

THE WATSONVILLE CANNING STRIKE; OF 1985-7

If you're my age or older, you may remember a TV commercial from the late 1950s about the Valley of the Jolly Green Giant. Advertising jingles from that era have a way of lingering in your memory, even when you'd rather forget them. What's remarkable about this one is that, years after I first heard it on TV, I discovered that it refers to an actual place: the Pajaro Valley, on the central California coast. It contains some of the richest farmland in the country. John Steinbeck used a fictionalized version of it as the setting for *In Dubious Battle*, his Depression era novel about a farm workers' strike. Since the 1850s, it's been the source of Martinelli's apple cider. And until fairly recently, its main population center, a town of 25,000 called Watsonville, was responsible for most of the output of the domestic frozen food industry. At any given time Watsonville had as many as a dozen plants employing from five to seven thousand people. Most of these workers were women who were born in Mexico and retained close ties with their native land. Their labor generated the profits for a billion dollar industry.

The Green Giant no longer lives in the Pajaro Valley. He moved down to Mexico when Bill Clinton signed the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994. And Watsonville, which for years billed itself as the frozen food capital of the world, has been largely abandoned by the industry which served as its economic lifeblood for four decades.

But Watsonville has another claim on our attention, and that's what I'm going to be talking about today. Thirty years ago, when the domestic frozen food industry was still robust, Watsonville was the site of a successful 18 month strike by 1,000 workers at Watsonville Canning, the oldest and largest plant in town. For years, workers in the plant—in fact, all the frozen food plants in Watsonville—had been represented by Teamsters Local 912. They enjoyed the protections of a union contract and earned something resembling a living wage. But in September 1985 the owner of Watsonville Canning, a man by the name of Mort Console, forced them out on strike in a transparent attempt to break their union.

For years, the Local 912 had been run by a hard-drinking ex-merchant seaman named Richard King. He ran the Local according to what one Teamster organizer called the padrone system. Green Giant belonged to an outside

corporation, but all the other frozen food plants in town were owned by local businessmen. King knew them and had always gotten along well with them. He used to negotiate contracts over a tankard of beer in the bar he owned, two doors down from the union hall. He kept owners happy, negotiated reasonably good contracts for his members, and answered to no one. Though most members of Local 912 were Spanish speaking, its meetings were conducted in English and were frequently cancelled for lack of a quorum. Richard King himself didn't speak a word of Spanish.

King was so confident of his good relations with the employers that he was totally unprepared when the owner of Watsonville Canning decided to go after the union. There had not been a strike in the industry since it was first organized back in the late 1940s. Local 912 didn't even have a strike fund. King was used to doing everything himself, so there was no one else in a position of responsibility in the union to step up and take charge. To make matters worse, Watsonville canning's biggest competitor, Richard Shaw Frozen Foods, broke off contract talks with the union and forced its own workers out on strike as well.

The upshot was that the Watsonville Canning workers found themselves in what would prove to be the fight of their lives with no organization and no leadership. Women made up about 15% of the plant's work force, and some of them had experience as union militants in Mexico. But inasmuch as Mexican unions are a traditionally male domain, few if any of the women strikers had any history of union involvement, much less going on strike. Mort Console predicted they'd be "begging for their jobs back in two weeks."

Many of them were single mothers. Few had any money saved up to sustain them through the walkout. They would have to feed their families on \$55 strike benefits from the Teamsters international union, plus whatever they could scare up in the way of donations from outside supporters. In the course of the strike, many would become homeless.

Despite all this, the strikers held on for eighteen months. During that time not one of them would cross the picket line. They learned as they went along how to organize themselves, how to take care of each other, how the jobs the union should have been doing. In the end, Mort Console wound up having to sell not only

his company, but nearly all of his family's real estate holdings, to stay out of bankruptcy court.

The plant was bought by Console's biggest creditor. The strikers ended their struggle in the most dramatic way imaginable, winning a contract from the new owner after a five-day wildcat strike.

Bear in mind that all this happened in the mid-1980s, when organized labor across the country was in headlong retreat. Across the country, workers with far more experience and resources at their disposal were suffering catastrophic defeats. Mort Console was only one many private sector employers who had tolerated unions for years and were now coming to realize that they could actually get rid of them, if they were willing to spend the money and assume the necessary risks.

