

The Necessity of Organization: The League of Revolutionary Struggle and the Watsonville Canning Strike

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Strikers confront the police at the gates of the Watsonville Canning plant. Credit: Holger Leue, February 1986.

The Pajaro Valley lies about 100 miles south of San Francisco. Its rich soil, abundant groundwater, and unusually long growing season make it one of the most productive agricultural regions in the United States. For years its main population center, the town of Watsonville, produced most of the frozen food on the nation's dinner tables. Thanks to an insipid television commercial, millions of Americans in the 1950s knew it as "the Valley of the Jolly Green Giant."

The Green Giant doesn't live there anymore. He moved down to Mexico in the 1994, when Bill Clinton signed the North American Free Trade Agreement, and most of the domestic frozen food industry went with him. Watsonville no longer calls itself "the frozen food capital

of the world.”

But in the mid-1980s, when the industry was still robust, 1,000 mainly Mexicana workers waged a successful 18-month strike against Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food, the town’s oldest and largest plant. In the face of the most difficult odds imaginable, they foiled a company effort to decertify their union, forced the plant owner to sell his business to avoid bankruptcy, and then won a contract from the new owner after a five-day wildcat.

Incredibly, this victory was achieved even though the union involved, Teamsters Local 912, had virtually stopped functioning when the strike began. This was September 1985, the height of the Reagan era, when private sector unionism was under a full-scale attack from which it has still not recovered. Across the country, workers with far more experience and resources at their disposal were suffering catastrophic defeats. Yet the Watsonville Canning strikers managed to prevail by maintaining a level of solidarity and self-organization that has few parallels in contemporary labor disputes. Over 18 long, difficult months, not one would break ranks and cross the picket line.

The strikers were ordinary people caught up in an extraordinary situation. Most were natives of Mexico, as many as 35 percent were undocumented, and nearly all were Spanish-speaking. 85 percent were women, many of them single mothers. Few had been active in the union, much less walked a picket line. The strike was a transformative experience for them.

Their triumph is a testament to the power of organization from below. But they did not do it alone. The paralysis of Local 912 at the outset of the strike left a void which many people tried to fill. In addition to the strikers themselves, forced by circumstance to assume new and unaccustomed responsibilities, these included union functionaries, union reformers, community activists, and self-conscious revolutionaries. Despite sometimes conflicting agendas, all contributed in one way or another to the final outcome. The strike itself became a laboratory for different styles of leadership.

Though the strikers welcomed outside help, they were steadfast in their insistence on making their own decisions and running their own strike. But they did not act in a vacuum, and the choices they made were influenced by the relationships they developed with others who brought their own ideas about how best to advance the struggle.

With the exception of the Teamsters International, which spent \$6 million on the strike, perhaps no force was so heavily invested in it as the League of Revolutionary Struggle (LRS). In one way or another, cadre in every area of the League’s work became involved. From the very beginning, the LRS made the strike a national priority and committed increasing resources as the struggle continued. It established close working relationships with key rank-and-file activists. It worked hard to make the strike a *cause célèbre* in the Chicano movement, a task for which it was well suited. It was able to get Jesse Jackson to Watsonville

for a mass rally. As the strike progressed, its approach to the Teamsters evolved from a strictly oppositional stance to one of “unity/struggle/unity,” seeking to keep the union hierarchy engaged without surrendering the strikers’ initiative.

The League

The LRS has sometimes been associated with the New Communist Movement that arose in the 1970s out of the remains of Students for a Democratic Society. It was one of the few organizations in that movement to last through the 1980s. What made it unusual were its roots in the Chicano, Asian, and Black Liberation movements, which provided the large majority of its cadre. Though the LRS never referred to itself as “Maoist,” its approach to mass work was deeply influenced by Mao’s writings on the united front. It believed that revolution would come to the United States not simply as a seizure of political power by the working class, but through a “strategic alliance of the working class and oppressed nationalities.” It saw the Black and Chicano movements as inherently revolutionary and fought for working class leadership in those movements. In its labor work, it prioritized the struggles of oppressed nationality workers, seeing them as the key to a revitalized labor movement.

Other left groups doing workplace organizing tended to focus on industries with a strategic role in the economy, where organized labor had a strong presence. Invariably, their focus was on union reform: they combatted the ideology of “business unionism” and sought to promote both union democracy and a higher level of militancy. Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), operating within the largest and most powerful union in the country (and arguably the most autocratic), provided an effective model for this approach.

