

LABOR HISTORY

Song of the Stubborn One Thousand

By Don McIntosh

It's said that those who go through a strike never forget it. Peter Shapiro took part in a mid-'80s cannery strike as a community supporter, and never forgot it. Thirty years later, retired from a career in the U.S. Postal Service, he wrote a book about that remarkable strike — a rare union victory during an era of union-busting.

Song of the Stubborn One Thousand: The Watsonville Canning Strike, 1985-87 tells the story of an 18-month struggle by 1,000 frozen food workers in Watsonville, California during which not a single striker crossed the picket line. Instead, a union workforce composed mostly of Mexican immigrant women forced the company owner into bankruptcy, and waged a five-day wildcat strike against the new plant owner to keep their health benefits intact.

Shapiro studied labor history at University of California Berkeley, but in 1975, decided he'd rather try to make labor history as a



Peter Shapiro

union activist than study it in a university setting. He later became a union officer in Portland-based National Association Letter Carriers Branch 82. But in the mid-'80s, he was working at the Oakland post office, and serving as the labor editor of *Unity*, a left-wing newspaper. When the strike in Watsonville began, he attended support rallies, helped co-workers collect canned goods for the strikers, and spread word about the strike in his newspaper.

In the 1980s, Watsonville, 30 miles south of San Jose, was the frozen food capital of the world, with eight frozen food plants and 5,000 workers. Watsonville Canning, with 1,000 employees, was the largest.

Teamsters Local 912 had negotiated industry-leading multi-employer contracts for 30 years. That meant frozen food companies had the same pay and benefits, so they didn't need to compete by keeping wages low.

What set the Watsonville struggle in motion was a disastrous deal that local union president Richard King made with Watsonville Canning owner



To dramatize their plight and appeal to God for help, striking cannery workers marched on their knees from the plant gates to a Catholic church.

Mort Console in 1982. Console claimed he needed a temporary pay cut in order for the company to stay profitable, and King agreed to reduce wages from \$7.06 to \$6.66 an hour.

King, union president since 1967, had close personal relationships with the cannery owners, including Console's father, the company founder. But the younger Console had new ideas about how to run the company.

The '80s was when business executives lost any shame about living large and flaunting excess while busting unions and demanding pay cuts from workers. Console embodied that lifestyle. He had expensive cars, two private jets, a large house, and \$200,000 worth of furniture.

Console's sweetheart union deal angered competitor Shaw Canning, so in 1985, Shaw withdrew from the master agreement and demanded the same favorable terms.

Meanwhile, Console, instead of being grateful for the last pay cut, now demanded a further cut to \$4.65 an hour — a \$2 an hour cut. Not that he was serious. Console had hired Littler Mendelson, one of the earliest and most significant union-busting law firms in the country. On their advice, he was attempting a strategy then being employed across America: provoke a strike with outrageous demands, hire permanent replacements, operate with scab labor for 12 months, then legally move to decertify the union in a government-administered election in which scabs get to vote. To weather any business difficulties, Console had secured an \$18 million line of credit from Wells Fargo and built up inventory in

the months before.

Rejecting the demands, workers at both Shaw and Watsonville Canning went out on strike. Local 912 was totally unprepared. It had no strike fund. Strikers had to do everything themselves, organizing the food bank, the hardship fund, the picket line, security. King didn't even speak Spanish, the language most of the workers spoke, and after the strike got under way, he soon disappeared and announced his retirement.

Government repression began immediately. Just 15 hours after the first pickets went up, a California judge issued a restraining order that effectively outlawed mass picketing: no more than four pickets within 20 feet of



"Just because you're Catholic doesn't mean you can't throw rocks at scabs."

— Gloria Betancourt

each of the plant's eight gates; pickets had to be at least 10 feet from each other; and no one else was allowed to congregate within 100 yards of Watsonville Canning unless they were entering the premises to go to work. To enforce the restraining order, the local police chief immediately put his entire force on 12-hour shifts, ensuring that at least a dozen officers would be on the scene at all times.

Violence and property destruction did play a role in the strike. Women strikers filled socks with sand to bust out windows of buses ferrying the scabs, or followed buses and hid behind bushes while throwing rocks at them as they passed. Trucks were sabotaged, and no one was ever caught. As one of the strike leaders, Gloria Betancourt, put it: "Just because you're Catholic doesn't mean you can't throw rocks at scabs."

At length, higher-ups in the Teamsters Joint Council leadership stepped in and reached a deal with the canning companies that weren't trying to bust the union. To preserve the master agreement, workers at all the other canneries took a wage cut to \$5.85 an

hour, with a "me-too" clause so the union couldn't let Watsonville further undercut their rate. That isolated Watsonville Canning, the true rogue in the bunch, and upped the stakes for the strikers.

Shapiro says the turning point was the defeat of the attempt to decertify the union. Console's union-busting plan required that scabs outvote strikers so that legally there'd be no more union. But he had a hard time getting enough scabs, and strikers made an incredible effort to stay together.

In the end, Console lost everything and declared bankruptcy. Creditors took over the company and negotiated a union contract workers could accept.

Was it truly a victory? Workers were making \$6.60 when they went out, and \$5.85 when they went back in. But as United Farm Workers leader Cesar Chavez said at the time, these workers had had no functioning union after 30 years without a strike. Now they had a union, and it would make a difference going forward. And it did, for a few years at least.

In the '90s, Watsonville's frozen food industry fell victim to

Turn to Page 11



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