Inventory of the Frank Bardacke Watsonville Canneries Strike Records, 1984-1989

Prepared by Kim Klausner.
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Descriptive Summary
Title: Frank Bardacke Watsonville canneries strike records
Date (inclusive): 1984-1989
Collection number: larc.ms.0093
Accession number: 1990/034
Creator: Bardacke, Frank
Extent: 1 carton (1.25 cubic feet)
Repository: Labor Archives and Research Center
J. Paul Leonard Library, Room 460
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Shelf location: For current information on the location of these materials, please consult the Center's online catalog.
Shelf location: Back Stacks: 02:02:B
Language of Materials: Materials are in English and Spanish.
Abstract: The Frank Bardacke Watsonville Canneries Strike Collection consists of materials collected by Bardacke, one of the founders of the Watsonville chapter of Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) and a resident of that community since the early 1970s, who was actively involved with the support committee for the striking cannery workers. It is largely comprised of newspaper clippings, mainly from the Watsonville Register-Pajaronian, leaflets, and newsletters. Materials date from 1984, the year before the strike, through 1989, although the vast majority of the material is from the strike itself (September 1985 to March 1987).
Access
Collection is open for research.
Publication Rights
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Preferred Citation
[Identification of item], Frank Bardacke Watsonville Canneries Strike Records, larc.ms.0093, Labor Archives & Research Center, San Francisco State University.
Acquisition Information
Frank Bardacke Watsonville Canneries Strike Records were donated by Frank Bardacke in 1990, accession number 1990/034.
Processing Information
The collection was processed by Kim Klausner in the winter of 1996.
Biography of Frank Bardacke
Frank Bardacke, one of the founders of the Watsonville chapter of Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), was born in San Diego in 1941. He earned a Masters Degree from UC Berkeley, worked for three years in the frozen food industry, and was teaching adult education at the time of the strike.
History of the Watsonville Canneries Strike
Watsonville, a town of nearly 30,000 located in the heart of the agricultural Salinas Valley, is home to numerous canneries that process the majority of frozen food products sold in the United States (Unity 10/85, in Media Coverage series). In September 1985, nearly half of the town’s 4,000 cannery workers went out on strike to protest wage cutbacks. In February 1986, R. Shaw Frozen Foods reached a settlement with their 900 employees that included a 17% pay cut. It wasn’t until a year later that workers at Watsonville Canning returned to work. The bitter 18-month strike can serve as a case study of the remarkable challenges facing agribusiness workers, whose livelihoods are affected as much by local politics as by the international economy.
The Watsonville strike involved a diversity of interests beyond the usual interplay of union and management. Race and gender dynamics played a central role in the conflict. At the forefront were the strikers who were largely women of Mexican heritage, some recent immigrants, others whose families had lived in the U.S. for years, many were single mothers. Teamsters Local 912, represented the cannery workers; the union had been formed in 1952 and had been under the leadership of Richard King, a white man, since that time. King had achieved close working and personal relationships with many of the cannery owners. Management and labor co-existed relatively peacefully for many years. Wages, benefits, and working conditions were decent; strikes were avoided.

The Watsonville chapter of the renegade Teamsters for a Democratic Union used the strike to challenge the authority of the entrenched union leadership, advocating for more democracy and representation within the union. TDU called on Local 912 to hold weekly union meetings during the strike, to authorize the election of a committee of strikers to administer the strike fund, and to nearly double strike benefits to $100 per week. TDU also ran a reform slate of candidates (all male) for the Local 912 Executive Board.

The Console and Shaw families, both locally based, dominated ownership of the canneries. They enlisted the help of a recognized union-busting law firm and were able to borrow over $18 million from Wells Fargo Bank so they could continue operating during the strike. Lastly, myriad Northern California political, community, and labor organizations provided unflagging support for the strikers.

