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TEAMSTERS ON STRIKE AGAINST UNITED FOODS

By Bill Segal

Teamster cannery workers are gaining ground in their fight to restore a living standard wage in the California frozen food industry. Workers at United Foods, Inc. plants have been on strike since June 1 in Modesto and July 30 in Salinas.

Workers at both plants had been working without a contract since the previous contract expired on July 30, 1986. In Modesto, the company unilaterally slashed wages from \$7.06 to \$5.05 an hour upon the expiration of the old contract, while continuing to pay \$7.06 an hour under a month-to-month extension of the old contract in the Salinas plant. In Salinas, the company is now proposing \$5.70 an hour, outright elimination of the pension plan, and an open shop.

The United Foods strike represents a new phase of the struggle by California's 100,000 cannery workers to halt and reverse attacks on their living standards. Most of these workers are women, the great majority being Chicana or Mexican. Their organized strength has grown steadily since the 1960s, and in several key Teamster locals they have elected new leadership from among their own ranks. The cannery strikes in Watsonville, and now Salinas and Modesto, show what these workers can do.

A victory by Teamsters Local 890 in Salinas and Local 748 in Modesto against United Foods would firmly re-establish a wage floor in the frozen food industry for the first time since 1982, and could help to sustain the momentum established with a \$6.16 contract signed between Teamsters Local 748 and Patterson Frozen Foods in September. Contracts at other large freezers will expire or undergo wage re-openers in February.

The United Foods strike got a big boost on October 17 when workers at NorCal Frozen Foods in Watsonville voted 194-5 not to comply with the company's order to pack frozen broccoli for United Foods. The NorCal workers, members of Teamsters Local 912, won a victory last March in the historic eighteen-month strike against Watsonville Canning, former owner of the NorCal plant. If Teamster cannery workers can maintain and strengthen their solidarity across the various locals, United Foods will be hard pressed to pack sufficient frozen broccoli and cauliflower to meet its obligations to retail and institutional customers. If United Foods cannot pack frozen vegetables, it will soon start losing business to its unionized competitors, applying further pressure on a company that is already engaged in a costly strike.

A Teamster boycott against United Foods is gaining momentum: United Foods products have been removed from the shelves of northern California Lucky's stores and from the 51-store Nob Hill chain. Within hours after the Teamsters announced they would set up picket lines outside Nob Hill stores, the store announced it would discontinue selling United Foods' "Pictsweet" label. Walter Herkle, vice president of Lucky's for Industrial Relations, told the LCR that his company has determined that United Foods products are "not up to standards" set by Lucky's for its "house brand" frozen food products. Lucky's gave notice to its frozen food broker in mid-October that it would not buy any product manufactured by United Foods.

Picket lines are scheduled to go up outside Albertson's stores on October 23 unless they remove United Foods products before then.

United Foods Wealth -- United Foods is one of the largest frozen food packers in the country, with plants in Utah, Minnesota, and Tennessee as well as the Modesto and Salinas plants in California. Altogether, the company employs 2,500 year-round and seasonal employees. But United Foods believes that "in order to remain competitive, the Company must reduce its labor costs," according to a report filed with the federal government.

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If anything, however, the company can afford to pay more than its competitors. Over half its products are sold under registered trade marks, enabling the company to obtain a premium over the price on "private label" products packed by other companies. Ample testimony to the company's profitability is provided by the \$1.5 million in management salaries collected by three members of the Tankersley family of Bells, TN.

United Foods and the Tankersley family appear to be a powerful and well-connected interest group in Tennessee. The Tankersleys are immensely wealthy, with ownership of 57% of United Foods stock. Other members of the company's board of directors include Edward J. Boling, president of the University of Tennessee and John Wilder, Lieutenant Governor of the State of Tennessee. Federal Elections Commissions records reveal thousands of dollars in contributions by the Tankersley family to the Republican National Committee and conservative political candidates.

Union Leverage -- But there is reason to believe that Teamster cannery workers will prevail in this battle. The importance of the Salinas plant to the company's operations is suggested by the fact that the company continued to pay workers there \$7.06 an hour for a full year after the previous contract had expired. Without production in Salinas, the company stands to lose ground in relation to its competitors. Industry sources reveal that the company is trying to meet its obligations to customers by contracting work out to Mexican frozen vegetable processors. But this strategy runs the risk of antagonizing Salinas Valley growers who had earlier signed contracts to supply United Foods. United Foods is also trying to contract work out to frozen food packers in Watsonville, but thus far members of Teamsters 912 have refused to pack products under the United Foods label in an impressive display of labor solidarity.

Two months into the strike, morale is high, boosted by two marches that drew hundreds of strikers and supporters. Despite a court injunction limiting the number of pickets, production has been slowed to one-third to one-fourth of normal at the company's Salinas plant. Only a handful of strikers crossed picket lines. During the week of October 4, 35 of the 100 strikebreakers at the Salinas plant resigned, with some charging that the company had cheated them by altering time cards. Then on October 8, three strikebreakers were hospitalized after an ammonia leak at the Salinas plant.

Outside support, which played a critical role in the Watsonville strike, is now coming in from the labor movement and the Chicano movement. Strikers have visited campuses including San Jose State University and U.C. Berkeley, where MEChA (*Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán*) raised \$170 for the strike.

On October 9, 90 people from all sectors of the labor movement gathered for a benefit breakfast called by the United Labor Action Committee, co-chaired by Bob Morales of the Teamsters Joint Council 7 Executive Board; Walter Johnson, Secretary Treasurer of the San Francisco Labor Council; LeRoy King of the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union; and Stan Smith of the Building and Construction Trades Council. Speakers included Frank Gallegos, President of Teamsters Local 890; Janet Favalaro, President of Teamsters Local 748; Chuck Mack, President of Teamsters Joint Council 7; Debbie Moy, a contact person for the United Foods Salinas strike; as well as Morales and Johnson. Altogether, the breakfast raised over \$400 for the strike.

A Food Caravan in support of Teamsters 890 will be held Saturday, November 7. The caravan has an impressive list of supporters, including the California Labor Federation, San Francisco Labor Council, Santa Clara Labor Council, Stanislaus Labor Council, ILWU, Teamsters Joint Council 7, Teamsters Joint Council 38, Mexican American Political Association, League of United Latin American Citizens, Raza Si, MEChA chapters at U.C. Berkeley, Stanford and San Jose State University, and SEIU Locals 715, 790 and 535.

In the past, the longest strike experienced by United Foods was five weeks in duration, during the mid-1970s. Things have changed since then, and the Watsonville strike appears to have set a new tone for what cannery workers are ready to do. The workers and the Teamsters Union seem determined to fight to the finish against United Foods. It is not clear whether the company really understands what they are up against.

Donations to help the strikers may be sent to United Foods Workers Committee, Teamsters Local 890, 207 N. Sanborn Rd., Salinas, CA 93905; or, ATTN: Janet Favalaro, President, Teamsters Local 748, 1222 I Street, Modesto, CA 95354. For more information, call Teamsters Local 890 at (408) 758-6311 or Teamsters 748 at 1-800-222-4748.

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