The League chose to focus on what it called “lower strata workers” – those who, because of racial and gender inequality, had been largely marginalized within the ranks of organized labor. It poured its energies into their struggles: immigrant women in the garment sweatshops of New York, undocumented workers in the metal fabrication shops of greater Los Angeles, “back-of-the-house” workers in the hotels of Honolulu, San Francisco, and Boston. Like other left groups in the labor movement, the League organized rank-and-file caucuses to challenge the power of the union bureaucrats. More often than not, its caucuses were organized along ethnic lines.

Central to the League’s politics was the demand for “self-determination for the Chicano nation,” a perspective which referred back to the forcible annexation of northern Mexico by the United States in 1848. LRS engagement with Chicano labor struggles thus went beyond encouraging worker militancy and more democratic unions: it viewed the Watsonville strike as part of the larger battle against national oppression, a key thread in the multilayered fabric of class struggle. For many of the League’s Chicano cadre who came from families of farm and cannery workers, the connection was intensely personal.

The League was thus well positioned to intervene in the Watsonville strike. The organization had a long history of political work in the California food processing industry. It played a leadership role in the Cannery Workers Committee (CWC), a statewide network of dissident seasonal workers, predominantly Spanish-speaking women, in the Teamster cannery locals. While TDU had organized mainly among truck drivers, who were mostly white men, the CWC was based in what might be termed the “lower strata” of the Teamsters union.

The Union

For years, Local 912 had been run with an iron hand by Richard King, a hard-drinking ex-merchant seaman who did not speak a word of Spanish. The local was largely a one-man operation. King prided himself on his ability to maintain good relations with the owners while taking care of his members. He had a master agreement covering all of Watsonville’s frozen food plants and, thanks to a chronic labor shortage in what was still a rapidly expanding industry, he was able to negotiate decent contracts. For the workers, it was a welcome alternative to migratory farm labor.

But in 1985 Watsonville Canning owner Mort Console, hoping to get a leg up on the competition, decided to drive the Teamsters out of his plant. Following the playbook of a growing number of private-sector employers, he forced a strike. His intent was to hold out for 12 months, at which point he could legally move to decertify the union. He retained the services of nation’s leading union-busting law firm and secured an \$18 million line of credit from Wells Fargo Bank to tide him over during the strike.

His largest competitor, Richard Shaw Frozen Foods, concluded that Local 912 was no longer able to enforce uniform wage standards in the industry and demanded massive concessions as well. Shaw’s 700 workers joined the walkout. A local judge promptly issued an injunction against mass picketing, so restrictive that one striker who lived across the street from the plant was arrested for standing on her front porch.

There had not been a strike in the industry since it was first organized in the late 1940s. Local 912 did not even have a strike fund. Richard King’s response to the crisis was to simply disappear from the union hall; rumor had it that he was on a drunken binge. He would resign in disgrace a few months later.

The strikers thus entered what would prove to be the fight of their lives with virtually no organization and no formal leadership. The walkout at Richard Shaw would end six months later, but Watsonville Canning workers held out until March 1987. They learned as they went along how to organize picket lines and demonstrations, how to run a food bank and hardship fund, how to mobilize outside support, how take care of each other, how to do all the jobs the union should have been doing.

In the course of the strike, Local 912 was revitalized. Even more important, the political climate Watsonville – a town where Latinos were fast becoming a majority of the population, but had largely been shut out of civic life – was transformed.

The Strike

None of this was completely spontaneous. In the early days of the strike, the task of developing rank-and-file leadership fell to a CWC activist and League cadre named Manuel Diaz, operating in his capacity as a paid TDU organizer. Four years earlier, the CWC had formally affiliated with TDU, giving TDU its first significant foothold in a mainly Latino industry. The alliance would not survive the strike, but it did establish an initial relationship between the LRS and TDU activists in Watsonville.

Diaz arrived in Watsonville shortly after the strike began. He found Local 912 in shambles and the local TDU chapter doing its best to lead the strike. TDU did not have a strong base in the struck plants, and its several dozen members were predominantly men. Believing that the strikers themselves needed to take more responsibility, Diaz held a series of house meetings where they could master the basics of running a meeting, mobilizing their fellow workers, planning demonstrations, and dealing constructively with differences in their ranks. Five weeks into the walkout his efforts culminated in a strikers-only meeting, which elected a rank-and-file Strikers' Committee from the two struck plants.

Nine days earlier, TDU had organized a Solidarity Day rally to protest the court injunction. The rally drew a large crowd of supporters from the Bay Area and was generally successful. But it was planned without real input from the masses of strikers. A day before, Reina Diaz and Oscar Rios, two League cadre with years of experience in Latino labor struggles, had come to town and discovered to their consternation that, beyond knowing that the rally was happening, strikers were almost completely in the dark about preparations. In particular, no one seemed to be on top of security, despite the obvious dangers involved in defying the injunction. Rios suggested to one striker that she find 10 people she could trust to take charge of security, each of whom could then recruit 10 others.

