ORAL TESTIMONIES OF MEXICAN WORKERS WHO ORGANIZED THE SONOMA COUNTY INDUSTRIAL UNION: QUE ES UN BOTON?

by

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Oral Testimonies of Mexican Workers who Organized the
Sonoma County Industrial Union: Que es un Boton?

Creative Project by
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ABSTRACT

Purpose of Study:

To document the struggle that Mexican workers from Calliope Designs and Point St. George Fisheries launched in 1988, to obtain union representation.

Procedure:

Oral interviews were conducted with workers of both plants, union organizers, and community members to document the formation of Sonoma County Industrial Union.

Findings:


Conclusions:

The organizing efforts of these Mexican workers appeared to have a social and political rippling influences on issues affecting Mexicans in Sonoma County.

Chair:
Dr. Daniel Markwyn

Date: /-6-9-

IV
Acknowledgments

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Preface

The story of the courageous Mexican women and men of Sonoma County Industrial Union interests me greatly, personally and professionally. As a Mexican woman, born and raised in México City, I feel the issues affecting Mexican workers in the United States need to be addressed.

I come from a working class background. In his late fifties my father became actively involved in union organizing at his workplace, which led to the termination of his job. Suddenly, he found himself old, unskilled, and without employment. I found myself reflecting on my father and his experience as I documented the experiences of the SCIU workers. Ultimately, some of the Calliope Designs and Point St. George Fisheries workers faced a situation similar to my father's.

I thought I knew a lot about Mexicans, being Mexican myself. These workers are my teachers, and I learned a great deal not only about their struggle, but about our shared culture and heritage. I want others to learn the story of these courageous workers, who speak so eloquently of their struggle and their lives.
Introduction

In 1988, Mexican workers at Calliope Designs and Point St. George Fisheries (PSGF) launched a struggle to obtain union representation. The workers' efforts resulted in the formation of the Sonoma County Industrial Union (SCIU). This project documents the circumstances of the union's origin, its brief but vibrant existence, and its subsequent demise. The heart of the project are the workers' perspectives of their experiences, documented in oral interviews conducted three years after the official demise of SCIU.

It is important to record the workers' struggle to unionize, particularly because it has not previously been documented with the exception of a series of newspaper articles which appeared in The Press Democrat during the period of the union's existence. Mexican labor history in Sonoma County has not been a primary subject of study for historians, and there is a need for the struggle of these people to be recorded not only for them, but for their children, for the Mexican community, and for the community at large.

The specific focus of this project is to document the workers' experiences, and it is not intended to document the
history of the union as a whole. Therefore, workers are the principal interview subjects. Several additional interviews with non-workers were conducted to add other key perspectives.

The technique of the oral interview was chosen in this project. The oral interview has been used to great benefit in many instances. Elena Poniatwoska, a famous Mexican writer and historian, relied on oral interviews for her works on the Mexican Revolution, the Mexican Student Movement of 1968, and the history of urban guerrillas in Mexico City. In the United States, the oral interview has been a fertile methodology for contemporary Chicano historians, many of whom have obtained invaluable results in their research. Raquel Rubio-Goldsmith utilized the methodology of the oral interview for her research on the history of Mexicanas in the United States. Rubio-Goldsmith stated:

Specific to the history of Mexicanas, oral interviews, their preservation, and transcription are emerging as primary-source material as a self-standing oral document that preserves recollection and memories of a collective and as a creation of a new historical document that views the interview as a totality including the interviewer.¹

The oral interview has also been utilized by United States historians in varied applications. Wallace Terry in his book *Bloods: An Oral History of The Vietnam War By Black Veterans*, presents twenty interviews he conducted with Vietnam Veterans. Terry does not explain his methodology to any appreciable degree, and the seemingly candid interviews stand alone. Yet, they provide profound insight into how soldiers, sailors, and officers of the United States Army and Navy experienced the Vietnam War. The reader is exposed to personal perspectives of the Vietnam War through the recollections of these Black soldiers and officers.²

Studs Terkel is a prolific writer who has made an extraordinary contribution to United States history through his use of the oral interview. This contribution is clearly reflected in his works, which include *American Dreams Lost and Found, Born to Live: Hiroshima, Working, and Chicago*.

In his book, *Working*, Terkel presents a wide variety of interviews with working people. He conducted his interviews with people from different ethnic and racial backgrounds, and different types of employment. His goal was to learn how workers feel

about their daily work and about themselves. \textit{Working} is an interesting book that documents how workers felt about their jobs during the 1970's in the United States.\footnote{Studs Terkel. \textit{Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day And How They Feel About What They Do.} (Avon Books, New York, New York, 1975).}

Research into the importance of oral history provided a valuable background for conducting the oral interviews for this project. The process of interviewing union workers, organizers, and community members served to refresh people's memories leading to other sources: newspaper articles, photographs, union buttons and shirts.

The first interviews conducted were with the two union organizers, Alicia Sanchez and Newman Strawbridge. They were involved with the workers and the union from the beginning of the organizing efforts. Sanchez continued as union organizer until its demise, and Strawbridge left the union in the winter of 1991. These interviews provided a comprehensive historical perspective on the union. Many hours were spent with Sanchez reconstructing her memories of the history of the union. Sanchez was always available to tape the interviews despite her busy schedule as a new...
mother. Her newborn boy was only two or three weeks old when the interview process began.

Unfortunately, Strawbridge's schedule was problematic. He granted only one interview, and after that he became unavailable due to his work schedule. The inability to interview Strawbridge led to a reliance on the information provided by Sanchez, workers, community members, and The Press Democrat articles in which Strawbridge was often quoted.

Most of the workers responded enthusiastically to the initial contact requesting an interview. Several workers expressed their feelings that their effort to form a union was part of making history in the United States, and therefore needed to be recorded. Most of the workers were candid and open in their answers and accommodated the interviews in their busy family and working schedules. The interviews were conducted in a professional manner, yet with an ease that made the process comfortable for both interviewee and interviewer.

The Anglo and Latino community members contacted also readily agreed to be interviewed. In general, these people were
happy that the workers' experiences were going to be documented to preserve this chapter of Mexican history in Sonoma County.

These courageous workers risked their jobs and their families' livelihoods and homes. For many of them, even their continued residency in the United States was at risk. Nevertheless, they were determined to organize a union that would guarantee their working rights and gain for them the respect they knew they deserved from their employers.

The great majority of the workers lacked an understanding of the legal system in this country. They launched their campaign for a union election with the belief that the government of the United States supports and protects workers' rights. According to Sanchez:

Workers had an incredible trust in United States laws and in lawyers, without realizing that [the laws of] the United States are not interpreted to [necessarily] protect workers. Their first instinct is to trust that the laws are going to protect them. Then, later on, they discover that this is not true [all the time].

Despite the many obstacles enumerated above, these workers initiated a Latino labor movement in Sonoma County that sparked

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the awakening of a dormant social group that had long been ignored by peace groups and unions in the county. In the course of the workers' struggle, these same peace groups and labor unions became very supportive of those previously overlooked.

Several steps were taken in documenting the interviews for this project. All interviews were tape recorded in English or in Spanish, and the tapes are preserved intact. The union organizers and community members were interviewed in English. Those interviews were transcribed verbatim. All of the workers' interviews were conducted in Spanish and translated into English. The transcriptions from Spanish to English were done with attention to language, grammar, and structural differences, with an emphasis on the clear communication of the workers' thoughts. Minor editing was done to improve grammar and clarity, and to eliminate redundancy. Finally, the tapes were divided into four main categories for purposes of organization and presentation: union organizers, Calliope Designs workers, Point Saint George Fisheries workers, and members of the Anglo and Latino community.
The first section of this project will establish the historical context of the formation of SCIU and its four to five years of existence. The interviews, as the central part of this project, will be presented entirely in the second section. The third section presents supporting materials and documents.
1. Calliope Designs

In January of 1988, on Martin Luther King Day, a historic event occurred at Calliope Designs, a Christmas dough-ornament factory in Santa Rosa, California. Workers, in the majority Mexican women, decided to take matters into their own hands as they searched for a solution to the poor working conditions they had experienced for years.