Bear in mind as well that the Watsonville Canning strikers operated in a local political climate that viewed them with suspicion if not outright hostility. Mexicans and Mexican-Americans were about to become a majority of Watsonville's population, but they were largely shut out of the town's civic life. Many lacked citizenship papers and could not vote. Anglos made up the entire city council and dominated most public agencies. The United Farm Workers had been attempting to organize the fields outside of town, and the local powers that be, which included many growers, were deeply suspicious of any bid by brown people to organize and assert themselves.

All this was reflected in the way civic authorities responded to the strike. The mayor refused to allow Spanish translations at a critical city council meeting, saying it would be a waste of the council's time. Before the strike was twenty-four hours old, a local court had issued an injunction against mass picketing so restrictive that one striker who lived across the street from the plant was arrested for standing on her front porch. Before it was over, hundreds of strikers would be arrested; acts of violence against strikers invariably went unpunished.

Given what they were up against, what they had to work with, and the terrible hardships they had to endure, it seems amazing that these women were able to prevail. I'm going to try to provide some insights into how they managed it, and why it matters to us today.

You can interpret this strike in a number of ways: as a labor-management dispute; as a struggle for Mexican immigrant rights; as an effort by women to assert their power in a traditional, male supremacist environment; as a bid to transform a top-down union; as a lesson in strategy and tactics when arrayed against a more powerful enemy. In my opinion the strike was all of these things, but at the most basic level it was a matter of ordinary people caught up in an extraordinary situation, and transformed by it. This is the stuff of high drama, but before I get into the plot, let me try to give you some sense of the characters.

First off, let me say a few words about frozen food. It's hard to appreciate today how big a role it played in the American diet a generation ago. My stepmother was a serious cook; she used to watch Julia Child on TV, furiously taking notes as if attending a college lecture course. But she routinely served up Birdseye frozen spinach or River Valley French cut frozen green beans at the dinner table. In our house and millions of other American homes, fresh vegetables were the exception and not the rule.

The technology for frozen food had been around for a long time, but the industry didn't really take off until after World War II, when all of a sudden every American household had to have a refrigerator with a freezer compartment. Once the consumer demand was there, the industry saw an explosive expansion.

Pajaro Valley farmers could turn out far more fresh produce more than the market could absorb. Ed Console, Mort's father, was the first of a succession of local entrepreneurs to convert his packing shed into a frozen food plant, buy up surplus crops from local farmers, pack and freeze them, and put them into cold storage until they could be sold and shipped to supermarkets across the country. He called his new company Watsonville Canning, not because it produced canned vegetables but because, until he came along, canning and food processing were pretty much synonymous.

Local farmers quickly learned how to take advantage of the emerging market for frozen food. Thanks to ideal growing conditions, a stretch of coastline north of town was converted into "an ocean of brussels sprouts" that accounted for 90% of the nation's crop. Most of it passed through Watsonville's frozen food plants en route to supermarket shelves. Sixty percent of the broccoli grown in the region was

sold frozen. Local plants handled cauliflower, spinach, and lima beans as well. Agriculture is a seasonal industry, but staggered harvests kept the frozen food plants running nine months out of a year. Watsonville was no longer a farming town that “rolled up its sidewalks during the winter,” as one local put it. It was now a factory town that required a year-round work force.

Because the technology involved in frozen food is relatively cheap, it was easy for local entrepreneurs to get into the business. As a result, the industry was fiercely competitive. The biggest problem employers faced was recruiting enough workers. When I was researching my book, I interviewed a number of strikers; I usually started out by asking them how they were first hired in the industry. The answer was always the same: “All you had to do was show up.”

No one cared if you were undocumented or even underage. Gloria Betancourt, who would emerge as the strikers’ outstanding rank and file leader, was fifteen years old when she first hired on at Watsonville Canning in 1963. I asked her how she got away with it. “It was easy,” she said. “You slap a little makeup on your face, it makes you look older.” She took one precaution: she made herself scarce when Ed Console’s wife, the plant manager, appeared on the shop floor. Mrs. Console, Gloria assumed, knew something about makeup.