The strike had a major impact on the small farming community of Watsonville but also attracted widespread attention because of its militancy and longevity. The strike changed economic, political, and social relations in the union, the community, and at the national level. Local 912 spent more than $5 million on strike-related expenses and launched a national boycott of company products. The union's leadership was ousted and replaced by its first Latino Secretary-Treasurer (who was Richard King's protege). Virtually all those who had previously been employed at the canneries refrained from crossing the picket lines which forced the companies to bus in scab labor from outlying areas. Wells Fargo finally refused to extend further credit to Watsonville Canning, which declared bankruptcy and was taken over by a consortium of growers to whom it owed money. Arsonists had destroyed a packing shed and other company property. Watsonville police had been paid over $200,000 in overtime in an attempt to curtail the militancy of the strikers and their supporters (Register-Pajaronian, March 1987, in Media Coverage series). Shortly after the strike, Watsonville's Latino community managed to become a part of the local political power structure.

Chronological History

The following is a summary of key events taken from an article that appeared in the Watsonville Register-Pajaronian (4 March 1987) and other material from the Status Reports & Chronology series folder.

1982 July
Watsonville Canning wins contract with 40-cent wage advantage over other processors. Line workers' pay drops from $7.75 to $6.66 an hour.

1985 July
Richard A. Shaw Co. implements wage cut to achieve parity with Watsonville Canning. The latter cuts wages another 30 percent.

1985 September
Strike begins at Watsonville Canning, Shaw, J.J. Crosetti and other canneries. Watsonville Strike Support Committee forms. Court injunction limits the number of pickets allowed at each gate to four.

1985 October
2,000 march through Watsonville in support of strikers. Arsonists hit canneries.

1985 December
Richard King, local union leader for 33 years retires and is replaced by Sergio Lopez.

1986 February
Strikers vote 2-1 to accept 17 percent wage cuts and return to work at Shaw's.

1986 June
The Rev. Jesse Jackson focuses national attention on Watsonville when he attends strike rally.

1986 July
Union members at J.J. Crosetti accept wage cuts to match Shaw, continuing the trend that establishes $5.85 an hour as the new industry standard.

1986 September
The State Department of Food and Agriculture begins investigation into Watsonville Canning's financial stability and the company's refusal to pay growers for products already delivered.

1986 October
Wells Fargo Bank acquires a lien against all assets of Watsonville Canning through deeds of trust.

1987 February
Norcal, a group of growers, takes over Watsonville Canning. Union and new owners meet.

1987 March
Strikers at first reject union-backed Norcal offer because of cut-backs in health insurance coverage. A number of strikers stage a hunger strike to demonstrate their resolve. A contract is finally signed with wages at $5.85 an hour, restoration of health benefits, and slightly reduced pension terms.

Scope and Contents
The Frank Bardacke Watsonville Canneries Strike Collection consists of materials collected by Bardacke, one of the founders of the Watsonville chapter of Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) and a resident of that community since the early 1970s, who was actively involved with the support committee for the striking cannery workers. It is largely comprised of newspaper clippings, mainly from the Watsonville Register-Pajaronian, leaflets, and newsletters. Materials date from 1984, the year before the strike, through 1989, although the vast majority of the material is from the strike itself (September 1985 to March 1987).

Arrangement
The collection is divided into nine series: Teamsters Local 912, Teamsters for a Democratic Union, Community Support for Strike, Media Coverage, Status Reports & Chronology, Legal, Watsonville Canning, Rally Operations Order, and Frank Bardacke. The first four series contain the bulk of the collection.

Indexing Terms
The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the library’s online public access catalog:
International Brotherhood of Teamsters. Local 912 (Watsonville, Calif.)
Teamsters Democratic Union.
Cannery workers--California--Watsonville.
Cannery workers--Labor unions.
Strikes and lockouts--Agricultural laborers--California--Watsonville.
Strikes and lockouts--Agricultural processing industries--California--Watsonville.
Watsonville (Calif.)

Series I: Teamsters Local 912 1985-1987
Extent: 5 folders
Scope and Contents
Contains the Weekly Bulletin, the official union publication that was published during the strike (starts with the December 23, 1985 issue and continues through September 1986, with several issues missing), other leaflets and notices from Local 912, the Workers Strike Committee, and other ad-hoc groups of striking workers. Also included are a small number of press releases, financial records, and portions of proposed contracts.

Box-folder 1/1 Leaflets 1985-1987
Box-folder 1/2 Weekly Bulletin 1985-1986
Box-folder 1/3 Press Releases 1986
Box-folder 1/4 Proposed Contracts 1985-1987
Box-folder 1/5 Strike Assessment 1985

Series II: Teamsters for a Democratic Union 1985-1987
Extent: 3 folders
Scope and Contents
Contains leaflets, reports, and a press release about the strike as well as non-strike related materials on Local 912 elections, the firing and trial of cannery worker Juan Parra, the United Farm Workers, and other issues. Also contains three issues of the "Convoy Dispatch: Voice of the Teamster Rank and File Since 1975."