The great majority of the employees worked for piece rate wages making Christmas ornaments. By comparison to workers in other local factories, the Calliope workers generally had earned more per hour by working that way. However, over the two to three year period prior to 1988, the owners Dorr and Stephanie Eddy had reduced the piece rate wage structure several times without prior announcement. The wage reductions and the cavalier manner of the owners was upsetting to the workers. In early January 1988, workers were notified of the latest wage reduction by way of a small notice posted next to the public telephone. The notice listed the ornaments for which the piece rate was going to be reduced.

Workers requested a meeting with Mr. and Mrs. Eddy in order to discuss these wage cuts. According to the workers, the Eddys
were unavailable for a meeting. Maria Pulido, a bilingual worker, relayed to the workers that Mr. Eddy felt it was time for the company to make money, and not only the workers, and that the *patron* [company Owner] had enough of the workers making more money than the company. Now it was the company's turn to make money. So he started reducing the pay in the ornaments by ten, or twenty cents a piece. So, can you imagine? Twenty cents multiplied by eight [$1.60], it was a lot of money that we were losing on only one ornament.¹

According to Mario Jimenez, the working conditions were extremely poor. In addition to the wage cuts, workers received no health benefits, paid holidays, or sick days. Workers ate while they worked, under the pressure of the piece rate system. They were paid only for what they produced.² The Calliope workers routinely used paints, lacquer, flour, and dyes in production without protective masks or adequate ventilation.³

Other factors also affected the work environment. Several of the workers had been employed by Calliope Designs for more than ten years. It saddened them when the company started growing and Mr. and Mrs. Eddy removed themselves from the production floor to

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¹ Mario Jimenez, interview by author, 13 December 1995, tape recording, Santa Rosa, California, transcription, p. 4.
² Mario Jimenez, 13 December 1995, p. 4.
³ Mario Jimenez, 13 December 1995, p. 5.
focus entirely on the administration of the company. Several of the workers mentioned in their interviews that when the company was small, Mr. Eddy would work side-by-side with them and talk to them in a friendly, almost family-like manner. Workers became accustomed to that familiarity and missed the friendly communication they previously had with the company owners.

The company was growing and in April, 1979, moved to a larger facility on Tesconi Drive in Santa Rosa. Subsequently, the company hired inexperienced supervisors who did not speak Spanish and were of Anglo background. Many workers questioned why Mr. Eddy did not offer the position to any of them, who had been working there for several years and who knew the ornament production well. Several workers mentioned that even though not all of them were fluent in English, there was one Chicana, Maria Pulido, who spoke fluent English and Spanish, and the position was not offered to her.4

Workers wanted the company owners to meet with them to discuss the concerns outlined above: piece rate reductions, benefits, and supervision. On Monday, January 18, 1988, Martin

Luther King Day, all of them reported to the workplace, but they did not work. They were upset because they knew it was a holiday, their children were not in school, and yet they did not have the day off. Workers organized a sit-down work stoppage reminiscent of those employed in the auto and steel industries in the 1930's. According to the workers interviewed, they did not know of the significance of Martin Luther King Day, nor did they know the history of his role in this country's civil rights movement. Their choice of the day and the tactic employed for their job action was purely coincidental.5

Sara Ochoa, a Calliope Designs worker, spoke about the events with a clear low-pitched voice. She would laugh and gesture with her arms when she described events or people that were favorable to the workers' cause. When she talked about the company owner, her voice changed to a high pitch, and she would cross her arms as though to protect herself. Ochoa was born in Michoacan, Mexico, and immigrated to California at the age of twenty-four. She had never worked in her native land, nor did she have union organizing experience. Ochoa started working at

5 Alicia Sanchez, interview by author, 6 October 1995, tape recording, Sebastopol, California, transcription, p. 4.
Calliope Designs in August 18, 1978, ten years before the union organizing began. Ochoa remembers their sit-in on Monday, January 18, 1988, Martin Luther King Day with extraordinary clarity.

While she offered another cup of coffee, Ochoa looked out her kitchen window and laughed, remembering the sit-down. She explained that

we went inside the company, but we were not going to work. We all decided to do that. We walked into the shop, and Lupe Farias, the woman who prepared the masa [dough] had everything ready for us to start making the ornaments. We had cutters and everything ready, but we did not work.

They asked us: 'What is happening? Why are you not taking your masa?' We told them: 'We are not going to work, we are going to drink coffee, and we want to talk to the patrones ...We only said that we wanted to talk to the patrones. The supervisors called the patrones and told them that the workers did not want to work. So we were there, just drinking and drinking coffee, but we did not work. Finally, the patrones came and talked to us.\(^6\)

The workers and the company owner did not reach any agreements during that three-hour meeting, and the workers decided to walk out and not work for the rest of the day.

The majority of the workers felt that they were indispensable to the company, because they had the skills necessary to produce intricate ornaments. They strongly believed

\(^6\) Sara Ochoa, interview by author, 20 January 1996, tape recording, Santa Rosa, California, transcription, p. 5.
that their skills were difficult to attain, since it took months to
train people to make dough ornaments at a fast pace and with high
quality. For this reason, workers expected that the sit-down and a
meeting would convince Mr. Eddy to respond to their concerns.
Several workers hoped that Mr. Eddy would agree to two things:
one, that he would restore the higher piece rate structure, and,
two, that he would begin again to communicate with them as
family as he had in the past. Workers yearned for the old familiar
times.7

However, after their sit-down and the three hour meeting
which followed, workers realized it would not be that easy.
When the sit-down and the meeting did not produce the desired
results, workers opted to take a further step in their quest to
improve their working conditions. Elena Pulido, who had been
working at Calliope Designs since 1975, mentioned to the other
workers that her daughter knew of a place where they could obtain
legal assistance regarding their working problems. The workers
chose a committee to go to California Rural Legal Assistance
(CRLA) to explore what could be done to solve their problems with

7 Elena Pulido, interview by author, 13 January 1996, tape
recording, Santa Rosa, California, transcription, p. 4.
the company owners. They sought help at CRLA where they hoped to find immediate solutions. Even though they did not know clearly what they expected from that agency, they went there because according to them, they saw this as their only recourse.

The workers spoke with Christina Briano of CRLA. According to Briano, CRLA could not provide legal assistance to the workers because the "labor problems they described were not labor violations." Briano decided to refer the workers to the Labor Law Enforcement Center (LLEC), an independent community organization.

The Labor Law Enforcement Center was a community-based organization founded by Newman Strawbridge and Alicia Sanchez in 1987. The formation of the Center in this county was the continuation of community organizing work that Strawbridge and Sanchez had started in Ventura County, California. In Ventura, Strawbridge had developed a questionnaire on minimum working standards to use in his community organizing work.

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8 Pulido, 13 January 1996, p. 4.
9 Christina Briano, interview by author, 7 September 1996, Santa Rosa, California.
10 Briano, 7 September 1996.
In Sonoma County, Strawbridge and Sanchez saw the need to develop a minimum working standards center with a long term goal of organizing a union. As Strawbridge recalled, Sonoma County did not have a center or an organization that would assist workers confronted with violations of labor standards. In his attempt to form the Center, Strawbridge contacted local agencies that provided low-cost or free services to workers needing assistance with labor problems. He also approached local unions for support in organizing Latino workers. Strawbridge did not receive the support he expected from agencies and unions. Unions, as Sanchez recalls, lacked the resources to organize Latino workers, in part because they did not have Spanish-speaking organizers.

In Strawbridge's opinion, Latino workers are the most exploited of the working class in California. According to Sanchez, she and Strawbridge could not just go out and say that they wanted to form a union. She explained that they needed to know what type of working violations workers experienced, and in addition, she noted

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12 Sanchez, 6 October 1995, p. 2.
that they needed to know which workers were the most exploited in terms of ethnic background, and which industries perpetuated these working violations.  