Much of the industry’s work force was recruited from the wreckage of the bracero program, a federal guest worker program first instituted during World War II. Braceros were supposed to insure agribusiness would always be assured of a readily available supply of farm laborers. If you’re at all familiar with the history of the United Farm Workers, you may know something about the braceros already. Cesar Chavez often characterized the program as a federally-sponsored scabhearding operation, using strikebreakers from Mexico to keep US-born farm workers from unionizing. .

The program’s actual history is a bit more complicated. I won’t go into detail here; suffice to say that workers have been travelling back and forth across the US-Mexico border ever since the United States first annexed northern Mexico by military force back in 1848. And from the very beginning, Mexican workers have been crucial to agricultural production the southwestern US. President

Woodrow Wilson acknowledged as much in 1916 when he said, “This used to be their country, and they can and will do the work.”

You can gauge how essential Mexican labor was in this country from the wording of the Reed-Johnson Act in 1924. This legislation, the first large-scale attempt to restrict immigration into the US, was thoroughly racist. It privileged northern European immigrants and sought to restrict the influx of people from southern and Eastern Europe, Asia, and the southern hemisphere generally. Significantly, Mexicans were classified as “white” and exempted them from the law’s noxious racial quotas.

With the onset of the Great Depression six years later, the federal government did an abrupt about-face. At least 400,000 people, including one-third of the Mexican population of Los Angeles, were arrested and deported or repatriated to Mexico—often without regard to legal residency. The Border Patrol was used to break strikes by Mexican cotton pickers in the California Central Valley. (Incidentally, one of those strikes served as a prototype for *In Dubious Battle*, although for some reason Steinbeck chose to portray the strikers as anglos. They weren’t.)

World War II brought with it an acute labor shortage. The US cut a deal with the Mexican government to bring 200,000 farm laborers into the US as contract workers, to be returned to Mexico when their contracts were up. Despite originating as a wartime measure, the bracero program was repeatedly extended after the war was over.

It was supposed to stabilize the farm labor market, stop illegal immigration, and prevent abuse of migrant farm workers. It didn’t do any of that. Employers routinely violated labor protections without suffering any consequences. Braceros often responded by “skipping” — walking off the job before their contracts were up. In border areas they often “went home as soon as they had earned what they wanted.” Others walked out of the fields and found better paying manufacturing jobs.

More than a few workers who had entered the country as braceros wound up in Watsonville’s frozen food plants. Family members from Mexico soon joined them. The program established patterns of migration that persisted long after it was

abolished in 1963. One scholar found that 80 percent of the residents of the village of Gomez Farias, in the Mexican state of Jalisco, had relatives working in Watsonville. Nearly all the strikers I talked with had first come to Watsonville to join family members who were already here.

Gloria Betancourt's father was a bracero; after a sympathetic employer helped him get citizenship papers, he saved enough money to buy a house in Watsonville and bring his family up from Mexico. His kids, worried about what years of field work had done to their father's health, took jobs at Watsonville Canning to augment the family income.

Frozen food work was not easy. One worker memorably described her first days on the job. As a young girl, she had become familiar with hard physical work on her family's farm in Mexico, but it did not prepare her for the production line at Watsonville Canning. "I never worked so hard in my life," she said. "I had pains in my back, and vomiting. Every day I said, 'I don't want to go back.' It took me two hours to fall asleep every night, and I dreamed about brussels sprouts." Another worker said, "All the foremen need are whips." But many frozen food workers who had had experience working in the fields found factory work a welcome alternative to migratory farm labor. You could live in the same house year round. Your kids could attend school on a regular basis. And you had a union contract.

Now I should say a few words about the union. At the time of the strike the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, like a lot of other unions at that time, was under siege. But it was still the largest and most powerful union in the country. In the 1930s, and '40s the Teamsters successfully organized over-the-road truckers, who went from being among the nation's most exploited workers to being beneficiaries of contracts that were the envy of workers everywhere.

This was a remarkable achievement. Truck drivers were not easy to organize, because they worked in isolation, and they were generally employed by small firms with relatively low profit margins. The trucking industry was highly competitive, and labor costs accounted for the bulk of its expenses, so employers were particularly tight-fisted when it came to wages.