On the day of the rally, 60 strikers who had been recruited in this way linked arms and interposed themselves between the crowd and the cops, protecting the crowd from possible police attack. The police made no attempt to break up the crowd, and the strikers got a taste of their power. Many of them had found TDU's role presumptuous and wanted to pick their own leaders. The League encouraged them to do so, leading some local activists to conclude that the creation of the Strikers' Committee was actually a power play by the LRS, calculated to undermine TDU.

The conflict had more to do with turf than with substance and might have been resolved, but neither the LRS nor its critics made much effort to do so. For League cadre, formation of the Strikers' Committee was a necessary part of implementing the "mass line"; their job, as

they saw it, was to facilitate the self-organization of the masses of strikers. In fact, initially TDU had also called for a rank-and-file body to lead the strike, but in the press of events it wound up attempting to assume that role itself. Frank Bardacke, who had founded the Watsonville TDU chapter and remained an influential voice in the local strike support work, would sum this up years later as a serious error.

Underlying this tension was a subtle but significant difference in emphasis. The Watsonville TDU chapter had been formed in struggle against an unresponsive union leadership, part of a nationwide effort to reform one of the most corrupt and autocratic unions in the country. Richard King was as much an enemy as Watsonville Canning owner Mort Console. For its part, the League was no stranger to oppositional activity in the labor movement; it engaged in its share of agitation against “union bureaucrats” and bought-off labor leaders. But its concerns were broader. Its years of work in the California food processing industry were driven as much by a demand for Latino empowerment as by a desire for union reform. In fact, the LRS was often critical of union reform movements generally for not paying more attention to this issue. Its decision to ally the Cannery Workers Committee with TDU had not come easily; the alliance began to fracture almost as soon as Manuel Diaz arrived in Watsonville and began doing the work that, in his view, the local TDU chapter had been neglecting.

Because TDU supporters saw its Watsonville chapter as leading the charge against Local 912’s leadership, many concluded that, by organizing independently of TDU, the Strikers’ Committee was trying to conciliate with the union. The charge irritated League cadre, one of whom later remarked, “They were accusing us of being too chummy with the union when there was no chance even to get chummy.”

In fact, the Strikers’ Committee formed precisely because workers realized that Local 912 could not be trusted to lead the strike. None of those elected to the committee had any experience doing this kind of work. “I didn’t know what it meant,” one of them said. “None of us did. But [the workers] had faith in us, so we couldn’t let them down.” League cadre worked closely with committee members, trying to build their skills and confidence, resolving the disputes and tensions that inevitably arise in such situations, encouraging strikers to see their struggle in broader terms and making them aware of the larger movement outside Watsonville that would support them. Given the court injunction and the intense anger it provoked, much effort was expended keeping people from exposing themselves needlessly to arrest and jail, something that would have rendered them useless to the cause.

Like most rank-and-file caucuses, TDU had centered its organizing strategy on the more “advanced workers” – what William Z. Foster, the early 20th-century union organizer and eventual Communist Party leader, termed the “militant minority,” a social force that still has relevance in current debates about the future and radical orientation of the labor

movement. These were workers who had attended union meetings regularly and never hesitated to challenge Richard King. There is much to be said for this approach, but it did not take into account the particular conditions in Watsonville. The overwhelming majority of strikers – those who would carry the biggest burdens of the struggle – were women, most of whom were uncomfortable in the union hall. (And with good reason: many of the men did not welcome their presence there.)

Strikers' Committee

Those elected to the Strikers' Committee were not chosen for their militancy – though Gloria Betancourt, the top vote-getter, could more than hold her own in that department. By and large they were people who had held positions of responsibility inside the plant, whom rank and filers were accustomed to seeing in leadership roles. Most had at least some English language skills.

Gloria Betancourt would chair the Strikers' Committee for the duration and was perhaps the strikers' most prominent public spokesperson. A 23-year veteran of Watsonville Canning, she had started working there when she was 15 years old and gradually worked her way up to floor leader, overseeing 125 co-workers. She also functioned as an informal shop steward: since Local 912 officers could not be trusted to effectively advocate for them on the shop floor, workers frequently sought her help in resolving their issues with management. She was a natural leader, but only during the course of the strike did she come to see herself as a spokesperson for Latina workers.