Sanchez and Strawbridge opted for a bilingual English and Spanish questionnaire on the minimum working standards to determine if there were working violations experienced by the workers.

The questionnaire was distributed by volunteers outside factories in the county, and at shopping malls in working class neighborhoods. Although Sanchez and Strawbridge aimed to organize Latino workers, the questionnaire was distributed to people of all races and backgrounds who were willing to take it.

The questionnaire included questions related to the minimum wage being paid, working hour violations, paid overtime work, differential treatment because of race and gender, and coffee breaks, among other questions. At the end of the questionnaire a telephone number and a Post Office Box in Santa Rosa was printed, giving workers the option of either calling or returning the questionnaire.  

It was not a controlled data-gathering process,

14 Sanchez, 6 October 1995, p. 2.

15 As well as can be determined, a copy of the questionnaire is not available, and records of incoming telephone calls were not kept.
as Sanchez and Strawbridge did not tally the numbers of respondents in relation to the numbers of questionnaires distributed. ¹⁶

When workers called responding to the questionnaire, they were able to talk to volunteers who had been trained in labor law by Strawbridge. Members of the Center answered the workers' questions in detail and sought ways to provide assistance beyond a telephone conversation. Sanchez recalls the conversations she held with workers with a spark of happiness in her eyes; helping workers to protect their rights gave her great satisfaction.

We would try to answer correctly as many questions as the person had. We would discuss in length the particular working violations the person encountered at the work site. However, before we completed the interview, we asked the worker if she or he thought of forming a union, it was quite interesting to hear the anti-union sentiment people expressed in our conversations. They would respond immediately 'I do not like unions!' I remember clearly that people who expressed the most anti-union sentiments were predominantly white. ¹⁷

The completed questionnaires returned by mail and the direct phone consultations with people who called in response to the questionnaire brought a two-level result. The first was the

¹⁶ Strawbridge, 3 November 1995, p. 3.
¹⁷ Sanchez, 6 October 1995, p. 4.
immediate services provided to the questionnaire respondents.

But the second level was the most important. According to Strawbridge, the results of the questionnaire confirmed the need to establish a working-class organization with long term goals of forming a labor-community union.¹⁸

Calliope Designs workers were unaware of the labor organizing work Strawbridge and Sanchez were doing in Sonoma County. Consequently, when Briano referred them to Strawbridge, she explained that he might provide some assistance in finding solutions to their working problems. The committee chose one of the workers to schedule a meeting with Strawbridge.¹⁹

Strawbridge remembers how worried he was about these workers who could have lost their jobs for organizing a sit-down and walking off their jobs. He mentioned that "two workers called, and then I set up a group meeting, and I remember we had to call the meeting off because I was involved in a pesticide investigation. I remember worrying all weekend how these workers were going to respond"²⁰ to the cancellation of the meeting.

²⁰ Strawbridge, 3 November 1995, p. 5.
At the end of January, 1988, the following week, twenty-one of the twenty-two workers attended the meeting with Strawbridge. The only person who did not attend was a worker on pregnancy leave. Clearly determined to find a solution to their problems, they expected Strawbridge to provide legal advice and to explain to them their rights as workers, so that they could return to work and ask the employer to fulfill those rights. The meeting was an eye opener for them. Workers learned that in the absence of a union contract the labor laws in United States allowed Mr. Eddy to cut their wages at his discretion and that he was not required by law to provide benefits to his workers. Sanchez also mentioned how obvious it was to her that these workers did not have previous union organizing experience. When she and Strawbridge suggested they could wear a union button to communicate to Mr. Eddy that they wanted to form a union, none of

21 Sanchez, 6 October 1995, p. 6.
22 According Herring, pursuant to United States Labor Code, employers have the right to cut wages arbitrarily, but not below minimum wage. In addition, Herring continued, employers are not required by any labor law to provide health benefits. Herring has been a Labor Law attorney for over twenty-five years.
them knew what a union button was. "Workers thought it was a regular clothing button, and they could not understand why we wanted them to wear a botón (button)."23

The workers came to understand that Mr. Eddy was not going to give them fair treatment, benefits and an increase in wages without a struggle. After talking to Sanchez and Strawbridge, workers concluded that their only alternative was to form a union.

This first meeting with Strawbridge and Sanchez brought a radical change in the workers' situation. First, they educated themselves about the realities of labor laws in the United States. Second, they were able to empower themselves as a group of workers united to protect their rights. For many of these workers, this was their first exposure to a structured meeting. Sanchez recalls this first meeting with tears in her eyes:

We talked about what a union meant: All of them coming together, being able to decide that they were going to change their lives by coming together. [It] was interesting that one of the women asked: "What does it take for us to form a union?" And Newman said: 'All you have to do is make a motion.' I translated to the woman: 'Lo que tienes que hacer es decir que quieren la union.' She sat there for a few minutes without saying anything. [Then] she lifted her arm in a fist and said: 'Me siguen? - would you follow me?' Everybody started saying 'si, si, si

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23 Sanchez, 6 October 1995, p. 6.
-yes, yes, yes.' She felt she had to do a sort of physical movement. So that is when she raised her fist, thinking that is what I meant to say: 'I move to do this or that.'

This meeting marked a watershed in the history of Mexicans living in Sonoma County. This group of Mexicans working in the manufacturing industry decided to change their lives by coming together as a group, and forming the first Mexican industrial union in this county, the Sonoma County Industrial Union (SCIU). These twenty-two decided that they did not want to join another union, but to form their own.

In the process of forming their own union, these workers developed an organization with a strong grassroots element. They made their first hand-made buttons that read: "We want a union/Queremos un Sindicato." Buttons were made from paper, cut in a circle and glued to a piece of metal or board. Two days after the January meeting, the workers pinned on their buttons and walked proudly as a group into their workplace.

Wearing the union buttons was the method workers chose to notify Mr. Eddy that they wanted to have an election for collective

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24 Sanchez, 6 October 1995, p. 7.
bargaining representation. In doing so, they were protected by the National Labor Relations Act, and Mr. Eddy could not fire them for their decision to form a union. Sanchez recalls that she and Strawbridge took turns waiting outside the plant in the parking lot. They were afraid that Mr. Eddy would take some action against the workers. During the lunch break, Sanchez said, workers reported to them that Mr. Eddy was "shocked and asked them why they were wearing those buttons. The workers answered him, 'because we want a union.'"\textsuperscript{27}

Several of the workers spoke of the subsequent radical change in Mr. Eddy's behavior. Mrs. Pulido recalls that:

\begin{quote}
From that time on, he never talked to us again. He was mad. He said many things, but I do not know what he said, because I do not speak English. As I said, people were not asking for a lot--just a little. If he would have agreed, we all would have been happy with each other...[The supervisor] also stopped talking to us. It was not the same--the environment was very tense.\textsuperscript{28}
\end{quote}

Strawbridge filed a petition signed by the twenty-two workers with the NLRB the following day. He requested that the NLRB inform Mr. Eddy of the action, and also petition for an election for collective bargaining representation.

