

Cuts spark strike at tomato processing firm

By Don Villarejo

EMPLOYEES OF GANGI BROS. Packing Co. were stunned when news of take-it-or-leave wage cuts were announced this past August at the San Joaquin Valley tomato processing plant.

According to the company's proposal, those employed 100 days or more during the tomato harvest season would see their pay drop by almost a third, to \$6.42 per hour, \$3 less than what they had been receiving. Those employed less than 100 days would be paid \$5.42 an hour, down \$2—or 27 percent—from the previous level. The strikers complain the cuts unfairly target the plant's lowest paid workers.

But there was more in the announced cutbacks that offended the employees: all four paid holidays, as well as medical benefits, would be eliminat-



PHOTO/LAN MAGAÑA

After five years at Gangi Bros., Sr. Carlos Moreno joined his coworkers in a strike against the company. (his story, below).

ed. On August 23, in response to the company's final offer, the workers, all members of Teamsters Local 748, went on strike.

A company attorney said Gangi Bros. employs approximately 450 workers during the tomato harvest, but the union claims it represents 520 members at the plant.

Within days the company had recruited and hired hundreds of replacement workers, and tensions rose. When striking employees attempted to block access to the plant with their bodies, local law enforcement officers appeared in riot gear, a move seen by the union as overreaction; no arrests were made. In the end, the strikers watched as their jobs were taken by others.

Gangi Bros. Packing Co. is a small firm located near Riverbank, which handles product from 32 growers in San Joaquin and Stanislaus counties. Gangi packs about 3 percent of the state's tomato production.

To explain the proposed cutbacks, the company claims that it has lost money for the past three years and that something needed to be done. For its former employees that "something" turned out to be everything. ♦

Testimonio de un huelguista

Sr. Carlos Moreno, de 56 años de edad, originario de Penjamillo, Michoacán, México. Radica en Oakdale, California. Se encuentra en huelga contra la planta enlatadora Gangi Bros. de Riverbank, California, desde el 23 de agosto de 1994.

"Tengo trabajando en esta planta 5 años. Estaba ganando a \$9.52 por hora. Con las propuestas de la compañía de recortarnos los salarios, entonces me pagarían a \$5.25 por hora, además nos descontarían los días de fiesta más los beneficios y por eso estamos en huelga. En vez de darnos aumento, nos han quitado lo que teníamos. No estamos peleando aumento de sueldos ni otra cosa, solo queremos que no nos quiten lo que ya teníamos. Nos quieren quitar casi la mitad, es mucho. Si así no la hacemos como es una temporada de tres meses, haciendonos estos recortes de sueldos y beneficios, pues menos.

"Tengo 21 años radicando en los Estados Unidos... El fil es duro y pagan barato y los rancheros ya tienen su gente, es difícil conseguir trabajo en el fil. Sé soldar. Tengo 25 años de experiencia. Me he apuntado en busca de empleo en las oficinas de empleo de los pueblos de los alrededores. Pero no me llaman, me discriminan por mi edad. Seguire en la huelga. Voy ir a la oficina del desempleo para solicitar beneficios y pagar mis biles. Los nuevos que están entrando a trabajar trabajan hasta doce horas."

— Carlos Moreno, a 6 de septiembre de 1994

Testimony of a striker

Sr. Carlos Moreno, 56 years old, hails from Penjamillo, State of Michoacán, Mexico. He lives in Oakdale, California. OTAC staff met Moreno when he went on strike against the Gangi Bros. canning plant of Riverbank, California, on August 23, 1994.

"I have worked in this plant for five years. I was being paid \$9.52 per hour. With the proposal from the company to cut our salaries, they would pay me \$5.25 per hour, and also would discontinue our paid holidays and other benefits; this is why we are on strike. Instead of giving us an increase, they are taking away what we have. We are not fighting to increase salaries nor for anything else; we only want that they not take away what we already have. They would like to take nearly half (our pay) from us—that's a lot. Our season lasts only three months, so the savings from these salary and benefit cuts would be small.

"I have lived in the U.S. for 21 years... (Living on) the margin is hard and the pay is low, and the farmers have their people; it is difficult to obtain work at the margin. I know how to weld. I have 25 years of experience. I have pointedly looked for work at the employment offices in surrounding towns, but they don't call me—they discriminate against me because of my age. So carry on the strike. I am going to go to the unemployment office to ask for unemployment benefits and pay my bills. The new ones (strikebreakers) that are starting work, they are working up to twelve hours (a day)."

— Carlos Moreno, September 6, 1994