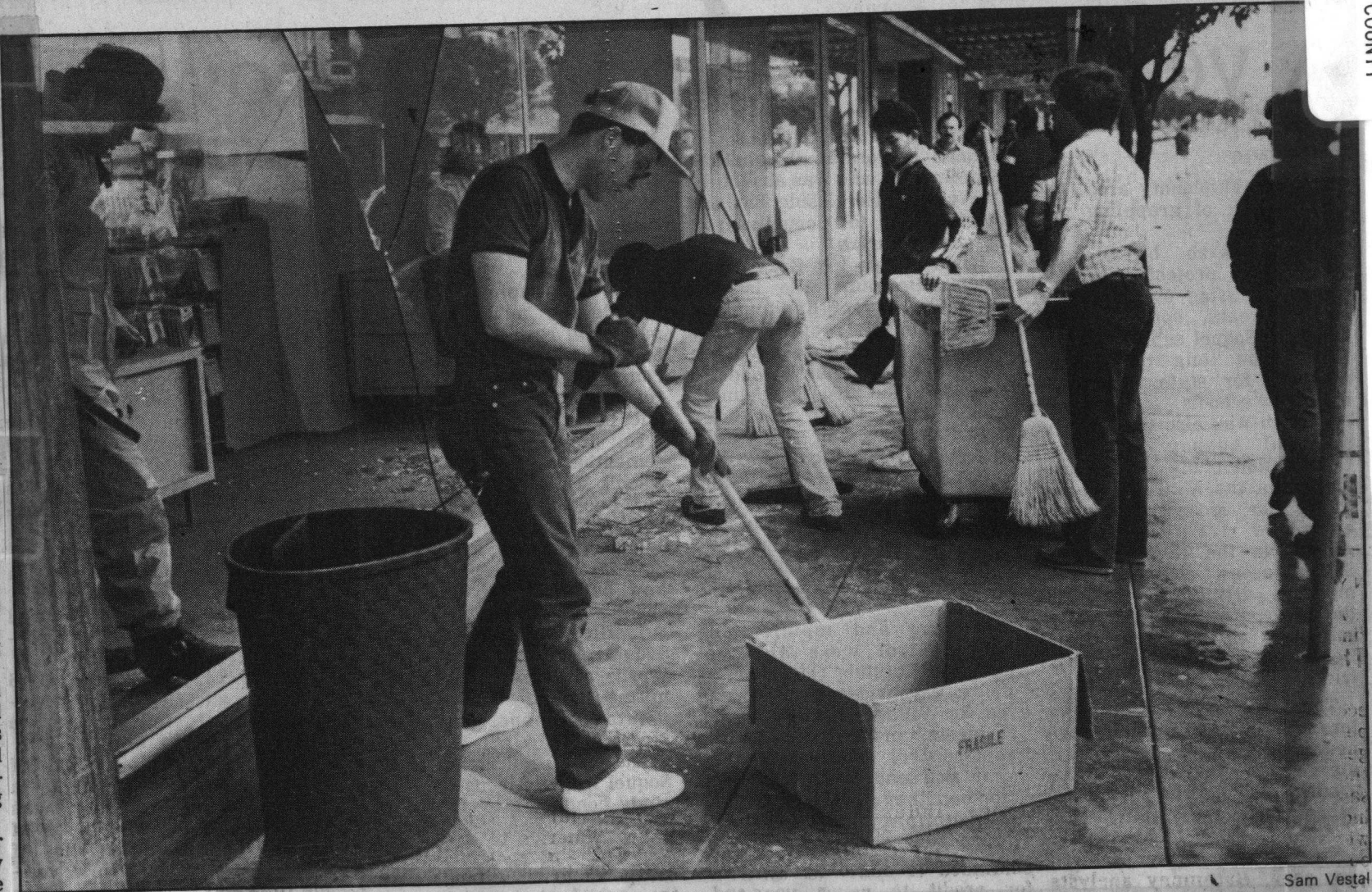
to disperse, but when it failed to obey, police pushed the crowd down West Lake Avenue.

Crowd control became a lost cause as it hit Main Street, where a small number of people began breaking windows, throwing bottles and frightening shoppers and merchants.

A few arrests resulted from the day's demonstration and those accused joined the ranks of dozens of other strikers and supporters charged with violating a court order restricting activity around the plant.

As those charged got their day in court during the next few months, all but one were acquitted by juries.

Running parallel to these events, Watsonville Canning and union officials returned to the negotiating table with a federal mediator at the start of the year. At first, the talks revolved around the sort of financial fact-finding that had proved successful at Shaw's.



Workers sweep up glass in front of Ford's in aftermath of strikers' rally that got out of hand.

Sam Vestal

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Both sides agreed such disclosure was necessary, but progress ground to a halt upon the company's demand that the Teamsters post a \$500,000 bond to ensure confidentiality.

