

Legacy of the Watsonville Frozen Food Strike Immigrants and Social Movements in California's Pajaro Valley

by Jon Silver



Photo: Jon Kersey

One of the most significant struggles for social and economic justice in the history of Santa Cruz County was the Watsonville Frozen Food strike of 1985-87.

A little bit of context: Watsonville and Pajaro Valley have a rich history of immigrant and migrant workers participating in social movements, as well as some disturbing history of racism and exploitation. For example, while both Chinese and Japanese immigrants helped create the wealth of Pajaro Valley they also faced a series of discriminatory laws and local actions. From the Chinese workers who were pushed out of downtown Watsonville in the late 1800's to the many Pajaro Valley Japanese-Americans who were forcibly removed from their homes and into internment camps during World War 2. In 1930, hundreds of white men armed with pistols and clubs beat Filipino fieldworkers on the streets of Watsonville, and shot and killed a young Filipino man.

In the 1930's and 40's radical CIO unions organized Pajaro Valley agricultural workers including dust bowl migrants. In fact, John Steinbeck's famous novel about a California apple strike, *In Dubious Battle*, was loosely based on the Pajaro Valley. In the 1970's the United Farm Workers Union had a strong presence in Pajaro Valley, and local workers participated in union activities and strikes.

Many Latino community members—both documented and undocumented were illegally arrested on the basis of their ethnic appearance during Immigration raids in the 1970's and 80's. This led to a County-wide immigrant rights movement and the creation of a Joint INS Task Force that drastically curtailed local Border Patrol activities.

During this time a voting rights lawsuit—*Gomez vs. the City of Watsonville*—began working it's way to the U.S. Supreme Court, eventually creating district elections that enabled Latino representation on the Watsonville City Council for the first time.

It was in this social milieu that the cannery strike erupted in September 1985—when more than 1800 workers from two canneries walked off the job after Watsonville Canning cut benefits and slashed wages from \$6.66/hour to \$4.25. The majority of strikers were Mexican women, many of them single mothers, and many had worked in the same cannery for over 20 years.

The strike turned Watsonville on its head. For 18 months there were periods of near martial law on the streets—riot-clad Watsonville police occasionally joined by neighboring law enforcement, including the Santa Cruz Police Department and Sheriff, restricted the civil rights of strikers and community supporters. Hundreds of arrests and malicious prosecutions were made by the Watsonville Police, District Attorney, and local courts.

Worker solidarity was impressive: no strikers crossed the picket line and widespread community support buoyed the strikers as they fought improbable odds—taking on not only the cannery owners but the police, Watsonville City Council, local media, Wells Fargo Bank, the court system and sometimes even their own Teamsters Union.

Community supporters did fundraising, food distribution, and participated in mass rallies. Strikers mobilized to urge other workers to not cross their picket lines, and they did outreach to build support throughout the Bay Area.

Displaying great courage in the face of hardship, the strikers won a union contract, retained their medical benefits, saved their union and returned to work—more or less—united. But the forces of globalization led to continued decline of the frozen food industry—as Watsonville’s Pillsbury/Green Giant and other companies moved production to central Mexico, where they paid workers about \$4 a day.

Today the Frozen Food industry is long gone from Watsonville but the legacy of the Cannery Strikers lives on. One example is Wendy Baltazar: *Hija de la Huelga*—born a couple of months before her mother Sylvia went out on strike, she was sometimes pushed in a baby stroller as her mom walked the picket line. Years later inspired by her family’s struggle, Wendy returned to Watsonville after attending UC Davis, as a bilingual immersion teacher—dedicated to educating and empowering the next generation. Wendy is but one example of hundreds of Watsonville young people who were inspired by their parents, families and neighbors who had demanded that their voices be heard.



Photos: Jon Silver, 2017

As our community lets our voices be heard today—whether against local ICE raids, economic injustice or White Supremacy—we can take inspiration from the heroic struggle of the Watsonville Cannery strikers.