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

### Accession number: 1990/034

Labor Archives & Research Center

San Francisco State University  
San Francisco, California

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### Descriptive Summary

**Title:** Frank Bardacke - Watsonville Canneries Strike Records,

**Date (inclusive):** 1984-1989

**Accession number:** 1990/034

**Creator:** Bardacke, Frank

**Extent:** 1 cubic foot

**Repository:** San Francisco State University. Labor Archives & Research Center

San Francisco, California 94132

**Shelf location:** For current information on the location of these materials, please consult the Center's online catalog.

**Language:** English

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### Preferred Citation

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[Identification of item], Frank Bardacke - Watsonville Canneries Strike Records, 1990/034, Labor Archives & Research Center, San Francisco State University.

## Introduction

These records were donated by Frank Bardacke in 1990. 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, was actively involved with the support committee for the striking cannery workers. The collection, then, provides a look at the strike from the perspective of someone participating in an organization that was dedicated to union reform. Bardacke was born in San Diego in 1941, has 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. The collection was processed by Kim Klausner in the winter of 1996.

## History

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 unflinching 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.

|                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| July, 1982      | Watsonville Canning wins contract with 40-cent wage advantage over other processors. Line workers' pay drops from \$7.75 to \$6.66 an hour.  |
| July, 1985      | Richard A. Shaw Co. implements wage cut to achieve parity with Watsonville Canning. The latter cuts wages another 30 percent.  |
| September, 1985 | 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. |

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|-----------------|---|
| October, 1985   | 2,000 march through Watsonville in support of strikers. Arsonists hit canneries.  |
| December, 1985  | Richard King, local union leader for 33 years retires and is replaced by Sergio Lopez.  |
| February, 1986  | Strikers vote 2-1 to accept 17 percent wage cuts and return to work at Shaw's.  |
| June, 1986      | The Rev. Jesse Jackson focuses national attention on Watsonville when he attends strike rally.  |
| July, 1986      | 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.   |
| September, 1986 | 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.   |
| October, 1986   | Wells Fargo Bank acquires a lien against all assets of Watsonville Canning through deeds of trust.  |
| February, 1987  | Norcal, a group of growers, takes over Watsonville Canning. Union and new owners meet.  |
| March, 1987     | 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 Content**

The Bardacke - Watsonville Canneries Strike files are 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. The collection was put together by a labor activist who was active in strike support and is therefore not the official record of Teamsters Local 912. It is largely comprised of newspaper clippings, leaflets, and newsletters. The extensive clippings, mainly from the Watsonville *Register-Pajaronian*, have been copied onto acid-free paper. Some of the material is in Spanish. A detailed series list is attached.

The 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).

**Series I: TEAMSTERS LOCAL 912, 1985-1987**

**Physical Description:** 5 folders

**Scope and Content Note**

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.

**Series II: TEAMSTERS FOR A DEMOCRATIC UNION, 1985-1987**

**Physical Description:** 3 folders

**Scope and Content Note**

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."

**Series III: COMMUNITY SUPPORT FOR STRIKE, 1985-1987**

**Physical Description:** 5 folders

**Scope and Content Note**

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).

**Series IV: MEDIA COVERAGE, 1984-1987**

**Physical Description:** 24 folders

**Scope and Content Note**

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).

**Series V: STATUS REPORTS & CHRONOLOGY**

**Physical Description:** 1 folder

**Scope and Content Note**

Consists of timetables and handwritten accounts of strike events by the strikers and their supporters.

**Series VI: LEGAL**

**Physical Description:** 1 folder

**Scope and Content Note**

Contains a legal brief from supporters and a letter from company attorneys.

**Series VII: WATSONVILLE CANNING & CROSETTI FROZEN FOODS**

**Physical Description:** 1 folder

**Scope and Content Note**

Contains miscellaneous communications from canneries.

**Series VIII: POLICE**

**Physical Description:** 1 folder

**Scope and Content Note**

Contains the operating order prepared by the police for February 1986 rally.

**Series IX: FRANK BARDACKE**

**Physical Description:** 1 folder

**Scope and Content Note**

Contains miscellaneous personal papers.

**TEAMSTERS LOCAL 912**

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

**TEAMSTERS FOR A DEMOCRATIC UNION**

|                |                                       |
|----------------|---------------------------------------|
| Box-folder 1/6 | <b>Strike Material 1985-1986/n.d.</b> |
| Box-folder 1/7 | <b>Non-Strike Material 1985-1987</b>  |
| Box-folder 1/8 | <b>Convoy Dispatch 1985-1987</b>      |

**COMMUNITY SUPPORT FOR STRIKE**

|                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| Box-folder 1/9  | <b>Watsonville Strike Support Committee 1985-1986/n.d.</b> |
| Box-folder 1/10 | <b>Other Organizations 1985-1987</b>                       |
| Box-folder 1/11 | <b>Letters to the Editor 1986/n.d.</b>                     |
| Box-folder 1/12 | <b>Correspondence 1985-1986</b>                            |
| Box-folder 1/13 | <b>Essays, Poems &amp; Film Treatment 1986-1987</b>        |

**MEDIA COVERAGE**

|                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| Box-folder 1/14 | <b>1984 1984</b>                       |
| Box-folder 1/15 | <b>January - April 1985 1985</b>       |
| Box-folder 1/16 | <b>August 1985 1985</b>                |
| Box-folder 1/17 | <b>September 1985 1985</b>             |
| Box-folder 1/18 | <b>October 1985 1985</b>               |
| Box-folder 1/19 | <b>November 1985 1985</b>              |
| Box-folder 1/20 | <b>December 1985 1985</b>              |
| Box-folder 1/21 | <b>January 1986 1986</b>               |
| Box-folder 1/22 | <b>February 1986 1986</b>              |
| Box-folder 1/23 | <b>March 1986 1986</b>                 |
| Box-folder 1/24 | <b>April 1986 1986</b>                 |
| Box-folder 1/25 | <b>May 1986 1986</b>                   |
| Box-folder 1/26 | <b>June 1986 1986</b>                  |
| Box-folder 1/27 | <b>July 1986 1986</b>                  |
| Box-folder 1/28 | <b>August 1986 1986</b>                |
| Box-folder 1/29 | <b>September 1986 1986</b>             |
| Box-folder 1/30 | <b>October 1986 1986</b>               |
| Box-folder 1/31 | <b>November 1986 1986</b>              |
| Box-folder 1/32 | <b>December 1986 1986</b>              |
| Box-folder 1/33 | <b>January 1987 1987</b>               |
| Box-folder 1/34 | <b>February 1987 1987</b>              |
| Box-folder 1/35 | <b>March 1987 1987</b>                 |
| Box-folder 1/36 | <b>April - November 1987 1987</b>      |
| Box-folder 1/37 | <b>Undated or incomplete 1985-1987</b> |

STATUS REPORTS & CHRONOLOGY

Box-folder 1/38

Status Reports & Chronology 1985-1986

**LEGAL**

Box-folder 1/39

**Support Committee Brief 1985**

WATSONVILLE CANNING & CROSETTI FROZEN FOODS

Box-folder 1/40

Correspondence 1985-1987

**POLICE**

Box-folder 1/41     **Rally Operations Order 1986**

FRANK BARDACKE

Box-folder 1/42

Personal Papers 1986-1989