The Teamsters overcame these obstacles by exploiting the strategic position of drivers in the movement of goods, the employers' peculiar vulnerability to economic pressure, and federal regulations which made it possible for the union to play the employers off against each other. The union's clout was vastly increased with the construction of the interstate highway system in the 1950s, which allowed trucks to supplant railroads as the preferred means of shipping goods across the country.

The Teamsters found they could increase the bargaining leverage of truck drivers by extending their organization to companies whose goods they transported. In organizing those companies, the Teamsters did not always bother to consult with the workers involved, not when they could go the easier route and "organize the employer." Sometimes this involved signing sweetheart agreements with the employers in question. The result was a two-tier union: truck drivers did well; the other Teamster jurisdictions, not so much.

The latter group included dock workers, manufacturing workers, and food processing workers. These workers were more likely to be black or Latino and face discrimination issues on the job. Discrimination was an issue in the union too. These workers were in a paradoxical situation. On their own, they did not enjoy the kind of bargaining leverage that truck drivers had. Being part of a powerful union undoubtedly helped them. On the other hand, they had been brought into the union in the first place mainly to give the drivers more clout. Their own needs counted for much less. They were largely shut out of power in the union, and their particular issues were apt to be ignored. The head of Joint Council 7, which oversees all the Teamster locals in Northern California, was a man who prided himself on his progressive politics. Yet he admitted to me that when the struggle in Watsonville broke out, he knew next to nothing about the frozen food industry and its workers.

The situation in Local 912 illustrates this dynamic perfectly. The mainly Mexican women in the frozen food plants were fortunate to be working under a Teamster contract, especially when you consider that the alternative for most of them would have been working in the fields and constantly pulling up stakes to follow the crops. Local 912 was the first in the California food processing industry to get health benefits for the seasonal workers who made up most its membership.

But the Local was run by a man who made absolutely no effort to get members' input. It was paternalism in action: Richard King took care of his people; his people were completely dependent on him.

The Teamsters employed another strategy to increase their bargaining power. They became very adept at negotiating master agreements covering multiple employers. When you are trying to organize a highly competitive industry, characterized by a lot of small employers with relatively low profit margins, you're not going to get very far trying to deal with each employer separately. You have to try to impose the same conditions on all of them, so they don't start competing to see which ones can pay their workers the least.. So you try to negotiate with all of them at once. Economists call this "taking wages out of competition," and the Teamsters were very good at it. They had to be, because when the union was first getting organized, trucking was a highly competitive industry.

So was frozen food. By negotiating a master agreement that covered everybody, the Teamsters made the lives of the frozen food employers a lot easier. It's a lot easier to run a business when you know in advance what your expenses are going to be, and you and your competitors all play by the same rules. Dealing with the union, and paying your workers a little more, was a reasonable price to pay for a measure of stability and predictability to what would otherwise be a chaotic situation. This is especially true when you're clubby enough with the head of the union to negotiate contracts over a tankard of beer.

Local 912 had maintained a multi-employer agreement with Watsonville's frozen food companies since the 1950s. But in 1982 something happened which no one has been able to explain—and Richard King, the man responsible, is no longer around to explain it. I mentioned that King was close to the Console family. He had been good friends with Ed Console, the man who had founded Watsonville Canning back in 1944. Mort Console took over the business when his father died, and King regarded himself as a kind of surrogate father to kid.

When the union's three-year agreement with the frozen food employers expired in 1982, Mort went to Richard King and asked for a 40 cent an hour wage cut. King gave it to him. None of the other employers got it. King was no fool, but

this was a remarkably stupid and irresponsible thing to do. It undermined the integrity of the multi-employer contract which was the source of Teamster power in the industry. It placed Console's competitors at a serious disadvantage, with potentially ruinous consequences for at least one of them. And it put workers throughout the industry at risk of similar pay cuts.

The pay cut at Watsonville Canning was supposed to be temporary; presumably, the old wages would be restored when the contract came up for negotiation again in 1985. It soon became obvious that Mort Console was playing for keeps. He was using his newfound labor cost advantage to drive his competitors out of business and drive the union out of his plant.

He invested \$750,000 in upgrades to his plant, significantly increasing its productivity. He hired time-study men to help him get more out of his workers. He began flooding the frozen food market, driving prices down. His intent, apparently, was to precipitate a shakedown in the industry, with the expectation that Watsonville Canning would survive and feed off the remains of its competitors. Wells Fargo Bank apparently thought Console's strategy was a sound one, because in August 1895 the bank extended Watsonville Canning an \$18 million line of credit.