Not all of those elected to the Strikers' Committee proved up for the job. All but one of the men had quit within a few months. Their places were quietly taken by women rank and filers who might not have been willing to stand for election but were more than prepared to take on the necessary work. In fact, much of the actual work was done, not by the committee itself, but by an informal group of 40 to 50 women who would meet in each other's homes or on the picket line. Strikers' Committee members regularly consulted with them there, soliciting their input whenever decisions needed to be made.

League cadre urged the Strikers' Committee to hold their meetings in the union hall, arguing that it would help make Local 912 more accountable. But it was not always easy to get rank and filers to show up. Even the most active women did not feel comfortable in an environment where their presence was openly resented.

The Strikers' Committee thus carried on much of its business outside the hall, relying on the intricate web of information sharing (and often kinship ties) which existed in a tightly knit community. Shiree Teng, a League cadre who worked closely with the strikers, called it a "total social network.... Word of mouth was all they needed, because everybody was related to somebody else." Many strikers had, in fact, first come to Watsonville from Mexico to join family members who were already there. Even before the strike started, they were deeply

involved with each other's lives. On the picket line, Manuel Diaz recalled, "there was always somebody getting married, getting pregnant, breaking up with somebody."

Committee members were "on the line, at the food bank, in the hardship fund one-on-one, talking to people all day long," a League cadre recalled. "They were taking people's pulse constantly." This improvisational style of work troubled some strike supporters, one of whom worried about the lack of formal accountability and would later argue that the Strikers' Committee, though democratically elected, devolved into "another bureaucratic formation." The League invariably defended the committee against such criticisms, arguing that it had a mandate from the rank and file and in any case was better equipped to represent them than well-meaning supporters.

Manuel Diaz had ample contact with the core group of active strikers. "The ones who impressed me the most," he reflected years later, "were the older women - their steadfastness, their clarity, their good judgment in making decisions. They were hard-working, non-complaining, sharing, and nurturing. They held the strike together. They noticed everything. No matter what was going on, they were there."

Still, the first big strategic challenge was not handled successfully. Local 912 elections were to be held just a few months into the strike, and with Richard King out of the picture, strikers eagerly anticipated changes. "We are unmasking the union officials," said one. "We are going to kick out all of them and put in persons who will stand with the people."

It proved easier said than done. Believing women had been excluded from leadership from the union for far too long, Gloria Betancourt (with the League's encouragement) persuaded the Strikers' Committee to pull together a full slate of candidates, which called itself La Planilla del Pueblo (People's Slate). The League helped draft its platform and provided logistical support. Members of the Strikers' Committee resisted inclusion of TDU candidates on the slate - with the result that TDU ran its own. Manuel Diaz would reflect years later that the League should have struggled with the strikers to be open to TDU candidates, but this was hindsight. Many strikers remained deeply resentful of TDU for its failure to involve them in the Solidarity Day preparations.

The People's Slate platform declared bluntly that "women need to run our union." But apart from Gloria Betancourt, only one other woman could be recruited to run on the slate. The TDU slate was all male. Local 912 business agent Sergio Lopez, a longtime protégé of Richard King who had broken with his boss, ended up running unopposed for the top spot; the candidate fielded by the People's Slate to challenge him withdrew one week into the campaign. Lopez stressed the need for experienced leadership and claimed that, if the People's Slate won, "We'll have to install a beauty parlor in the union hall." In the end, though Strikers' Committee member Chavelo Moreno made a strong showing, only one candidate - TDU's Joe Fahey - ran successfully against the incumbent slate.

The Union Leadership

Further disappointments lay ahead. Even before the election, the higher levels of the Teamster union, in the person of Joint Council 7's Alex Ybarrolaza, had begun to intervene in the strike, and his involvement, though ultimately helpful, created many problems. An experienced strike strategist who was fluent in Spanish, Ybarrolaza had arrived in town shortly before Solidarity Day. He was deeply impressed by the strength and solidarity of the strikers, and appalled by the state of Local 912. He concluded that the strike was winnable, but only if the International union took charge, a goal he doggedly pursued for the next eight months.

Working largely behind the scenes, he developed a strategy whose components included a quick settlement with Richard Shaw and an economic sanctions campaign against Watsonville Canning. In February 1986, five months into the strike, he persuaded Shaw to open his books. They revealed that the company was, indeed, in financial trouble, in part because Watsonville Canning had been deliberately flooding the market to drive prices down and force its competitors out of business.

