

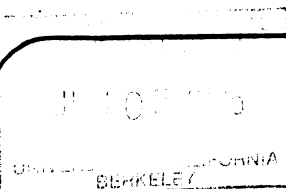
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WATSONVILLE STRIKERS HANG TOUGH

by William Segal

Cries of "huelga! huelga!" (strike!, strike!) rang through the air as hundreds of striking frozen food workers marched through Watsonville, California in September. 2200 members of Teamsters Local 912 have been on strike since September, the vast majority of them Mexicana and Chicana women.

The strike began when their employers, Watsonville Canning and Richard Shaw, Inc., unilaterally implemented a new contract that cut the base wage from \$6.66 to \$4.25 an hour. Management also announced a "two-tier" system, with new hires coming in at \$2.43, along with 44 other takeaways.

Management claims the changes are necessary in order for them to compete with non-union firms in Texas and Central America, where workers are paid \$1.50 a day. The union says that Watsonville Canning and Richard Shaw should maintain parity with the other five Watsonville frozen food processors, who continue to pay a base wage of \$7.06 an hour.

The Watsonville strike has become much more than a fight over dollars and cents. The strikers have taken on the entire local white power structure. Five hundred workers came out to the picket lines the first day of the strike. In response, management got an injunction against more than four workers on the picket line. Police in riot gear have closed off entire streets to strikers and their supporters, and hundreds of strikers have been arrested. Workers charge that police routinely stop anyone who looks Mexican to demand identification.

But the people's spirit remains unshaken. "They're tough people," Bill Walsh told the LCR. Walsh, Director of the Teamsters' Assistance Program for IBT Joint Council 7, added that "They're going to hold out. They're sharing everything they've got with each other." Despite the arrests and police provocation, picket lines are up 24 hours a day, seven days a week, even on holidays. As midnight approached on New Years Eve, a group of strikers strapped on guitars and serenaded the picketers from the back of a pickup truck.

When this reporter visited Watsonville ten days after the strike began, I was part of a march through the community by several hundred workers. "Que viva los Mexicanos de los Estados Unidos!" shouted an elderly woman. "Que viva!" the crowd roared back. Police tried to stop the march, ordering the crowd off the street, but the crowd responded with jeers and ridicule. "Speak to us in Spanish, we don't understand English," they laughed. "What are you, ignorant? You can't even speak our language."

The workers have had to take on their own union leadership as well. For 34 years, Local 912 was under the control of secretary-treasurer Richard King. According to Chuck Mack, president of Teamsters Joint Council 7, King had "trouble communicating with the membership." According to strike leader Gloria Betancourt, "The top 912 leaders never wanted us to go out on strike in the first place. Once we went out, they did nothing to help us. We've had to organize it ourselves."

On October 15, 500 workers met to select the Strikers Committee. The Committee has gone to unions, campuses and churches throughout northern California to build support for the strike, and helped organize rallies that drew as many as 3,000 people to the gates of the struck plants. Supporters have donated over 500,000 pounds of food since the strike began, thanks in part to the tireless efforts of Walsh. Teamsters Joint Council 7 sponsored a highly successful fundraising benefit performance of a musical adaptation of Studs Terkel's "Working" which raised hundreds of dollars for the strike.

Growing outside support and increased rank and file initiative helped boost morale. On October 28, workers rejected Wastonville Canning's "final offer" of \$5.05 an hour by an 800-1 margin.

Changes in Local 912--Richard King's decision to step down, under pressure, from his long reign as secretary-treasurer threw the local elections up for grabs. The new secretary-treasurer is Sergio Lopez who served as business agent for 14 years under King, and the first Mexicano to win this position in the history of the local. Workers hope that now that he is secretary-treasurer, the top position in Local 912, the union will put its weight behind the strike.

Rank and file strike leaders put together the People's Slate, with a platform emphasizing representation of women workers, a decrease in salary of union officials, and bilingual union meetings. Presidential candidate Gloria Betancourt and the other People's Slate candidates were defeated, but this marked the first time that a woman had run for one of the top slots in this local, and a Mexicana at that!

Instead of running on the issues, supporters of opposition candidates harassed and ridiculed Betancourt, asserting that if she were elected the union would have to set up a beauty salon in the hall. Considering the difficulties involved in running the strike and the campaign at the same time--both with very little money--the People's Slate candidates did fairly well, with Ed Torres and Chavelo Moreno nearly winning their respective bids for vice president and business agent.

When all the votes were counted, Leon Ellis and incumbent John Bubick of the Lopez slate were elected to the presidential and vice-presidential slots, respectively. Joe Fahey of Teamsters for a Democratic Union, a white UPS driver, ran a successful independent campaign for both Recording Secretary and Business Agent.

The Battle Still Goes On--Watsonville is the self-proclaimed "frozen food capital of the world," with seven canneries producing 50% of all U.S. sales of frozen broccoli, spinach, brussel sprouts and caluliflower. The two struck plants are the largest in the country. Other firms are watching the outcome of this strike to see what they can get away with when their labor contracts expire next year. Chuck Mack says bluntly that "Watsonville Canning and Richard Shaw are the contracts that are going to prevail in the industry."

Recently, negotiations resumed between Richard Shaw, Inc. and Local 912. Negotiations with Watsonville Canning have been suspended while an arbitrator conducts a "market study" to determine whether the company has a "legitimate" problem with high labor costs.

According to Chuck Mack, "the battle still goes on" in Watsonville. "The workers have a good chance of victory if they can hold out until March or April, when the growing season resumes.

In order to win, the strikers urgently need more support. For example, the union is trying to find shelter for families who are sleeping in cars because they have been evicted from their homes. Teamsters Joint Council 7, the Santa Clara County Central Labor Council, the Northern California Watsonville Strike Support Committee, the Watsonville Support Committee and Raza Si organization have come together to support a food caravan to Watsonville the fourth Saturday of every month--starting February 22.

The Watsonville strikers are fighting for their lives, their families, and their future. Their militancy and determination have already dealt a blow to management's attempts to impose a contract that no self-respecting union could accept. Ultimately, low wages and bad contracts in California's fields and canneries pull down the standard for all California workers. The Watsonville strikers are not just fighting for themselves, but for the entire working class.

- William Segal

To help the Watsonville Strike, send your check to Teamsters Joint Council 7, 150 Executive Park Blvd., Suite 2900, San Francisco CA 94134

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