Console also availed himself of the services of the nation's premier union-busting law firm. Firms like this were proliferating like maggots in the 1980, as employers who had tolerated unions for years began concluding that that getting rid of them might be worth the trouble and expense. To do this, they invariably took advantage of a loophole in federal labor law. The law guarantees workers' right to strike. But it also allows employers to hire "permanent replacements" when strikes occur. If twelve months go by without a settlement, the strikebreakers can request an election to determine whether the union will continue representing the company's employees. After twelve months, strikers are not allowed to vote. Some very prominent corporations got rid of their unions this way during the 1980s, among them International Paper, Phelps-Dodge and Greyhound Bus.

When his 1982 with Local 912 contract expired in the summer of 1985, Watsonville Canning did not restore the old wages. Instead, Mort Console demanded additional cuts of \$2 an hour, gutting of health benefits, ending the

deduction of union dues from workers' paychecks. Union officers who entered the plant on routine union business were arrested for trespassing.

Watsonville Canning's biggest competitor was Richard Shaw. Shaw was a onetime Watsonville Canning manager who had left to start his own company after a falling out with the Console family. He had made a sizeable investment in his state of the art plant and was still paying it off, so the labor cost advantage that Console had been given put him in an impossible situation. He accused the union of throwing him under the bus, and demanded the same concessions Console was demanding. When Watsonville Canning's 1,000 workers walked out on September 9, 1985, they were joined by 700 strikers from Richard Shaw.

By now Local 912 had all but ceased to function. This didn't stop the strikers from organizing spontaneously. On the first day of the strike, hundreds of pickets surrounded the two plants. The courts responded with an injunction which placed large sections of Watsonville under something resembling martial law.

Police enforced the injunction with a vengeance: anyone coming within two blocks of the struck plants could expect to be hassled by the cops. Plant managers stood at the plant gates, pointing out particular strikers and demanding that they be arrested. The police usually complied.

None of this prevented strikers from confronting busloads of scabs on the edge of town and pelting them with rocks, or sabotaging company property under cover of night. The situation inside the plants was reportedly chaotic: there was a constant turnover, and many strikebreakers clearly didn't know what they were doing. One of them quit after a few days; he told of supervisors screaming at the workers as vegetables piled up on the floor.

With the union local in shambles, there was a huge leadership vacuum that desperately needed to be filled. Initially, the Watsonville chapter of Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) tried to fill it. TDU was a nationwide organization of rank and file truck drivers who had banded together to challenge union leaders and make the union over as a "fighting, democratic organization." During the 1970s and '80, a number of unions saw rank and file caucuses spring up in their organizations. Most were started by former campus radicals who had decided to do take their agenda for social change to the point of production. Few of these

caucuses lasted very long, but TDU is still going strong today. Its Watsonville chapter was started by a transplanted Berkeley radical named Frank Bardacke; at the time, it was probably the only TDU chapter in the country with a predominantly Spanish-speaking membership.

Watsonville TDU had several dozen members, many of whom had been militant union activists in Mexico. Most of them were men: in Mexico, unions have traditionally been a male domain, and that mentality carried over into Watsonville.

In 1982, capitalizing on widespread resentment over the deal Richard King had cut with Mort Console, Bardacke made an unprecedented challenge to Richard King's leadership of Local 912. Despite the fact that he had only been a Teamster for a few years, he ran against King in the union election and almost won. Now TDU tried to take charge of the strike—"acting as if we were the union," as Bardacke put it.

It proved to be a serious mistake. Though TDU had attracted a hard core of militant workers, it did not have a strong base in the struck plants. On October 6, it organized a massive rally to protest the injunction, bringing several thousand supporters to Watsonville from around the Bay Area. Since the rally was held in defiance of the court injunction, TDU leaders were understandably concerned about possible violence. They tried to keep tight control over the planning of the rally. In the process many strikers were antagonized. Strikers felt it was time to stop taking their cues from others and assume responsibility for their own struggle.