Such a bond was necessary to protect their competitive edge, company officials claimed. Union officials said the arrangement would prove worthless unless they could share discovered information with their membership if wage concessions were found to be necessary.

The two sides have had few negotiating sessions since and bitterness appears to be the principal product of the strike.

A union-certification vote in which both union members and replacement workers cast ballots was conducted Aug. 14. All but 54 of the more than 1,700 ballots cast were challenged. The National Labor Relations Board is still investigating the challenges.

National attention was turned to Watsonville several times during 1986 as its previous nickname of "Frozen Food Capital" was changed to "Rally Capital."

Food drives and rallies almost every month indicated the strong support Watsonville strikers have gotten from other unions.

Three particular events accented what many labor leaders feel is a current anti-union climate prevalent in American society.

In April, strikers were denied

a permit to gather at the Plaza because they could not meet the city requirement of liability insurance. Lawsuits, citing this denial, police brutality and other incidents, were later filed by strikers and their supporters who claimed their First Amendments rights had been violated.

Also, during the spring, meat-packing strikers from George Hormel Inc., of Austin, Minn., and striking stewardesses from TWA visited Watsonville. They applauded the solidarity of Watsonville Canning strikers, proclaiming that they symbolized the front line in similar battles against contract concessions being fought by workers across the nation.

The June 29 visit of civil rights leader Jesse Jackson boosted morale among strikers to an all-time high. Although Watsonville city officials showed no desire to meet the one-time presidential candidate, officials of Teamsters General Union Local 912 rolled out the red carpet for Jackson.

Hundreds heard Jackson

speak at a benefit pancake breakfast, and about 3,000 listened at Callaghan Park while Jackson delivered a stirring sermon that congratulated the strikers "as representatives of the highest and best in all of us.

"Today we come to Watsonville, California, because Watsonville is today what Selma, Alabama, was to political justice just 20 years ago," Jackson said.

Although Watsonville Canning dominated the labor news of the year, the fate of more than 1,000 workers at six of Watsonville's other food-processing plants was also being determined.

The Shaw contract, with its "take-backs" and wage cuts, had set the trend.

In early March, workers at Del Mar Foods took an hourly wage cut to \$5.90; New West workers accepted the same reduction later that month; in May, the Naturipe Berry Growers won a contract settlement calling for \$6 an hour for its line workers; Crosetti Frozen Foods got workers to accept

\$5.85 an hour after closing the plant for 16 days. Soon thereafter, union members at Smuckers took the same cut.

Only Green Giant, which holds a larger market niche in specialty frozen vegetables, kept hourly line-worker wages of \$7.06.

In case after case, workers here and throughout the state accepted contracts that called for lower or status quo wages, indicative of the problems afflicting the frozen-food-processing industry.

Several employers threatened to move operations to areas where even lower wages prevailed, and some said simply they would go out of business rather than face heavy foreign competition.

The problems of the frozen-food industry provided the impetus for a well-attended hearing on the local economy conducted in August by the Watsonville City Council.

Growers and union officials joined in their criticism of management at Watsonville Canning during the autumn months. While the union launched a national boycott against the company's product, three major produce suppliers filed lawsuits against Watsonville Canning claiming they hadn't been paid for hundreds of thousands of pounds of produce delivered to the plant.

Speculation on the firm's stability soared when dramatic financial negotiations between Watsonville Canning and Wells Fargo Bank were transacted to secure millions of dollars of loans to the company.

Records filed with the Santa Cruz County Recorder's Office indicate that Mort Console, owner of Watsonville Canning, and his mother Kathryn, put up 13 pieces of personal and industrial properties to secure debts to the bank.

The plant was closed for ten days and phones were disconnected because of lack of payment for one day, in what appeared to be a time of reorganization for the company.

In response to the suits filed by growers, the company offered shares of Watsonville Canning as payment for the debts. Growers rejected the offer and partial cash payments and repayment schedules were finally reached in November.

At the same time, the Marketing Enforcement branch of the California Department of Food and Agriculture launched an investigation of the company's finances on behalf of informal complaints that growers had not been paid for delivered produce.

By mid-December the new line of credit from Wells Fargo

Bank to Watsonville Canning seemed to ease the growers' concerns and the plant is now back in normal operation.

Also toward the end of the year a series of articles printed in the Santa Cruz Sentinel accused the company of engaging in unethical and illegal activity. The reports were based on information from strikers and fired employees who claimed Watsonville Canning processed vegetables marked "unfit for human consumption," and upgraded inferior quality vegetables.

Smiley Verduzco, president of Watsonville Canning, denied the allegations.

Throughout the year, as attention focused on Watsonville Canning, company officials blamed the media for their difficulties.