

# Carrier's book recalls Watsonville Canning Strike



Peter Shapiro

**I**magine being a single mother who spoke only Spanish and had few job opportunities.

Now imagine being on strike for a year and a half.

Such women, along with other cannery workers, risked everything in their 18-month strike against California's Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food Company from 1985 to 1987, but not a single worker crossed the picket lines. By staying united, more than 1,000 food workers won the strike and a better contract, even as other unions were in decline.

Portland, OR Branch 82 member **Peter Shapiro** has done what many a retiree has pledged to do—write a book. Shapiro's work focuses on the pivotal Watsonville Canning strike, bringing together new details that expand on the written history of the labor movement.

His book, *Song of the Stubborn One Thousand*, hits bookshelves this month.

"It's an amazing story," Shapiro said. "Everything was against them." He used a wealth of sources, and skills learned as an academic, journalist and editor of his branch newsletter, to bring the strike to life. Though Shapiro is a member of the Portland branch, he now lives in the San Francisco Bay area near Watsonville, a town of 50,000 people an hour's drive south of San Jose.

Shapiro's inspiration to write the book came when he

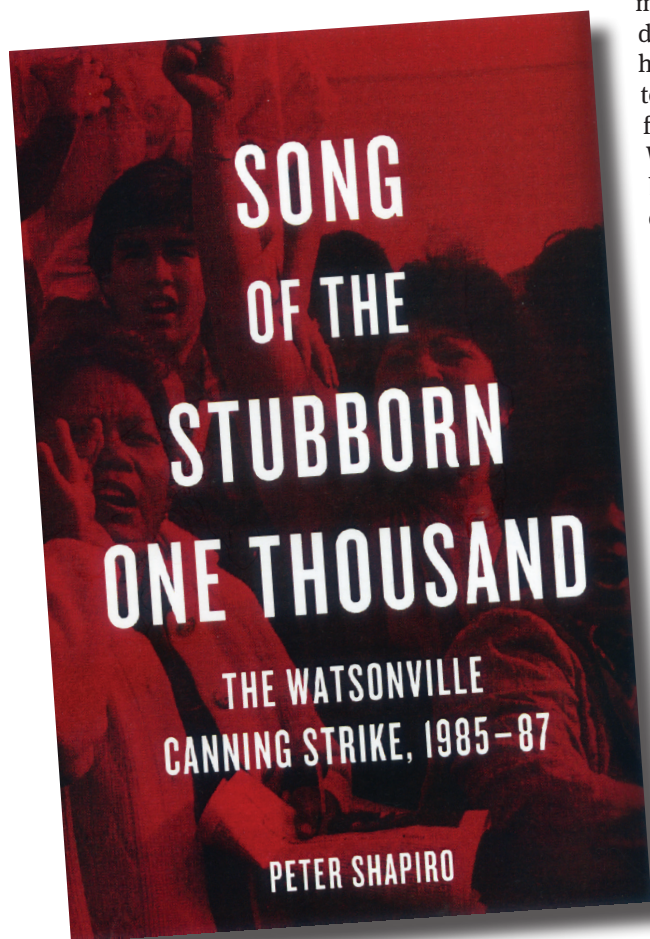
listened to a speaker at a labor history conference say that strikes and other labor struggles had all failed, and the unions were weakened and sometimes decertified, in the anti-union era that began when Ronald Reagan fired striking air traffic controllers in 1981. After the talk, Shapiro told the speaker that he knew of a strike during the Reagan years that turned out just the opposite. "You should write about it," was the reply.

Shapiro was well-equipped to write about it. Trained as a labor historian at Berkeley in the early 1970s, Shapiro left academia and pursued a career with the Postal Service as a letter carrier, mail handler and clerk before retiring in 2008. ("I wish I had stuck with carrying mail," he said.) During the Watsonville strike, he wrote about it for *Unity*, a labor newspaper. Working in the Bay Area for the Postal Service at the time, Shapiro also attended rallies and helped fellow postal workers and union members collect and deliver food for the strikers and their families.

