

LABOR CENTER REPORTER

BERKELEY, CA 94720
(415) 642-0323

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY
CENTER FOR LABOR RESEARCH AND EDUCATION
INSTITUTE OF INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS



April 1987
Number 210

VICTORY IN WATSONVILLE

by William Segal

The Watsonville strike ended in a stunning victory for the 1100 strikers, their union, and the entire labor movement, on March 11, 1987, eighteen months and two days after it began. "It could be a turning point for all of labor," John Blake of the Western Conference of Teamsters told the LCR. "I think all of labor could rally around something like this and get a message out to the employer that, 'look, you aren't going to push us around anymore.'"

The Watsonville strike had become the longest-running major collective bargaining dispute in the country. Coming in the wake of a series of labor defeats that began with President Reagan's firing of the PATCO air controllers, the Watsonville strike became a symbol to the entire northern California labor movement of resistance to Reaganomics and employer attacks. "It proved that labor has a staying power and there are still people around who'll fight for principle," said Walter Johnson, President of the San Francisco Labor Council.

Not a single striker crossed picket lines during the 18-month dispute. Moreover, the militancy of the strikers on the picket lines helped to discourage strikebreakers from staying on the job. As a result, strikebreakers never gained enough skills to restore production to pre-strike levels. Ultimately, the strikers' solidarity and determination drove owner Mort Console out of business. "Mort Console told us he would break us, that we would be back at work in two or three weeks. Instead, we broke him. We held out longer than he could," said Watsonville Canning Strikers Committee President Gloria Betancourt.

The new owner of the struck plant, NorCal frozen foods, agreed to grant union recognition to the Teamsters without even going through a representation election. After voting on March 6 to postpone ratification of an initial offer that would have denied health benefits to most workers for up to three years, strikers voted March 11 by a 543 to 21 margin to accept a better offer including health benefits, a \$5.85 base wage (the industry standard), and rehiring of strikers in order of seniority with no discrimination against strike leaders. Strikebreakers have been discharged and will only be rehired for positions that cannot be filled by ex-strikers.

By preserving recognition and requiring the rehiring of rank-and-file leaders who emerged during the past year and a half, the new agreement puts the ex-strikers and their union in an excellent position to halt and even to reverse the concessions tide in the California frozen food industry. By re-establishing an industry standard, the Watsonville victory establishes the conditions for raising frozen food wages back up to \$7.06 an hour, the industry standard before the strike began.

How the Strike Was Won -- The principal ingredients of this labor victory appear to have been the unity and the determination of the strikers themselves, and the backing of the Teamsters International, which poured \$8 million into strike benefits and their corporate campaign against Watsonville Canning. "Without the people you've got nothing," observed Teamsters Local 912 Secretary-Treasurer Sergio Lopez after the ratification vote. "I'd like to say that I was the one that's responsible for this, but I know I'm not; the credit belongs to the people themselves. They held strong, they held together, and that was the end of the strike."

The strike began when 1000 workers walked off the job September 9, 1985 in response to a unilateral pay cut which slashed wages from \$6.66 to \$5.05 an hour. Owner Mort Console tried to ride out the dispute with an \$18 million war chest provided by Wells Fargo Bank, and with several hundred nonunion replacement workers.

INSTITUTE OF INDUSTRIAL
RELATIONS LIBRARY

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
BERKELEY

Console failed to reckon with the determination and organizing ability of the strikers, however. Strikers organized several large support rallies in the late Fall of 1985, and established an elected leadership body, their Strikers' Committee, at a meeting of 500 strikers. In the face of the growing level of strike organization, Teamster Local 912 Secretary-Treasurer Richard King announced his decision not to run for re-election. King, a personal friend of owner Mort Console, had signed an agreement with Watsonville Canning in 1982 which undercut the frozen food master contract. Sergio Lopez, the first Chicano Secretary-Treasurer in the history of the local, was elected in December 1985.

Frozen food packer Richard Shaw, Inc., which was also struck by Local 912 in September 1985, signed an agreement establishing a \$5.85 base rate the following February. The Shaw agreement became the pattern-setter for frozen food packers around the state, with some agreements going slightly higher and several others substantially below. Watsonville Canning, however, maintained its intransigent position and refused even to come to the bargaining table.

The strikers remained steadfast. A broad network of outside supporters contributed food, money, media attention and bodies on the picket line. Months later, after the strike had been won, Chuck Mack, President of Teamsters Joint Council 7, observed that "the united labor effort in the Bay Area was outstanding. We could not have sustained the strike without that support." Strikers received consistent backing from the Chicano movement as well, especially students from MeCha, the nationwide Chicano student organization, some of whom had been born and raised in Watsonville. Every leading Chicano official and activist in the state endorsed the strike.

The strike got a shot in the arm in late June 1986, when Jesse Jackson spoke before a crowd of 4000 enthusiastic strikers and supporters. His appearance drew renewed media attention, and helped to put the strike in a larger political and historical perspective: "Watsonville is to the economic justice movement of the '80s what Selma was to the civil rights movement of the '60s," said Jackson.

An "economic boycott campaign" launched by the Teamsters in June 1986, applied behind-the-scenes pressure to suppliers, distributors, and financial institutions doing business with the struck firm. Teamster representatives gathered information on the financial status of Watsonville Canning and transmitted it to growers who had not been paid since the strike began, contributing to their growing concern over repayment. An important development was the decision by a Mexican vegetable freezing firm to back out of a marketing agreement with Watsonville Canning following a meeting with Teamster officials.

Si se puede--It can be done! The August 1986 NLRB certification vote called by the union was a turning point in the strike. Because the Teamsters had been recognized thirty years earlier by Watsonville Canning without going through a representation election, the union retained the right to call for such a vote. Over 900 strikers came from as far as Mexico to participate in the certification election, far more than the number of strikebreakers that voted. The outcome of the vote ruled out the possibility of decertification for at least another year.

Soon after the certification vote, growers began to panic, filing lawsuits for immediate repayment of debts owned to them by Watsonville Canning. The firm was forced to close for a week in late September because of a shortage of funds. With the aid of new loans from Wells Fargo, however, the plant reopened. The bank itself became a target, and was hit by pickets in eight California cities during January.

After bankrolling the strike for 18 months, Wells Fargo evidently decided to pull the plug in late February, declaring the plant in default on its loans and transferring the plant to new owners. The contract ending the strike was reached with NorCal Frozen Foods, a new firm headed by David Gill of King City, a harvester representing 18 growers owed a total of \$5 million by Watsonville Canning. NorCal is responsible for the debts incurred by the struck firm.

The Watsonville strike has many lessons for the labor movement, and it will undoubtedly be closely studied and emulated for months and even years to come. Strike leader Chavelo Moreno hopes that the Watsonville strikers' experience will be useful to the labor movement. "I think unions should pay more attention to the rank and file," he told the LCR. "Strikes are not won unless the rank and file put their unity together. The rank and file are the ones who put up the fight. It takes everybody, not just the rank and file. But without the rank and file you can't fight."

-- William Segal

This article does not necessarily represent the opinion of the Center for Labor Research and Education, the Institute of Industrial Relations, or the University of California. The author is solely responsible for its contents. Labor organizations and their press associates are encouraged to reproduce any LCR articles for further distribution.