\textsuperscript{27} Sanchez, 6 October 1995, p. 12.
\textsuperscript{28} Pulido, 13 January 1996, p. 5.
During the two months it took for the NLRB to schedule the election, the working relations grew increasingly tense. Although Mr. Eddy did not directly discourage the workers from organizing a union, he no longer spoke to the workers. Additionally, the supervisor and Mr. Eddy began to dictate arbitrarily who was going to make the ornaments that were on the top of the pay scale. The company produced a wide range of ornaments that varied from a simple heart to a detailed wedding couple. The less detailed ornaments were popular with the workers, because they could be produced more rapidly, thus resulting in greater compensation for the worker. The few workers that did not participate in the union organizing efforts were given these ornaments to produce, and the most vocal union supporters were compelled to make new ornament patterns and more complicated ornaments that resulted in lower compensation.\(^{29}\) Ochoa stated that before they organized the union, Farias, the \textit{masa} -making person, would have their \textit{masa} available immediately upon the worker's request. After the campaign for the union started, according to Ochoa, Farias did not fill the \textit{masa} orders at the requested time. Instead, she would

\(^{29}\) Paulina Martinez, interview by author, 27 April 1996, tape recording, Santa Rosa, California, transcription, p. 1.
take a long time to fill the orders. These actions caused the workers to lose money as they waited for the *masa*.\(^{30}\)

Mr. Eddy organized two lunches for the workers during the campaign for the election. He planned these lunches to coincide with the weekly lunchtime potlucks workers were holding on Fridays outside the factory. Many of the workers felt conflicted about this. On one hand, they wanted to win the election, but on the other hand, they continued having "family-like" feelings for Mr. Eddy, and they did not want to hurt his feelings by not attending his lunches. Because of these feelings, the workers decided to participate in Mr. Eddy's lunches, but they did not change their mind about the union organizing. Mr. Eddy also sent letters to workers expressing his unhappiness regarding their union organizing. Mr. Eddy mentioned how shocked he and Mrs Eddy were by the workers' union activities because they had been like a family, attending their parties, baptisms, and weddings. Now, workers were choosing to move apart from them, breaking the family bonds they had built for years.\(^{31}\)


\(^{31}\) Martinez, 27 April 1996, p. 6.
Mr. Eddy's behavior was not as extreme as is often found with employers. In Sanchez' opinion, some employers make the working conditions so unbearable for workers that they resign before the election for collective bargaining. Nonetheless, the interviews of the workers clearly demonstrate that they experienced a high level of tension in the workplace.

Despite Mr. Eddy's efforts to discourage workers from voting for the union, they continued organizing their election campaign. During the campaign, workers experienced radical changes, not only in their personal lives, but also in their political awareness. Many workers learned how to use a typewriter, do bulk mailings, and keep office records. Some learned to run meetings, make organizing telephone calls, and speak in public. Additionally, workers were studying English and learning union organizing strategies.

Workers organized themselves into several committees with one or two workers chairing each. Sara Ochoa, Mario Jimenez, Paulina Martinez, and Adolfina Hernandez emerged as leaders in organizing the committees.

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Alicia Sanchez, interview by author, 11 October 1995, tape recording, Sebastopol, California, transcription, p. 2.
One committee organized home visits to workers who were not supporting the union. These latter workers included a few American Indian and Anglo women, and they were not part of the twenty-two original workers seeking union representation.

Community members went with the workers to interpret, at the same time often providing organizing tips to assist committee members in encouraging people to join the union. Paul Kaplan, President of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) in Sonoma County, remembers the home visits:

I remember visiting workers at their home and talking to them about voting for the union...I went to one woman's house [Lupe Farias] with Newman, and she was the person [who prepared the dough for the workers] and kind of ambivalent. I think that she ended up voting against the union. It was not only Brown workers who worked at the plant; there were White workers there, too, who worked in different aspects. And, I think that the vote came down along racial lines, and the way that the union was won is that the majority of the people who worked there were Latino workers. So that is why the union was successful. In terms of bridging the gap, the employers were very successful in using people's racial identity to divide them up.33

One committee was responsible for inviting community members to attend the workers' weekly noontime potluck rallies held outside Calliope Designs. Sanchez explained the system she

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33 Paul Kaplan, interview by author, 16 October 1995, tape recording, Dillon Beach, California, transcription, p. 4.
and the workers developed to include community people, organizations and other unions in their community-worker rallies.

I gave certain workers who knew English a list of telephone numbers and names of community people, and I gave them a script. I would write a little script for them: something like this: 'Hi, I am Fina, and I am a Calliope Designs worker. I am calling you to invite you to a lunch on Friday from 12:00 p.m. to 12:30 p.m.' The workers themselves would make the phone calls to talk to the community people. 34

The NLRB held the Calliope Designs' election for collective bargaining on March 25, 1988, with a resounding victory for the workers. Twenty-two workers voted in favor of the union, and three against. Since the Eddys did not challenge the election, the NLRB certified Sonoma County Industrial Union (SCIU) as the bargaining unit for the workers at Calliope Designs.

However, the contract negotiations which followed encountered several serious obstacles. Mr. Eddy presented contract proposals that were no different than the current wage and working conditions. Mr. Eddy also hired an attorney, Michael Merrill, who was experienced in labor law. According to Sanchez, Mr. Eddy became extremely obstinate during negotiations. His perception of "family-like" relations impeded him from relating to

his employees as workers. According to Sanchez, Eddy's personal feelings blocked him from negotiating in good faith on a business level. Negotiations became adversarial immediately, and they deteriorated in terms of the ability to negotiate in good faith.

Kaplan's experience in collective bargaining was reflected in his opinion of the negotiation process. According to Kaplan,

> The employer did not want to give anything [new] in the contract that he already was not giving in independent terms of agreement, [so] there was not the willingness on the employer's part [to negotiate in good faith]. [I saw] a variety of things at play. The inexperience on our part, [in collective bargaining] for one, and the newness in organizing industrial Latino workers in Sonoma County. [In addition], the complexity [of the contract] in terms of piece-rate structure, how the work was organized, and how to codify that and put it all in writing.

Bargaining at the table presented a new challenge not previously experienced by the union organizers and the workers. Strawbridge and Sanchez had extensive peace and labor movement organizing experience, but they did not have specific expertise in contract negotiations. The worker representatives also had no previous experience and looked to Sanchez and Strawbridge for guidance and expertise.

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35 Sanchez, 11 October 1995, p. 3.
An additional challenge was that Strawbridge and Sanchez had many other commitments during this period. In addition to the Calliope negotiations, they also became involved with the workers at Point St. George Fisheries (PSGF) who were in the process of organizing their union election campaign for collective bargaining. Sanchez was working full time for California Human Development Corporation (CHDC), and Strawbridge was working as an independent investigator for private attorneys. It is probable that the many demands on their time affected their ability to negotiate a contract for Calliope Designs workers.

Kaplan felt that Strawbridge and Sanchez also allowed their personal feelings to affect the contract negotiations. Intimately involved in the day-to-day workers' organizing efforts, they lacked the emotional detachment necessary to negotiate objectively and successfully. Usually, union organizers do not represent the workers at the bargaining table. Union lawyers or other union members execute that difficult task.

38 PSGF union organizing efforts will be cover in Part 2.
In Herring's opinion, contract negotiations were problematic:

One of the things that was a weakness in SCIU leadership was that they did not take organized coherent steps in collective bargaining. In other words, they did not put out a coherent union package proposal. Alicia and Newman were not well prepared for the negotiation sessions at all. I would try to get Alicia and Newman to meet to decide on tactics at the bargaining table.

But those tactics, to the extent we ever agreed on any ahead of time, were rarely implemented. Alicia would go off on a tangent at the bargaining table, or the company would do something provocative--maybe the company lawyer would say something insulting...In collective bargaining you are trying to figure out what is really important for your people and what is really important to "the enemy," to the company.40

The absence of professionalism at the negotiating table affected the workers severely. The empowerment they had gained during the two previous months of organizing appeared to dissipate as workers felt less and less power in negotiations. The workers' representatives on the negotiating committee did not take an active role in the negotiations. They did not fully understand the process of writing a contract and negotiating it at the table with the employer. A few of them indicated that they had not understood the process clearly because they had not had enough preparation before the negotiating meetings. The meetings were not fully interpreted for them. This problem could have been

40 Herring, 24 October 1995, pp. 9-10.
avoided by contracting with a professional interpreter, thus allowing the workers to have a complete and coherent understanding of the negotiations. Obviously, contracting with a professional interpreter would have been the responsibility of the union organizers. However, Sanchez and Strawbridge did not consider it a priority because Sanchez is bilingual. She could briefly summarize the discussions for the workers present at the negotiating table.

