The amazing events in Watsonville

DICk MEISTER

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

The Rev. Jesse Jackson

Jesse Jackson was exaggerat-
ing. I suppose, in assessing the
recent events in Watsonville, a
small city 100 miles south of San Fran-
cisco 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 pro-
cessors, Watsonville Canning, that
finally was settled at 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 grasping on to something, but they
gained 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 politi-
cal climate. That’s essential if the
unions are to survive the constant
opposition of employers and the
employers’ allies in the Reagan admin-
istration and many state administra-
tions.

The frozen food workers in Wat-
sonville show why—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 wages, 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 Sep-
tember 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 deceived by
the strikers 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.

Not were the strikers deterred by the
several financial hardships many had to
undergo. Their only steady income
was $35 a week in Teamster strike
benefits. Most strikers quickly used up
their savings. Many couldn’t pay their
rents and were forced to move in with
relatives or friends or sleep in cars or
campers.

The strikers’ plight and fierce
determination won them crucial
and heavy support from many other
unions, from church, student and
community groups, political organiza-
tions and social service agencies. Tons
of food, clothing and other necessities
poured in steadily, as did contribu-
tions to help pay their bills. They were
joined on picket lines 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 zrickers 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 opera-
tions 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, Gregorio
Lopez, summed it up in one extremely
appropriate word.

The word is “amazing.”

Dick Meister, a San Francisco writer,
is co-author of "A Long Time Coming:
Struggle to Unionsize America’s Farm
Workers” (Macmillan, Hispanic Link).

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