Ybarrolaza negotiated a settlement that reduced wages from \$7.06 to \$5.85 an hour, which would become the new industry standard. The Shaw strikers, bitterly divided, voted to accept it, a decision which left the Watsonville Canning strikers angry and demoralized. Neither the League nor the other left forces in Watsonville had a strong enough base in the Shaw plant to effectively challenge the settlement, though Strikers' Committee members lobbied vigorously against it. Over the next four months, every frozen food plant in town had to accept similar terms. When workers in one plant balked, Ybarrolaza and John Blake of the Western Conference of Teamsters advised the plant owner to lock the workers out until they came to their senses. The workers were not prepared for a work stoppage and narrowly voted to concede after two weeks. Significantly, Blake and Ybarrolaza never told Sergio Lopez what they were doing, even though Lopez was supposed to be handling the negotiations.

The worst thing about the new contracts was that they all contained a "me too" clause: if Watsonville Canning settled for less or broke the union, the wage settlements would be renegotiated. This put the Watsonville Canning strikers in the position of holding the line for the entire industry. It was in keeping with Ybarrolaza's strategy of isolating a rogue employer, but it placed an enormous burden on the strikers.

One week after the Shaw settlement, several members of the Strikers' Committee joined forces with some TDU activists and community supporters and organized a mass rally at the plant gate, in defiance of the court injunction. "We thought that things were going too slow," said Gloria Betancourt, "so we decide to get all of our forces together." A large crowd of angry strikers battled police and scab trucks in a violent downpour. At one point the strikers attempted to regroup in the union hall and were routed with tear gas. A small breakaway

group smashed shop windows on Main Street. When strikers showed up at a City Council meeting several days later to protest police conduct, the mayor refused to allow Spanish translations, calling it a waste of the council's time. Predictably, the Teamsters took pains to dissociate themselves from the demonstration.

Though the Watsonville Canning workers never wavered in their determination to stay out, some supporters began to wonder if their strike was in fact winnable. If it was not settled by September 1986, Watsonville Canning could move to decertify.



A Watsonville Canning striker. This photo first appeared in the League of Revolutionary Struggle's newspaper, Unity.

The Boycott and the Vote

At this point the League made a strategic reassessment. LRS cadre in Watsonville had been focusing on holding the strikers' ranks together, maintaining morale, and providing material support. The organization's national leadership concluded that more was needed. The Teamsters had far more firepower at their disposal than had thus far been brought to bear; the trick was to get the union to deploy it. A consumer boycott, if the Teamsters could be prevailed upon to mount one, could dramatically broaden the strike's base of support – particularly in the Chicano community, where the League exerted some influence. Ideally, it would galvanize the movement in the same way the United Farm Workers (UFW) grape boycott had.

After consulting with the UFW field office in Salinas, League cadre and contacts drew up a detailed proposal which Shiree Teng submitted to Alex Ybarrolaza. Internal Teamster documents suggest that he took it seriously. Ybarrolaza had believed from the outset some kind of boycott would be necessary to win the strike. But he was concerned about federal labor law, which forbids involving third parties in labor disputes and made it risky for the union to target markets where Watsonville Canning products were sold. The UFW had never had to worry about this problem, since farmworkers are not covered by the law. The League's boycott proposal suggested setting up an independent committee to run the campaign, thereby affording the Teamsters a measure of protection. Of course, this would also have deprived the Teamsters of control, so this particular idea went nowhere.

At the Teamsters national convention in May 1986, Ybarrolaza maneuvered through a resolution launching an economic boycott campaign against Watsonville Canning. The International committed \$20,000 a month to the campaign; boycott offices would eventually be set up in a dozen cities. A four-man work team from the Western Conference of Teamsters was dispatched to Watsonville to work with Ybarrolaza, who wryly described himself as "the lowest paid one of the bunch."

The strikers largely ignored the work team. Sergio Lopez, while welcoming the International's commitment, was suspicious, believing union higher-ups were looking for an excuse to put the local in trusteeship. The LRS tried to keep up the pressure for a consumer boycott which would generate mass outside support for the strike, particularly from the Chicano community. Ybarrolaza acknowledged that a highly visible campaign would be "great public relations exposure for the Teamsters," but added that of all the union's possible options, it would be "slow moving and the most costly."

The Teamsters had the money, but there wasn't much time. In September, Mort Console would be free to move to decertify the union. Fortunately a Teamster lawyer realized that the union had never been formally voted in at Watsonville Canning, having won representation rights years ago not through a National Labor Relations Board election but through a militant strike for union recognition. Accordingly, the strikers themselves could still petition for a vote. If it was held before the 12-month deadline, they could cast ballots

along with the scabs. The Labor Board scheduled balloting for early August, and Watsonville Canning, hoping to stack the vote, went on a hiring binge. To win, the strikers would need close to 100 percent turnout.