Ochoa was part of the negotiating committee, and she mentioned her dissatisfaction with the format of the contract negotiations. She also mentioned that Mr. Eddy did not talk directly to the workers during the negotiating meetings. Even if one of the workers gathered his or her courage to ask him a direct question, Mr. Eddy would always look at Strawbridge and Sanchez when he spoke, and never made eye contact with the workers. Sanchez and Strawbridge could have empowered the workers by asking Mr. Eddy to answer the worker's question by looking and talking directly to the worker. Ochoa discussed how lost she felt when the meeting was partially summarized in Spanish by Sanchez.41

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During the interviewing process, two of the workers were reminded of the contract negotiations, and after some time to re-collect, they discussed their discontent with the process. They had hoped for an agreement that would benefit everybody--workers and employer. However, after three months of frustrating negotiations, workers considered the idea of going on strike. Workers felt frustrated because they could not reach an agreement with Mr. Eddy regarding piece rate wages, paid vacation, sick leave, health insurance, and union security. As mentioned previously, workers felt indispensable to the company and believed that a strike would last only a few days and would achieve the desired results.

In a meeting at the beginning of July 1988, the Calliope Designs workers voted to go on strike. The vote was twenty-one in favor, with no workers voting against or even speaking against a strike. They had made a decision and now they would live with it.

Because the union was new, workers did not yet have a strike fund. Workers did not take this into account, perhaps because they
expected to be back to work within a few days. None of them had ever been part of a strike, and they did not know what a strike entailed.

In retrospect, workers seemed to regret the decision they had made to go on strike. A few stated that they were told but not fully informed about the problems they might face. According to Sanchez, she and Strawbridge fully informed workers about the consequences of a strike. Furthermore, she stated that she and Strawbridge tried to convinced the workers to seek other alternatives to a strike.\textsuperscript{42}

However, Martha Jimenez stated that Sanchez and Strawbridge did not provide the proper information about a strike and its consequences:

\begin{quote}
In reality they [Strawbridge and Sanchez] never told us. Well, I think that not even they had a notion. I am very sure that they did not have a notion, or experience, about union organizing. They did not have a clue of what they were doing. In other words, they just told us: 'Organize yourselves, and it is going to be very easy...' "A piece of cake." That is why the night we voted to go on strike Newman and Alicia thought that everything was going to be solved overnight, and the \textit{companeros} (fellow workers) were thinking in similar ways.\textsuperscript{43}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{42} Sanchez, 11 October 1995, pp. 2-3.
\textsuperscript{43} Martha Jimenez, interview by author, 13 December 1995, tape recording, Santa Rosa, California, transcription, p. 9.
Workers discussed openly how naive they were when they voted to go on strike. During the interviews, several of the workers spoke of two major mistakes: that they should not have gone on strike, and that if they were going to strike, they should have chosen to go out during the high-production months. Ochoa felt that both workers and union organizers were responsible for going on strike at that time:

Alicia and Newman said that we could boycott the stores where the patron sold his merchandise. We were not able to do anything like that. Another thing is that we did not have support from the state, and I do not remember us discussing it. The support I am talking about is that the strike needed to be respected. There was no law to stop the patron from hiring other people to replace us. Truthfully speaking, we did not think seriously about all those things before going on strike. The strike was presented to us as a "piece of cake." I assumed they [Sanchez and Strawbridge] had experience in those matters. They had to explain all those issues more in detail. But, as I told you, one of the reasons was because I personally had never been in a union, much less participated in a strike. And I think it was similar for the majority of my companeros. We thought that we were going to control the situation very fast. They may have seen us very enthusiastic, but they should have said that was not the right time to go on strike.

44 Ochoa is referring to a Mexican Labor Law that closes the factory during the time workers are on strike. This practice is not common in the United States.

Sanchez stated that she and Strawbridge discussed at length the strike with the workers.

I do not think the workers [truly understood the implications of a strike]. Nobody actually knows what a strike is like and whether you can sustain it. I mean, if you are a worker, if you never had gone out on strike, you have no idea what it entails, and these workers themselves did not know. Newman and I were really worried because we kept thinking that a strike can create disunity, divide us, and make us break up as a union. We were shocked at the unity and solidarity, the love that these twenty-one workers had for each other.46

On July 13, 1988, workers at Calliope Designs went out on strike, alleging that Mr Eddy had not been negotiating in good faith and had canceled a negotiation session the night before. As SCIU was a new and independent union, the workers were without a strike fund. Workers and union organizers mobilized a strike campaign to seek monetary and moral support from other unions, peace organizations and the community. Workers also organized a media committee to keep the press informed about the strike.

The Press Democrat played an active role by keeping the community informed of the union organizing efforts of the Mexican workers of Sonoma County Industrial Union. On Thursday, July 14, 1988, The Press Democrat reported that twenty workers were

46 Sanchez, 11 October 1996, p. 3.
picketing outside Calliope Designs on Wednesday morning. Mrs. Eddy expressed surprise by the strike because "no one [had] said anything to us about a strike or a reason to strike." However, workers stated that Mr. Eddy's refusal to bargain in good faith and treat Mexican workers with respect prompted the strike. Holanda Arzate, a worker, told the newsman that "they just don't take us seriously. They think that what we want will never be accomplished and what they'd like to do is break the union." 47

Workers told The Press Democrat that wages were very low, that a person working there for six years was earning less than $6.00 an hour, and that they were underpaid and mistreated because they were Mexicans. Conversely, Mr. Eddy stated that workers earned between $6.00 and $12.00 an hour, depending on the kind of wage-piece rate or hourly rate—and that workers earned the same regardless of their ethnic background. 48

Neil Herring spoke of his concerns regarding the workers' decision to strike:

During the first few days of the strike, workers believed that the strike would not be long. They had not an inflated idea, but a strong idea of [their] indispensability at Calliope Designs, and this is always a dangerous misconception.49

Workers and union organizers did not consider several key factors. Lupe Farias, the person who prepared the dough for the ornaments, did not go on strike. This was particularly damaging to the strikers' effort, because Farias was the only worker who knew how to prepare the dough. Because Farias did not go on strike, Mr. Eddy did not have to halt operations to train a new person. Farias also recruited a few Mexicans to work during the strike. The recruitment of Mexicans as replacement workers was difficult for several of the striking workers to accept. They expected their countrymen to support them in their struggle, and they felt betrayed by their own. After all, the strikers reasoned, they were all in this struggle to improve the treatment of Mexicans in the workplace.50

It became clear to the workers that Mr. Eddy had no intention of speeding up the negotiations. Mr. Eddy hired two security guards to keep workers off the premises.

49 Herring, 24 October 1995, p. 11.
Additionally, Mr. Eddy had made preparations for the possibility of a strike or another work stoppage. Prior to the strike, he had rehired a few workers who had left the company and who were not necessarily in favor of the union. After the strike started, Mr. Eddy moved quickly to hire replacement workers, primarily of Asian descent. This action was a definite setback for the strikers. The Mexican workers on strike felt that the Asian strike breakers were damaging to the strike. The Asian workers did not speak fluent enough English to communicate with union members and supporters about what the Mexican workers were fighting for. According to Kaplan, the practice of hiring people of different ethnic background as strike breakers has been commonly used by employers who are not interested in negotiating in good faith.\(^5^1\)

In *The Press Democrat*, July 27, 1988, picketing workers said the company was "wasting their money on replacement workers"

\(^5^1\) Herring, 24 October 1995. pp. 11-12.
who are too inexperienced to make dough ornaments requiring much patience and skill. Workers...said the company brought in seven workers...to help replace the twenty employees...on strike."

Facing these new challenges, workers resorted to a fast and wide mobilization to gain support for their struggle. With the aid of other unions and the Anglo and Mexican communities, workers organized different committees to plan and implement their strike strategies. One committee worked on a campaign to collect funds to support the strikers. The members of this committee went to several churches, including Community Baptist Church, Resurrection Catholic Church, and the Unitarian Fellowship, among others. Workers sent delegates to talk to different unions, such as the Letter Carriers, Carpenters, and Service Employees International Union. They also participated in community events, so that they could inform people about the strike and solicit donations for their economic survival. Money and food were

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collected and distributed equitably among workers. Couples who both worked at Calliope Designs received a greater share because they did not have any other source of income.

