

HISPANIC WORKERS

The amazing events in Watsonville

DICK MEISTER

"Watsonville, California, is today to economic justice what Selma, Alabama, was to political justice 20 years ago."

The Rev. Jesse Jackson

Jesse Jackson was exaggerating, I suppose, in assessing the recent events in Watsonville, a small city 100 miles south of San Francisco known as the frozen vegetable capital of the United States. But he wasn't exaggerating much. His remark was prompted by an 18-month-long strike against the largest of the city's—and the world's—frozen food processors, Watsonville Canning, that finally was settled in March. It truly was one of the most extraordinary labor disputes in recent years.

These are among the worst of times for unions, with employers everywhere demanding—and getting—reductions in pay and benefits and other concessions.

The Watsonville strikers also ended up granting concession. But they granted far less than was demanded, and they did so only after waging a battle of the kind very few unions have managed in recent years.

Given today's circumstances, unions often must make concessions. But union members must maintain—and strengthen if possible—unity among themselves, their unions and their supporters while awaiting the return of a more favorable economic and political climate. That's essential if the unions are to survive the constant opposition of employers and the employers' allies in the Reagan administration and many state administrations.

The frozen food workers in Watsonville showed—and far better than anyone else has shown—how union members can do what they must do. There's been nothing quite like it since the early organizing days of the United Farm Workers Union in the 1960s and 1970s.

The strike was waged, ironically, under the banner of the Teamsters Union, once a major rival of the UFW. The union agreed to cuts of 17 percent

at other frozen food firms, lowering average pay to \$5.85 an hour. But Watsonville Canning imposed cuts of more than 30 percent that lowered average pay to only \$4.75 and, in September of 1985, the strike was on.

Union members must maintain unity among themselves

The 1,000 strikers, 80 percent of them Hispanic women, half of them single mothers, were not deterred by the strikebreakers hired from out of town to replace them. They were not deterred by court orders that severely limited picketing and subjected them to harassment from local police.



Nor were the strikers deterred by the severe financial hardships many had to undergo. Their only steady income was \$55 a week in Teamster strike benefits. Most strikers quickly used up their savings. Many couldn't pay their rent and were forced to move in with relatives or friends or sleep in cars or campers.

The striker's plight and fierce determination won them crucial and heavy support from many other unions, from church, student and community groups, political organizations and social service agencies. Tons of food, clothing and other necessities poured in steadily, as did contributions to help pay their bills. They were joined on picket lines and at rallies by hundreds of supporters.

The strikers' determination was remarkable. Almost invariably, those involved in such lengthy disputes begin returning to work across their union's picket lines after a few months. But virtually no Watsonville strikers did that.

Watsonville Canning had hoped to break the strikers' union, but the union ended up helping break the company. The strike curtailed the firm's operations to the point that Wells Fargo Bank moved to foreclose on the firm for failing to guarantee repayment of more than \$19 million in loans.

Operations were turned over to a consortium of 14 growers who had been unable to collect \$7.3 million owed them for produce they had shipped the company on credit. The growers formed a new company and quickly agreed to grant union members the same pay and benefits as the other food firms had granted long before and to rehire strikers as fast as they could resume full operations.

One of the strike leaders, Sergio Lopez, summed it up in one extremely appropriate word.

The word is "amazing."

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