On October 15, at a mass meeting from which non-strikers were barred, hundreds of workers from Watsonville Canning and Richard Shaw elected a nine-member Strikers Committee to assume formal responsibility for the jobs the union should have been doing. Backing it up was a largely informal group of forty to fifty mainly women strikers who carried out much of the actual work. They organized picket duty, ran the food bank, set up a hardship fund, planned rallies, and maintained an effective mutual support network.

The Strikers Committee had to learn it went along. "I didn't know what it meant," recalled one worker who was elected to the committee. "None of us did. But they were counting on us, so we couldn't let them down." As a matter of

principle, the Strikers Committee held its formal meetings in the union hall, but few of the women strikers felt comfortable there. Instead, they usually met in each other's houses or on the picket line to plan and coordinate strike activity, share information, and discuss strategy. Members of the Strikers Committee would consult with them there, sounding them out about their next moves.

Many strikers lost their homes and were reduced to doubling up or living in cars. Others left town to find other work; several dozen actually returned to Mexico to wait out the strike. An important task of the Strikers Committee was making sure everyone stayed in contact with each other.

Shortly before the Strikers Committee was elected, Joint Council 7 sent an emissary named Alex Ybarrolaza to check things out. Ybarrolaza spoke fluent Spanish and was a seasoned strike strategist. He was deeply impressed with the strength and solidarity of the strikers, and appalled by the state of Local 912, which he considered a disgrace to the Teamsters. His confidential report to his superiors excoriated Richard King but asserted that the strike was winnable, provided the International union got actively involved and gave the strikers the support they needed. It would take eight months, but Ybarrolaza eventually prevailed upon the International to launch an economic sanctions campaign against Watsonville Canning.

In the meantime, Ybarrolaza tried to repair the damage done by Richard King. Many strikers were estranged from the union; it was necessary to regain their confidence and make sure they did nothing that jeopardize support from the International. Local 912 elections were coming up and members of the Strikers Committee were determined to throw out the old leadership. Richard King had decided not to seek reelection after his longtime protégé and business agent, Sergio Lopez, told him bluntly that there was no way he could win. Lopez wound up taking over King's job.

Gloria Betancourt, chair of the Strikers Committee, wanted to see women take over leadership of the local, but few of the women felt comfortable seeking union office and only one was willing to run on a slate with her. Gloria's brother, a member of the Strikers Committee and a popular figure in the Watsonville Canning plant, agreed to run against Lopez, but a week into the campaign

Ybarrolaza had persuaded him to withdraw. Ybarrolaza told him it would be easier for the International union to work with Lopez. In the end, only one opposition candidate was elected.

Another disappointment awaited the strikers. Ybarrolaza believed that the strike against Richard Shaw should never have happened. Richard King had jeopardized the survival of Shaw's business when he cut a deal with Mort Console. It was now necessary to mend fences with Shaw and make sure that he remained in business as a union employer.

The Teamster strategy was isolate Mort Console by coming to a common agreement with his competitors and diverting his business to them. After looking at Richard Shaw's books, Ybarrolaza agreed to substantial wage concessions from him. In the interest of maintaining a uniform wage standard throughout the industry, all the other frozen food plants had to accept the same concessions. When workers at one plant balked, a high-ranking Teamster official privately advised the plant's owner to lock them out until they backed down, which they did after two weeks. Meanwhile the union stipulated that if Watsonville Canning settled for less, all the contracts would be renegotiated. This put the Watsonville Canning strikers in the position of having to literally defend the wages of every worker in the industry.

The International's economic boycott campaign also became a source of tension. Strikers and supporters wanted a UFW-style boycott which could take advantage of widespread sympathy for the strike in the Chicano community. This proved problematic for several reasons. For one thing, since supermarkets sold frozen food under a variety of brand names, it was not always easy for shoppers to identify which products came from Watsonville Canning.

The Teamsters also worried about possible legal issues. Federal labor law prohibits involving third parties in labor disputes. This wasn't a problem for farm workers, because farm workers aren't covered by federal labor law. But other workers are covered, and Teamster lawyers worried that a consumer boycott, if not handled properly, could leave the union vulnerable to legal action.

Fortunately, the Teamsters had another powerful economic weapon at their disposal, once they were prevailed upon to use it. Wells Fargo Bank had had been

bankrolling Mort Console through the strike. The Teamsters had over \$1 billion in pension and other funds invested in Wells Fargo accounts. There was nothing to prevent them from taking that money elsewhere.