Another committee solicited support for the picket line. Workers needed help during the picketing because they were covering two entrances, and because as the strike continued, many workers took temporary jobs in other places. Some of the senior workers, among them Pulido, Ochoa and Martinez, felt angry at workers who actively sought other jobs because that left only a few of them covering the picket line most of the time. According to these three women, the workers who abandoned the picket line were the very people who had pushed the idea of a strike. Therefore, those remaining were forced to solicit community people to staff the picket line and talk to the strike breakers, press, and other union supporters who were interested in their struggle.

The "Friday Lunches" committee continued operating as before the strike. The committee brought dozens of people to rally
outside Calliope Designs every Friday at noon where food or money was distributed to workers. During these "Friday Lunches," supporters were given an update on the negotiations.

Workers vividly described the hardships they endured during the strike. All of them remembered that the strike brought financial difficulties and family problems and also posed risks to future employment.

Pulido described her dissatisfaction with some of her coworkers and the strikebreakers. According to Pulido, workers who took other jobs were not united with the workers who fully participated in the strike for the three months that it lasted.

I had to go to the picket line at certain hours because that was my shift. And some other compañeras [coworkers] asked me to cover their shifts in addition to mine, because they said they had to do errands. They were all mentiras [lies]. They did not have any errands to do. They went to work, and that was not okay. I did not know anything about a strike before. All of the sudden, since you do not know anything, you get involved. And, when you want to leave, you want to get out, you cannot: it is like everything. We all suffered. We did not know. We were blind. We did not know what to do. I [also] felt very upset at the scabs because they knew that we were outside for them, too. Because, in the future we could all benefit. And yet, they always worked...I did not feel okay for them to work because that was my job; they were taking it away from me.\footnote{Pulido, 13 January 1996, pp. 6-7.}
Adolfina Hernandez worked in the shipping department, and she remembers the difficulties she experienced during the strike. The strike was the catalyst for radical changes in her life, leading to a divorce and a severe workplace injury. On the positive side, she felt empowered by the unity of Mexicans and Anglos working together for a common goal.

We had an idea of what to expect because Newman and Alicia told us about the strike. But it is never the same to be told as to experience it, because to live a strike experience was very difficult. The first and most important aspect, at least for me, was the division among Mexican workers, our own Raza [Race]...I felt horrible to see Mexicans going in to work for the patron while we were on strike. The second aspect was the fact that we had to be on the picket line every day...To support ourselves we did many things. We even made cheese to sell among friends. I even went to the flea market in Napa with cans to ask people for donations. That means we were boteando. We also went to different businesses, like Food 4 Less and Lucky stores.

We felt bad to see the scabs going in to work...I was very angry because we were struggling to improve the working conditions, and it was awful to see Latinas working there.

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54 *Boteando* is a practice commonly used in Mexico by workers on strike. Strikes are respected in Mexico. The factory closes down, and no strike breakers are allowed to work. Workers on strike form small groups of two or three, and go to popular places to inform people about their strike and to request donations to support the strike. People place their donations in sealed cans that are then taken to the union hall to be added to the general fund.

Martinez described the events of the union organizing in tears. For her the strike was a time of hardship and pain. Martinez was detained during the strike because, according to Mr. Eddy, she had physically assaulted the woman security guard with her picket sign. Martinez was taken into custody by the police. Workers, union organizers and community members paid for her bail, and she was released a few hours later. Although she was seen as a heroine in the struggle, she did not see herself as one. On the contrary, Martinez felt devastated. Her life had been marked by the police arrest. Her cultural values had taught her that a woman never sets foot in prison, and she had gone against her own values and her husband's.

Economically we did a little bad. I do not complain a lot because my husband was working at that time and that helped me...Morale-wise, [the strike] was bad in terms of what happened to me...I never had an experience like that. In terms of the incident with the security guard...I was detained and taken over there [Jail].

Even though I was taken to jail, I was on the picket-line the next day, with more conviction and anger. So, I was there all day. That same day he [Mr. Eddy] came out and saw me...He threw all my things in a box into the street [and fired me]...I remember clearly that this incident happened on August 12, 1988. I went back to the picket line on August 13, 1988.

The union sued Calliope Designs for firing me during the
strike, and months later, after people went back to work, the NLRB told the patron that he did not have the right to fire me.\(^{56}\)

Herring explained the tactics used by the company to fire Martinez, and how the strike was turned into an unfair labor practice strike.

The firing of Paulina Martinez was simply a company tactic. You cannot fire strikers. You can fire a striker who engages in strike misconduct—that means violence or intimidation, or interfering with the scabs going to work, that kind of thing. But you cannot fire the strikers. If you do not fire them, they have the right to go back to work when the strike is over...There are two kinds of strikes under the United States law. One is what is called the unfair labor practice strike. So an unfair labor practice strike is one that is caused or aggravated by the company committing an unfair labor practice, which is defined in the NLRB Act. And, the usual unfair labor practice committed during the strike would be not bargaining in good faith, or firing strikers unlawfully. So, if the union has been able to say...[that this is what it is], and I think we actually did this, [then we are able] to convert the strike into an unfair labor practice strike after Paulina was fired. Why? Because the key difference is that if you are in an unfair labor practice strike, you cannot be permanently replaced. When you say 'I am ready to go back to work', you must be given your job back. If you are a non-unfair labor practice striker, which the law calls an economic striker, then you can be permanently replaced. So, if the company claims it has replaced you with a scab, if you are on an economic strike, and you say: 'Okay, the strike is over, I am reporting for work', they can say: 'You do not have a job any more.'\(^{57}\)

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\(^{56}\) Martinez, 27 April 1996, pp. 6-10.

Workers stayed on strike for two more months without any progress in negotiations with Mr. Eddy. Although workers received considerable support from the community, peace groups, and other unions, they were growing increasingly desperate for money.

At the beginning of October 1988, workers received the final contract offer from Calliope Designs. They were told that if they did not return to work by October 13, 1988, the twenty striking workers would be permanently replaced.

On October 14, 1988, The Press Democrat did an extensive report on Calliope Designs' final contract proposal to the workers.

Union representatives maintain the company's last offer reduced piece rates for the most popular crafts. But Mike Merrill, attorney for Calliope Designs said the workers will work under the pay and benefit provisions of the last offer, even though the union refused to accept the proposal. He said seven of the twenty replacement workers [hired] on a temporary basis by Calliope Designs will be retained to handle the company's growing work load. Neil Herring, attorney for SCIU, said workers realized the replacement workers would carry Calliope Designs through the Christmas business crunch. Herring said the Calliope Designs package offered no union security, recognition of seniority, or health insurance for dependents.  

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Herring observed during his interview that workers felt a strong sense of support for each other inside the plant.

I think their morale was pretty high [when they returned to work]. I think they felt proud that they had survived for three months without wages, and involved the community in their support. They were not intimidated, they did not go back with their heads down. They had developed good leadership, they were good strong people. They also functioned effectively as job stewards. So when anything happened, they would stop work, go with the employee into the office of the boss and confront the boss. Usually not just one worker, but two or three.59

Although workers felt pride that they had sustained a three-month long struggle, they also experienced feelings of defeat because they had not accomplished all of their goals with the strike. It was difficult returning to work without a signed union contract after their difficult struggle. They gained only minimal improvements in benefits and did not gain any substantial wage raise, which was one of the main reasons they went on strike.

Ochoa described with sadness in her face the first day she went back to work after the strike.

The first day of work was terrible for me. I even got sick. My stomach hurt all day because the atmosphere was horrible. The scabs, supervisors, and workers who did not participate in the strike gave us dirty looks. Nobody talked to us...In reality when I went back to work, I was very proud.

because I went back to work. I did not take anybody’s work away...I remember that they [scabs] left one side of the shop for us. I did not care about that. On the contrary, I felt fine [not being with them].