Shapiro's knowledge of labor history and passion for research is laid bare in *Song of the Stubborn One Thousand*. The book is chock-full of details—about the leading characters and many rank-and-file workers—that bring the story to life. "A lot of the strikers are still around, so I was able to interview about a dozen," he said, such as Anita Contreras.

"In many ways Anita Contreras was typical of the strikers," Shapiro wrote. Born in Mexico, Contreras "picked apples and grapes and worked the strawberry fields in the nearby Salinas Valley before hiring on at Watsonville Canning." She preferred indoor factory work to toiling in the fields.

"Like many strikers," he wrote, "she was a single mother, opting to raise her children alone rather than remain with an abusive husband."





Above and below:  
Images from the strike

Watsonville Canning produced canned and frozen vegetables grown on nearby farms in one of America's most productive farming regions. It also drew from the same labor force as the farms. Most were Latina women like Contreras who were happy to have a year-round, indoor job instead of working the fields. But when the cannery tried to cut their already low pay and slash benefits, workers struck in September of 1985.

"I could barely make it getting \$6.66 an hour; how am I going to survive on \$4.75?" picketing plant worker Angie Elizalde, a single mother of four, told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1986. "I've worked for that company 16 years and to get treated like this isn't right. We're angry and refuse to give in."

The strike was complicated by the workers' conflict with Teamsters Union Local 912, which represented them. Like many Teamsters locals representing food workers at the time, the union had a cozy relationship with the company and was out of touch with workers' needs. Local 912's longtime president, Richard King, spoke no Spanish and socialized with the company's owner in between negotiating weak contracts. The local had never struck before.

With even their own union leadership unprepared, the striking workers staged a genuinely grassroots effort. "What made the critical difference," Shapiro wrote, "was the strikers themselves—not just their tenacity and determination but their readiness, at crucial points, to take the initiative, assume responsibility, and make and carry out key strategic decisions."

The striking workers endured, relying on their close family and community relationships to survive. The company's attempts to outlast the strikers by hiring scabs failed—most

replacements couldn't handle the hard work for the low pay. A vote to decertify the union also failed.

"The strikers didn't allow themselves to be distracted by the legal struggle," Shapiro said. "Their main task was to support each other and to make sure nobody crossed the line."

When Watsonville Canning's bank pulled the rug out from under it by withdrawing its line of credit because it feared the strike would destroy the cannery, the owner declared bankruptcy and a creditor who was owed a large sum of money by the company—a broccoli farmer who hadn't been paid for his crops—assumed ownership and settled the strike with a new contract.

But the struggle wasn't over.

The new owner treated even long-time workers as new hires because, as far as he was concerned, it was technically a new company—a policy that deprived many workers of pay raises and health benefits they had earned. Many had children who hadn't seen a doctor throughout the strike and now would have to wait even longer without health benefits. Against Local 912's wishes, the strikers continued their mission.

To bring their case for justice to public view, some workers staged a hunger strike in front of the plant. But one of the most remarkable acts of demonstration came when a group of devout Catholic women among the strikers participated in a *manda y peregrinación*, or offering and pilgrimage. They were inspired by Farmworkers Union founder César Chávez and his supporters, who had walked a 300-mile *peregrinación* from the fields to the state capitol in Sacramento in 1966.

A group of Watsonville strikers, mostly women, traveled from the plant through the streets of the city to nearby St. Patrick's Catholic Church. Follow-

ing a religious tradition that demonstrates humility, they traveled not on their feet, but on their knees. With the help of supporters who spread carpets in front of them and held aloft images



of Jesus and Mary, they shuffled forward in a slow, solemn demonstration of faith.

Observers were brought to tears at this show of devotion and determination. The company's owners and attorneys, many who worshipped at the same churches as the strikers, agreed the next day to a settlement that restored health benefits.

There's much more to this fascinating tale, and Shapiro brings the events to life in 280 pages, including firsthand accounts published for the first time. *Song of the Stubbhorn One Thousand* is available from the union bookseller [powells.com](http://powells.com), [amazon.com](http://amazon.com) or at [hay-marketbooks.org](http://hay-marketbooks.org). **PR**