They got it, thanks to a phenomenal organizing effort by the Strikers' Committee. Many strikers had left town to look for work, often following the harvests in California's Central Valley. Several dozen had returned to Mexico to wait out the strike. Of those who remained, many had been evicted and were doubling up or living in their cars. The Strikers' Committee had to track down 1,000 people and bring them back to town for the day of the vote, often from hundreds of miles away. The effort succeeded, insuring that the Teamsters would keep their bargaining rights for at least another year.

Several weeks later, Watsonville Canning shut down for 11 days at the height of the harvest season. Mort Console had exhausted his \$18 million line of credit from the bank. To reopen the plant, he had to mortgage virtually all his property. Growers who had never been paid for their produce were filing lawsuits against the company, which for all practical purposes now belonged to Wells Fargo. Along with strikers and other supporters, the LRS called on the Teamsters to target the bank and organized noisy picket lines at bank branches which the Teamsters were quick to disavow.

New Boss, New Contract, New Level of Struggle

The Teamsters now played their trump card. The union had over \$1 billion invested in Wells Fargo accounts. By threatening to withdraw the money, it effectively persuaded the bank to foreclose on Console. This fulfilled the Teamsters' objective of keeping the frozen food industry unionized. But the strikers wanted more – they wanted their jobs back.

Fortunately a local grower who had never been paid for \$5 million worth of broccoli was persuaded that his best chance to get his money back was to buy the plant, sign with the union, and operate at a profit until his losses were recovered. After whirlwind negotiations, he accepted the same terms the other frozen food employers had agreed to.

The settlement seemed straightforward enough, but it overlooked a crucial fact: Watsonville Canning (renamed NorCal Frozen foods by its new owner) was technically a brand new company. This meant that the seasonals who made up most of the plant's workforce would be treated as new hires, requiring several years' seniority to qualify for health benefits. Many of the strikers were longtime veterans of the plant; they had already been without coverage for eighteen months.

Strikers' Committee members on the rank-and-file negotiating committee had no prior experience with collective bargaining or contract administration. League cadre who were officeholders in other unions could have prepared them, but events were moving so quickly

that it never happened. The actual negotiating was largely left to Sergio Lopez and Alex Ybarrolaza.

Fortunately Joe Fahey, the former TDU leader who now had a year's experience as a Local 912 business agent, knew the contract well enough to spot the problem. He urged rejection of the proposed settlement. For three days, the exhausted strikers weighed their options, then voted to send their negotiators back to the table, despite a warning from Ybarrolaza that they could not expect further support from the International union.

League cadre did not attempt to influence the vote. Rejection of the settlement carried real risks, and the League believed that only the strikers could decide whether they were ready to assume them. Shiree Teng was deeply impressed by the way they arrived at their decision. "Nobody saw things in terms of a pure solution," she said. It was "democracy in action."

Proceeding without union sanction, the strikers now took on full responsibility for the struggle. Gloria Betancourt and five other strikers, joined by Shiree Teng of the LRS and a local social worker, pitched a tent across the street from the plant and began a hunger strike which would last five days. The tent became a de facto strike headquarters. The League rallied behind the hunger strikers, providing logistical help and mobilizing outside support.

On the fifth day, hunger strikers led a larger group in a *manda y peregrinación*, a Mexican folk ritual appealing for divine intervention. Bearing images of the Virgin of Guadalupe, they marched on their knees from the plant gate to a Catholic Church half a mile away, where an impromptu mass was held. The health benefits were restored and the strike ended in triumph the following morning.

Assessing the League's Role

The League was justifiably proud of its role in the strikers' victory. Other forces made significant contributions as well, but in the last analysis nobody "owned" the strike except the strikers, and arguably the greatest strength of the League's work was rejection of anything that resembled a missionary approach. In retrospect, there may have been times when the LRS could have been more proactive and perhaps prevented certain tactical errors and setbacks in the conduct of the struggle. But League cadre were scrupulous about respecting the right of strikers to make their own decisions. And, especially in the strike's final days, the strikers proved more than capable of identifying and correcting mistakes and modifying their tactics as circumstances required.

The League's concept of the "mass line" went far beyond the notions of "empowerment" embraced by many union organizers and non-profits schooled in the methods of Saul Alinsky. [Fred Ross](#), the Alinsky-trained organizer best known for mentoring Cesar Chavez

and Dolores Huerta, defined an organizer as “a leader who does not lead but gets behind the people and pushes.” The Watsonville strikers did not need to be pushed, and League cadre did not treat them that way. In the League’s view, they were the kind of people who could be expected to be in the forefront of the revolutionary struggle. What they needed, apart from the material support which is necessary in any strike, was an awareness that they were not alone and an analysis of the larger social forces involved and how they could be made to work to the strikers’ advantage.