Pulido felt that the strike forced Mr. Eddy to close the company and move it to Tijuana, Mexico. Pulido also discussed the lack of trust she felt for two fellow workers after they returned to work. For her, the most difficult issue to accept during the strike and afterwards was feeling deserted by her fellow Mexican workers. She could not find an explanation for their behavior. After all, according to Pulido, they were all "brothers and sisters united in the same cause."  

We did not win anything with the strike. The only thing that we won was the moody faces we saw every day. We may have won something but not better pay. However, the patrones did not reduce our wages anymore...It is true that we won our jobs back when the strike was over, and we had to leave after a few years because the work ended. We left because the patron moved the shop to Tijuana. Alicia [Sanchez] used to say that they may move the shop a few miles. But look how far they moved! So what did we win? 

Hernandez had a difficult time returning to work after the strike. Shortly after she returned, a severe accident at work left

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Hernandez disabled. She never returned to work at Calliope Designs following the accident. During her interview, she spoke of the strike and the accident.

On one side, we were happy because we won. We defeated the patron, and we had shown to him that we were not as stupid as he thought...When I went back to work, I had an accident three days later. The supervisor and I were supplying orders. I needed one box from the higher shelves. Well, he just pulled the box in the middle and the box that was on top fell on my head. I had no room to move to. There was only space for the ladder and myself. The box weighed 40 pounds. So when it landed on me, I fell with my legs wide open...I was taken to the hospital, and he was removed from his job immediately...I had to go to court to fight for my case. After a long struggle, I received $10,000.00 as a compensation for my accident.63

After Hernandez' accident, Mr. Eddy laid off four of the most active workers for a month because he said that they did not follow the company's disciplinary rules. The union could not do anything to help the workers return to their jobs.64 These events marked the beginning of the demise of the union inside the plant and among its general membership.

In August of 1993 when Calliope Designs moved to Tijuana, only seven of the twenty-two workers who had organized still worked for Calliope Designs, and only two remained formally

63 Hernandez, 5 December 1995, pp. 5-7.
64 Pulido, 13 January 1996, p. 12.
active in the union. Jimenez described the surprise she received when she reported to work on a Monday in August of 1993 and was told that Calliope Designs was closing.

They did not tell us about closing. We just got to work on a Monday, and they gave us a recommendation letter and our checks...We had an idea that they were going to close the factory...but they did not tell us when they were going to close.⁶⁵

Pulido felt that all the years she worked for Calliope Designs were in vain, because she did not receive any severance compensation when Calliope Designs closed.

One day when we arrived at work, there was no masa. So, we wondered: 'How are we going to work?' Lupe was just laughing. When the patron arrived he told us: 'This is it.' He told us to pick up our belongings, making sure that we did not take anything that did not belong to us. We had our own equipment for working. We either had bought it there or someplace else. So, we picked up our stuff and left...After all the work I did for the union and the patron, I did not receive any kind of compensation for the eighteen years that I worked for Calliope Designs. Nothing. They said that they did not have the means, and the union could not do anything because it had been gone for one year. In reality, the union had not been active since the end of 1990.⁶⁶

2. Point St. George Fisheries.

The union organizing efforts of the workers at Calliope Designs provided an example to other Latino workers in Sonoma County. In February 1988, during the Calliope Designs workers' campaign for representation, workers at Point St. George Fisheries (PSGF) approached Sanchez and Strawbridge to help them organize a campaign for union representation at their worksite.

PSGF processed fish and shellfish for a broad restaurant and grocery store market in Northern California and in some parts of Oregon. This company, owned by Americans of Portuguese descent, had originated in Sonoma County and expanded its business to San Francisco and to Oregon in the 1970's. Its Santa Rosa plant, which was the main one, was located on Sebastopol Road and employed over 170 Mexican and a few Central American workers. The supervisory positions were held by Anglos and Portuguese.

According to Sanchez, the workers at the San Francisco and Oregon plants were unionized, and the workers at the Santa Rosa plant lacked union representation. Sanchez explains that the vast majority of workers in the Santa Rosa plant were Mexicans, and she views the absence of union representation as a racial problem...
because the employer did not want to pay the Mexican workers wages that were comparable to those paid in his two other plants.

All the plants [in San Francisco and Oregon] were unionized under the Food and Commercial Workers Union, except for this one [Santa Rosa]. One of the things that was interesting was that the majority of the workers in the Oregon and San Francisco plants were predominately white. And at this plant, which was the main one here in Santa Rosa for processing, or the largest I should say, the workers were predominately Mexican. That was, [perhaps] one of the reasons that the company in many ways was racist. They did not want to allow Mexican workers to unionize because they did not want to pay them the same wages.¹

The large majority of the workers earned an hourly wage and rotated through jobs according to the fish season. They cracked and cleaned crabs, peeled shrimp, or packed and stored fish in the freezers. Only a small group of women worked filleting fish. The twenty *fileteras* earned a piece rate wage. They were the best paid workers in the plant and enjoyed higher status than the rest of the workers. Only the most qualified women became *fileteras*, and trained for approximately one year before they were put on the filleting fish line. The *fileteras* worked at the conveyor belt that carried the fish. A male worker threw the fish at the beginning of

the conveyor belt, and the fileteras took the fish from the belt to fillet it. The senior fileteras were at the beginning of the belt, so they had the choice of the best fish to fillet. As those were the larger fish, they were able to fillet more pounds, thereby earning more money at piece rate wages. The less senior fileteras filleted the fish the senior fileteras left on the band. Often that fish was small and took longer to fillet. They had to work fast because the male worker was constantly putting fish on the belt.2

According to the workers, working conditions at PSGF were very poor. Workers did not receive health benefits, vacation or sick days. A large majority of them earned the minimum wage and worked under unsafe and unhealthy circumstances. Because this was a fish-processing plant, the law required that workers wear protective gear--rubber boots, plastic or cloth gloves, hair caps, and plastic or cloth aprons--provided by the employer. PSGF had been violating these laws for years by charging the workers for protective gear and by permitting many employees to work without the proper gear.3 Many workers who could not afford to buy the

2 Celia Mendoza, interview by author, 16 September 1996, Santa Rosa, California,
3 Neil Herring, interview by author, 24 October 1995, tape recording, Santa Rosa, California, transcription, p. 8.
necessary protective gear were allowed by their supervisors to work in their regular clothing and street shoes.\textsuperscript{4} These and other workplace violations caused many accidents.\textsuperscript{5} During the interviews, workers unanimously expressed concerns about the safety and hygiene of the plant. Workers related that they had sought workers' compensation when they had been involved in accidents at work. Gomez states that prior to the union organizing in 1988, the violations and unsafe working conditions were never reported to the CAL-OSHA or to the city of Santa Rosa.\textsuperscript{6}

Julieta Martin Del Campo confirmed that the charges of unsafe working conditions and the company's failure to provide protective gear were accurate. According to her, the plant was dirty. There was not good sanitation or safe working conditions. The company did not have good floor mats to protect us from falling down. Instead, they spread salt on the floors. The company did not provide protective gear, and many people did not have the means to buy boots, aprons,
gloves, and hair nets. Many people were often allowed to work in regular shoes. There were not strict rules in terms of protective gear.\textsuperscript{7}

Agueda Gomez explained that workers had accidents constantly and that the company would fire people who reported any accidents to workers' compensation authorities.

\textit{[In terms of accidents], if we cut ourselves at work, and we did not work for a few days, they did not cover any wages or expenses. Unless a person cut herself very, very bad. Then she was taken to the hospital. If the cut was not too bad, she went to the office and they put a bandaid and a plastic protector on the finger, and she was sent back to work...There were people there [PSGF] who got cut, or fell down and hurt themselves very badly. And they [owners] got very upset because the workers complained to workers' compensation, and they [owners] denied it. They said that nothing happened there, that nobody hurt himself there. So the burden of proof lay on the worker...If workers made a report to Workers' Compensation, they had to leave [the company] permanently because the \textit{[patrones]} did not take them back. That is why workers seldom reported their accidents.\textsuperscript{8}}

In addition to the unsafe working conditions, workers also experienced physical and verbal abuse at the plant. Workers described how a "woman supervisor hit several workers with a

\textsuperscript{7} Del Campo, 16 March 1996, p. 4.  
\textsuperscript{8} Gomez, 1 November 1995, p. 4.
knife sharpener and another supervisor cursed and insulted workers in both English and Spanish.  