In the meantime, Watsonville Canning's bid to decertify the union after 12 months had to be stopped. There had never been a formal union certification vote at the plant; Watsonville Canning had voluntarily recognized the union as bargaining agent for its workers back in 1948, following a militant strike. The Teamsters lawyer realized that if the union petitioned for a certification vote before the twelve months were up, strikers would be allowed to vote along with the scabs.

It was a brilliant legal strategy. But it was up to the strikers to make it work. Once the vote was scheduled, Watsonville Canning went on a hiring binge, hoping to tilt the election in its favor. To win, the strikers needed close to 100 % turnout.

By now, many strikers had left town. Some were following the harvests up and down California's Central Valley. Others were as far away as Texas. Several dozen others had gone back to Mexico to wait out of the strike. Of those who remained in and around Watsonville, many had lost their homes and were living in their cars or doubling up in other people's houses. Getting all these people back to town on the day of the vote required a major organizing effort, probably the most intense and difficult of the entire strike.

From the beginning, the Strikers Committee had tried to keep tabs on everybody's whereabouts. If someone left town without leaving word where they were going, their relatives were consulted. Strikers took over the phone lines in the union hall. An effort was made to contact every Watsonville Canning striker as many as three times. When the time came to cast their ballots, some strikers travelled hundreds of miles in order to do so.

The strikers won the vote. It proved to be the turning point of the strike. Mort Console had blown through his entire \$18 million dollar credit line from the bank. He shut his plant down for eleven days at the height of the season. To reopen it, he had to mortgage every piece of property his family owned. For all practical purposes, Watsonville Canning now belonged to Wells Fargo. In early 1987, nearly a year and a half after the strike began, the Teamsters International

threatened to close all its Wells Fargo accounts. The bank responded by foreclosing on Console.

The Teamsters' objective was to make sure the industry remained unionized. By driving a union-busting employer out of business, they had effectively achieved their goal. But it would be a Pyrrhic victory for the strikers if they did not get their jobs back. Fortunately a local grower named David Gill agreed to buy the plant and was willing to work with the union. Gill had never been paid by Watsonville Canning for \$5 million worth of broccoli he had sold the company at the beginning of the strike. He realized that if Watsonville Canning simply went broke, the bank would get all its assets.

Buying the company and operating it at a profit represented his best chance of getting his money back. The union quickly negotiated a contract with him that was essentially the same as its contract with the other frozen food companies.

But there was a problem. Because the union was dealing with what was technically a new company, the standard contract language meant that the seasonal employees who made up most of its work force would have to wait at least three years before qualifying for health benefits. Many of these women were longtime veterans of the plant, and they had already gone 18 months without access to care. At a stormy union meeting, the workers refused to ratify the contract and directed their union representatives to return to the bargaining table. They did so despite warnings from the Teamsters that the union had no dispute with the new owner and any continued strike activity was unauthorized and would be proceeding without union support.

Strikers pitched a tent at the plant gate which became a de facto strike headquarters. Six strikers and two supporters camped out in the tent and carried out a hunger strike which would last five days. On the fourth day, several dozen strikers engaged in a *manda y peregriacion*, a Mexican folk ritual whose purpose was to ask God's help in achieving a just settlement. It involved marching on their knees from the plant gate to a Catholic church half a mile away, where the priest led them in an impromptu mass. At this point, to give you a feel for what it was like, I want to show some video footage taken by Eddie Wong during the strike's final days, for a documentary that was never completed.

(SHOW FOOTAGE)

As you can see, God was paying attention, because the union was able to get the health benefits restored, and the strike ended in triumph. I'd like to make some points in closing:

- 1) The strikers were the kind of people who have traditionally been relegated to the fringes of the in the labor movement, and to some extent still are. (And of course they are just the kind of people Donald Trump wants to deport.) They walked out at a time when organized labor generally was in retreat and workers with far more experience and resources at their disposal were suffering catastrophic defeats. Yet they found a way to prevail.
- 2) The level of solidarity maintained by the workers over eighteen long, difficult months has no parallel that I'm aware of in contemporary labor disputes. None of the strikers broke ranks and crossed the picket line. I would attribute their cohesion not only to the shared experience of working at a demanding job, but to the common perspective of Mexican immigrant women, many of them raising their children alone, with strong family ties in both Mexico and Watsonville. The largely informal character of their rank and file organization was never a serious problem because, as one perceptive observer noted, "There was a total social network. Word of mouth was all they needed, because everybody was related to somebody else."
- 3) From the beginning, a strong identification on the part of the Chicano community with the strikers' cause was their most reliable source of support. I was working at the time at a large mail processing facility in Oakland which had recently hired a large number of Spanish surnamed workers under a court-ordered affirmative action program. When we conducted a food drive for the strikers at the facility, they responded with little or no prompting.
- 4) The Catholic faith of many women strikers was crucial, as the *manda y peregrinacion* suggests. They regarded the privations of the strike as a test of their faith. Catholic notions of female submissiveness may have inhibited them from becoming more active in the union or assuming out-front leadership positions, but this paradoxically served to make them

- rely more on each other. And, as one striker told me, “Just because you’re Catholic doesn’t mean you can’t throw rocks at scabs.”
- 5) When the Strikers Committee was elected, formal positions of leadership went to people who had held positions of responsibility inside the plant, had not been confined to a single department or operation, and had some English language skills. They were not necessarily the most militant, but they had a history of on-the-job relationships with the masses of line workers who respected their leadership. It’s worth noting that, with one exception, the men elected to the Strikers’ Committee dropped out within a few months and were replaced by rank and file women who volunteered to take on the responsibility.
 - 6) Watsonville’s TDU chapter, which did not survive the strike, had pursued a strategy of organizing the most outspoken and militant workers and encouraging them to attend union meetings and challenge the leadership. Its most active members, typically men, were apt to be veterans of the labor movement in Mexico. Yet effective strike leadership fell mainly to women who preferred to avoid the union hall. As a TDU leader later observed, “They didn’t say a lot, they didn’t strut the same way, but there was a cohesion among them.”
 - 7) The intervention of the higher levels of the Teamsters union in the strike was in many respects a mixed blessing. Strikers were frequently kept in the dark about what the union was doing, and as we have seen, their agendas were sometimes in serious conflict. Yet the resources the union brought to the struggle clearly made a difference, especially towards the end, and the strike would have been far more difficult to win had it been marked by the kind of breach between the strikers and the International that wrecked the contemporaneous Hormel strike.
 - 8) In launching an economic boycott campaign against Watsonville Canning, the Teamsters were embracing the so-called “corporate campaign” strategy which was increasingly popular among unions in the 1980s. It is usually identified with the organizing drive at J.P. Stevens, popularized in the movie “Norma Rae,” but it really has its roots in the United Farm Workers grape boycott a decade earlier. Their strategy has two aspects: mass mobilizations aimed at winning public sympathy and support, and identification of strategic “pressure points” which directly

attack the employers' bottom line. Strike supporters who saw the strike to as a *cause celebre* for the larger Chicano movement wanted an emphasis on the former. The Teamsters opted for the latter, finding it both more effective and less legally and politically problematic.

- 9) The domestic frozen food industry went into a precipitous decline following the ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement. Today it has largely relocated to Mexico. But Watsonville, which was very much an *anglo* town during the strike despite Mexicans making up close to half the population, is no longer one today. Latinos are well represented not only in city government but in other aspects of civic life. The city council---largely hostile to the workers during the strike---recently voted to make Watsonville a sanctuary city. Strike veterans have responsible positions in city administration. Many of these changes can be traced to a successful voting rights lawsuit in 1989 which resulted in city council members being elected by district instead of at large. But it was the political climate growing out of the strike, and the newfound sense of empowerment on the part of Mexicana workers, that enabled this legal victory to transform the actual life of the town.
- 10) Because the Watsonville Canning strikers returned to work in 1987 earning less than they were making when they were forced out on strike 18 months earlier, some have questioned whether theirs was really a victory. Cesar Chavez addressed the question shortly after the strike. Here's what he had to say: "When they went out on strike, they were totally disorganized. There was no rank and file leadership. But when they went back in there was strong leadership and a real union. ..These women in Watsonville have set a precedent. More than the wages, more than the money, is that they broke that long, long period of no strikes and no fight-back." I would have to agree with him.