Here is where the League’s broader perspective made a real difference. The ability of the League to involve Chicano community leaders and student activists in the mass rallies and other support work was an obvious asset. Less obvious was its evolving analysis of the Teamsters’ role in the strike. When they walked out, the strikers’ experience with their union had been almost entirely negative. They had few if any illusions about the union: to them, it was irrelevant at best, treacherous at worst.

It fell to the League point out that while the Teamsters union could not be trusted, its continued engagement with the strike was critical. The strikers had to find a way to maintain a “unity/struggle/unity” relationship with a union used to having its own way with its rank and file.

Some regarded this approach as temporizing. But it paid off in the end. To be sure, it was not always easy for the strikers and the Teamsters to work together, and there were times when it was simply not possible. But at critical points in the strike, each had to rely on the other. On their own, the strikers would have been hard-pressed to force Mort Console out of business; the Teamsters used their economic clout with the bank to make it happen. On their own, the Teamsters could never have won the representation election that thwarted the company’s bid to decertify the union; they had to rely on the Strikers’ Committee, and the extraordinary self-organization of rank-and-file strikers, to assure the turnout needed to win.

An open breach occurred in the strike’s final days, when the strikers rejected the proposed settlement and launched an “unauthorized work stoppage.” But their ability to hold their ranks together over the next five days forced Teamster negotiators to return to the bargaining table and successfully address the strikers’ objections.

The League’s attention to tactical and strategic alliances reflected its larger concern for the social dimensions of the strike. Many strike supporters on the left, however sensitive they may have been to issues of racism, sexism, and discrimination, still tended to see the strike itself in largely class terms, with the result that the battle with the Teamster bureaucracy tended to overshadow other aspects of the struggle. Some confused tactical militancy with commitment and staying power. But as the strike unfolded, it recalled a crucial line of dialogue from *Salt of the Earth*, the classic 1954 film about a communist-led zinc miners’

strike in New Mexico: “You want to go down fighting,” the wife tells her husband. “I want to win.” The struggle of the men in the film to accept leadership from the women was acted out in real life during the Watsonville strike.

So, too, was the struggle for Latino political power. Perhaps the strike’s most enduring triumph was the way it transformed the political landscape in Watsonville, which before the strike was an *anglo* town whose Latino majority was largely ignored by the powers that be. In 1989, thanks in part to a successful voting rights lawsuit, Oscar Rios was elected to the Watsonville City Council. He served on the council, off and on, for 15 years, including five terms as mayor, and over that time the town’s Latino electorate emerged as a major political force.

Unfortunately, just as Rios was enjoying his first success in the electoral arena, the League was breaking up, and during his time in office most of the town’s frozen food industry relocated to Mexico. His tenure in office thus became not an electoral component in a larger revolutionary strategy, but rather one more case of a progressive local politician trying to engage in damage control in the face of wholesale deindustrialization.

Rios’s political career ended abruptly in 2018. Inspired by #MeToo, Shiree Teng and another woman who had worked closely with the League broke years of silence and revealed that Rios had sexually abused them at the time of the strike. Rios issued a brief written *mea culpa* and resigned from the City Council. He had functioned as the League’s most visible representative in Watsonville during the strike, and was generally acknowledged even by those who did not share his politics to be a superb organizer. The revelation of his misconduct – details of which were truly disturbing – prompted intense soul-searching on the part of League veterans, who struggled to understand how such behavior could have passed under the radar in an organization which prided itself on its predominantly female leadership and its readiness to struggle against any manifestation of sexism within its ranks. One can only hope that this is a question which future generations of revolutionaries will not have to ask themselves.

Implications for Today

More than 30 years have passed since the Watsonville Canning strike, but the issues it raised, and the challenges it poses, are still relevant. Drawing general conclusions from a particular struggle, especially one that took place under different historical circumstances, is a risky business. Still, there are several things the LRS brought to the struggle which warrant attention today.

The most obvious has been noted even by critics of the organization: an understanding that, more than anything else, the strike was a fight against national oppression. For the LRS, the plight of Watsonville’s frozen food workers reflected an ongoing pattern of power relationships that brown people have been struggling against ever since the U.S. annexation

of northern Mexico in 1848. For the strikers, many of whom felt little or no identification with their union before the strike, this analysis was compelling as well as credible; it spoke directly to their experience in a way that the language of “class struggle unionism” did not. Along with their shared struggles as women in a traditionally male-dominated milieu, it forged the strong bonds of mutual support and solidarity which made their triumph possible.