Box-folder 1/6 Strike Material 1985-1986, undated
Box-folder 1/7 Non-Strike Material 1985-1987
Box-folder 1/8 Convoy Dispatch 1985-1987
Series III: Community Support for Strike 1985-1987

Extent: 5 folders

Scope and Contents

This series contains material, primarily leaflets, that was published by the Watsonville Strike Support Committee and the various other groups that helped the strike efforts. The latter organizations include Santa Cruz Strike Support Committee, other Teamster Locals, the Communist Party USA, Cannery Workers Organizing Project, League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), Central Labor Council of Santa Clara County, Northern California Watsonville Strike Support Committee, International Committee Against Racism (ICAR), National Writers Union, AFT Local 1936, Spartacist League, Unitarian-Universalist Fellowship of Santa Cruz County, Progressive Labor Party, and SEIU & AFSCME Locals. Other materials include poems, song sheets, a short interview with Gloria Betancourt, a strike leader, and two essays analyzing the strike (“Fire and Ice: California Frozen Food Workers Battle Takeaways” by Caitlin Manning & Adam Cornford and “Watsonville: Chicano Power vs. California Agribusiness” by William Segal).

Box-folder 1/9 Watsonville Strike Support Committee 1985-1986, undated
Box-folder 1/10 Other Organizations 1985-1987
Box-folder 1/11 Letters to the Editor 1986, undated
Box-folder 1/12 Correspondence 1985-1986
Box-folder 1/13 Essays, Poems & Film Treatment 1986-1987

Series IV: Media Coverage 1984-1987

Extent: 24 folders

Scope and Contents

This series contains hundreds of newspaper clippings (primarily from the local paper, the Register-Pajaronian) about the strike as well as magazine and journal articles. While the material dates from 1984 through 1987 (with a gap from May to July 1985), it centers on the period of the strike (September 1985 to March 1987).

Box-folder 1/14 1984
Box-folder 1/15 1985 January-April
Box-folder 1/16 1985 August
Box-folder 1/17 1985 September
Box-folder 1/18 1985 October
Box-folder 1/19 1985 November
Box-folder 1/20 1985 December
Box-folder 1/21 1986 January
Box-folder 1/22 1986 February
Box-folder 1/23 1986 March
Box-folder 1/24 1986 April
Box-folder 1/25 1986 May
Box-folder 1/26 1986 June
Box-folder 1/27 1986 July
Box-folder 1/28 1986 August
Box-folder 1/29 1986 September
Box-folder 1/30 1986 October
Box-folder 1/31 1986 November
Box-folder 1/32 1986 December
Box-folder 1/33 1987 January
Box-folder 1/34 1987 February
Box-folder 1/35 1987 March
Box-folder 1/36 1987 April-November
Box-folder 1/37 Undated or incomplete 1985-1987
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<tr>
<th>Box-folder 1/38</th>
<th>Status Reports &amp; Chronology 1985-1986</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td><strong>Extent:</strong> 1 folder</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Scope and Contents</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consists of timetables and handwritten accounts of strike events by the strikers and their supporters.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Box-folder 1/39</th>
<th>Support Committee Brief 1985</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Series VI:</strong> Legal 1985</td>
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<td><strong>Scope and Contents</strong></td>
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<td>Contains a legal brief from supporters and a letter from company attorneys.</td>
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<th>Box-folder 1/40</th>
<th>Correspondence 1985-1987</th>
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<td><strong>Series VIII:</strong> Police 1986</td>
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<td><strong>Scope and Contents</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Contains the operating order prepared by the police for February 1986 rally.</td>
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<th>Box-folder 1/41</th>
<th>Rally Operations Order 1986</th>
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<td><strong>Series IX:</strong> Frank Bardacke 1986-1989</td>
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<tr>
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<td><strong>Scope and Contents</strong></td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Contains miscellaneous personal papers.</td>
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| Box-folder 1/42 | Personal Papers 1986-1989 |