There may well be aspects of the League’s theory of a Chicano nation which need to be reassessed, or at least refined. Since the 1980s, Mexico’s debt crisis, passage of NAFTA, and the frightening repercussions of the “war on drugs” have brought about new waves of immigration from Mexico and Central America. Watsonville’s social and political climate in 1985 was thoroughly racist, but even though most strikers were natives of Mexico and many were undocumented, their immigration status was rarely an issue during the strike. It would be impossible for immigration status *not* to be an issue for strikers today.

In acknowledging these changes, one need not embrace idealist notions of *sin frontera* which imply that any distinction between Chicana/os and Mexicana/os is “divisive” and legitimizes the imperialist ideology. Movements are grounded in the actual conditions of people’s lives, and in real life it still makes a big difference which side of the border you were born on and why. But we still need to be mindful of how concrete conditions today may differ from those that shaped the Chicano liberation movement a generation ago, and adjust our strategies accordingly. For the movement itself – whether one calls it “Chicano liberation” or something else – remains critical to the prospects for revolution in this country. The political centrality that the LRS accorded to the “strategic alliance of the multinational working class and oppressed nationality movements” still offers a powerful perspective for what an articulated revolutionary process might look amidst ongoing social struggles, and cuts through oft-sterile and historically impoverished debates over identity politics.

The League’s emphasis on tactical flexibility, especially where the Teamsters hierarchy was concerned, was another major contribution to the strike. Other strike supporters on the left condemned the LRS approach as opportunistic, but many strikers who had every reason to be suspicious of the Teamsters gradually came to see it as necessary. “We had to unite with the union and try to work with them,” Gloria Betancourt said after the strike, because “there were too many enemies against [us].” It was a conclusion she reached only after a great deal of struggle; she had been one of the union’s sharpest critics. And it demanded a great deal of the strikers. Their relations with the union were a source of continual struggle and renegotiation, reflecting the tensions that exist in any united front.

For all the conflict and occasional missteps, the strikers proved fully capable of navigating the process once they understood its necessity. Their assertion of ownership of their local was one of the strike’s real accomplishments. Significantly, this was not achieved through a

rank-and-file caucus contending for union office, a strategy that TDU pursued before the strike. Instead, the workers relied at first on a parallel organization, operating outside the formal union structure, which did much of the necessary work of the strike. For most of the strike, its relationship with Teamster officials – to the extent it remained non-antagonistic – was more a matter of coexistence than coöperation. Once the strike was over, however, former members of the Strikers' Committee went on to hold positions of responsibility in the union, and Local 912 would never again return to the *padrone* system which characterized Richard King's administration.

Let me conclude with a few comments about "self-organization," since it has become something of a buzzword on the left. [Jane McAlevey](#) has argued, quite correctly, that effective struggles generate their own leaders. The Watsonville Canning strike certainly did. And in an age of social media, we have seen dramatic examples of working people taking things into their own hands when the institutions and organizations that were supposed to protect them failed to do so. In the massive and largely spontaneous [teachers' strikes](#) which swept through several states in the spring of 2018, Facebook pages and social networks did the work of mobilization and collective organizing that a badly weakened union could never have accomplished.

But self-activity is not a panacea. Upsurges and movements sparked from the bottom up can be truly inspiring, but they are rarely sustainable. This is not necessarily because they lack "revolutionary consciousness" or do not know their enemies. Oppressed people may readily grasp the need for revolution, and act accordingly. But long-term struggles require enduring political forms. Such forms are needed to keep things going, to analyze the different forces in conflict and strategize accordingly, to make adequate adjustments as factors and relationships change. Organizations are needed to engage the masses of people (upon whom everything ultimately depends) in an ongoing dialogue, to understand the conditions of their lives, to respond to their needs, and to help them put their own struggles in a larger context. The formation and maintenance of insurgent institutions like the Strikers' Committee generated a dynamic circuit between activists and the cannery workers, which raised the militant capacity of those involved.

Participating in a revolutionary organization is a full-time commitment. There is nothing inherently "elitist" about taking on this role, so long as one recognizes that the task requires humility as well as analytical chops, immersion in day-to-day struggles as well as theoretical understanding. For 13 years (longer, if one considers its precursor organizations), the LRS attempted this work, in some cases more successfully than in others. In Watsonville, its efforts were in many ways exemplary.