These allegedly terrible working conditions prompted workers to sign union cards passed among the workers by some of the fileteras. Even though fileteras were the best paid workers at PSGF, they initiated the union organizing. The plant manager, Les Amundsen, had begun a night filetera shift at the end of 1987. By March 1988, the night shift was doing most of the filleting production. Therefore, fileteras from the day shift were losing working hours, despite the fact that they were the senior fileteras. Before the fileteras approached SCIU for assistance, Celia Mendoza, the senior filetera, attempted to convince Amundsen to close the filetera night shift. However, Amundsen refused to close it, arguing that he needed the night shift to supply restaurants in the early morning.

Alvaro Delgado, "Fish Plant Protesters Cry Racism," Staff Writer, The Press Democrat, Santa Rosa, California, 5 April 1988, Sec. A, pp. 1 and 10. Several workers indicated during the interviews that the supervisors had a tendency to swear to workers. Mostly to female workers.

Celia Mendoza, interview by author, 24 February 1996, tape recording, Santa Rosa, California, transcription, pp 1-3.
Mendoza emigrated from Michoacan, Mexico when she was in her early twenties, and she started working at PSGF in June 1968. Mendoza worked peeling shrimp and cleaning crab for ten years. In 1978, she was promoted to a filetera position. Although she was happy to be promoted after ten years of peeling shrimp, she was also apprehensive because she was the first Mexican to hold a filetera position. Mendoza described the discriminatory treatment she received from the other fileteras who were second generation Italians. According to Mendoza, Italians did not like to have a Mexican working side by side with them. Italian and Portuguese workers had become accustomed to seeing the few Mexicans there doing the hardest and worst paid jobs. Clearly, Italian and Portuguese workers dominated the unskilled labor force at PSGF throughout the 1950s. However, as the Italian and Portuguese workers began to retire during the 1960's, Mexicans dominated the labor force at PSGF. In 1968, when Mendoza started working at PSGF, the discrimination against Mexicans was already terrible. Mexicans, she stated, were called "wetbacks" and "people without
papers* [undocumented] by everyone. Italian, American Indian, and Portuguese workers were always screaming that they were going to call immigration on the Mexicans.\textsuperscript{11}

Describing the harsh conditions Mexicans worked under at PSGF in Santa Rosa during the 1960's and the 1970's, Mendoza recalled that "Mexicans always had the worst jobs. Mexican men had to pack frozen fish all day long, and Mexican women helped the men pack the frozen fish, all for minimum wage!"\textsuperscript{12} During the 1980's, she said, working conditions worsened.

We started organizing a union because at that time, the working conditions went from bad to worse, and they were not giving us work. They [the owners] made a \textit{filetera} night shift, and I told them not to make the night shift because there was not enough work for everyone [meaning \textit{fileteras}]. I defended myself, because I have always defended myself, right? Then Les Amundsen, the general manager, told me; 'Do not worry, Celia, there will be enough work for everyone.' But, it was not true. Soon enough, he was giving more work to the night shift than to us, the ones who had more seniority!...I think that shift had been operating close to a year before we finally did anything...When we, the \textit{fileteras} started organizing ourselves, the majority of the workers did not want to be part of it. They questioned our motives for organizing a union, since we made more money than anyone else...After a while, everybody saw that it was good for us and started signing the union cards.

\textsuperscript{11} Mendoza, 24 February 1996, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{12} Mendoza, 24 February 1996, pp. 6-8.
My sister Angelica [a worker from Calliope Designs] told me: 'Look, go and talk to this man.' So, I went and talked to Newman and Alicia. I do not remember the month, but I remember that there were many of us.¹³

At the beginning of March 1988, a filetera committee held a meeting with Sanchez and Strawbridge, requesting their assistance to organize a union for the workers at PSGF. Sanchez and Strawbridge explained to the fileteras the strategic steps they needed to take to form a union: the majority of the workers had to sign a petition for collective bargaining representation before they could risk holding any meetings with larger groups.

According to Sanchez, this small group of workers returned in a few days with over one hundred signatures, petitioning for SCIU representation.¹⁴ Sanchez and Strawbridge organized a meeting in the middle of March with most of the workers who signed the petition.

There were about, I would say, eighty workers that [attended the meeting]. [Prior to this meeting] some of the [fileteras] had already collected petitions because...we had already met with a small committee, a group of five women at PSGF. And we said to them, if there is interest, we would like for you to have the rest of the workers sign this petition. So the women collected all the signatures, a lot of signatures. Then we called our first meeting. It seemed like

eighty workers came, and they brought their families along. We told them that it is a long struggle, but things get changed. Then we said, you have to love each other, you have to accept each others' differences. Once you start the struggle, you have to finish it. So people did that and they said yes that they will do it. Then we all started clapping and cheering.\textsuperscript{15}

Francisca Bejar remembers the first meeting PSGF workers held with Sanchez and Strawbridge. She discussed the hope that workers felt as a result of having somebody willing to help them in their organizing efforts. Bejar became one of the leaders in their struggle, and she feels very thankful that the union helped the workers gain some respect from their supervisors. Bejar had first worked peeling shrimp, and had been working as a filetera for PSGF for nine years when they began their organizing effort in 1988.

Bejar described the way workers organized their first large meeting. Workers, she explained, did not need letters, phone calls or reminders about the meeting, but rather learned about it by "word of mouth." The filetera committee informed people about the time and date of the meeting with Sanchez and Strawbridge, and people told each other.

\textsuperscript{15} Sanchez, 17 October 1995, p. 3.
[We knew about the meeting] by word of mouth. We were told about Alicia and Newman....[and] we knew about the workers at Calliope Designs because they were already organized...The beautiful thing about it is that many people came. We all had hoped to have some changes...I remember we were a lot of workers because we could hardly fit in that big room...[and] I remember that everybody came out from that meeting with our spirits very high. Everybody felt that we were stepping into paradise. But they told us that it was not going to be an easy organizing effort...And as they said, the struggle was very hard...Alicia and Newman told us everything about organizing ourselves. They explained to us very well that if we had over fifty percent of the votes for a union, we won. But if not, we lose. That is why we had to talk very well with all the workers about the union...I remember they explained all of that. Yes I do remember everything!16

This meeting not only generated a network of resources among Mexicans in Sonoma County, but also began another equally important development. It unified local labor, peace and community forces in a common cause: the struggle for fair treatment of the Mexican workers at PSGF and Calliope Designs. Under the direction of the union organizers and help from community volunteers, workers began an effort to blend together labor, peace and community support.

Workers at PSGF took a different approach than those at Calliope Designs to inform the management of their desire to form

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16 Francisca Bejar, interview by author, 17 February 1996, tape recording, Santa Rosa, California, transcription, pp. 4-6.
a union. With the support of labor, peace and community activists, Sanchez and Strawbridge led a mass rally outside PSGF. Their goal was to press Les Amundsen, PSGF general manager, to recognize SCIU as the representative of the workers in collective bargaining.

On Monday, April 4, 1988 at noon time, between three and four hundred people\(^\text{17}\) rallied outside the PSGF plant. After everyone had gathered, Sanchez and Strawbridge delivered speeches about the poor working conditions Mexicans were experiencing at that factory. Since Amundsen would not come out to speak with the workers, Sanchez led the marchers into the plant, stopping right outside the main office to request that Amundsen recognize the union.\(^\text{18}\) She described in detail their first action.

The first action that I remember was that we had to ask for recognition from the company, voluntary recognition. We were hoping that the company would recognize the union without having to go through an election. So we planned a big rally at PSGF and that is when we asked a lot of people to come. We ended up having maybe three-hundred or four-hundred people...It was around noon or so, we did a noon rally, and we went into the plant, walked inside the plant, all of us, community and workers. and we asked for recognition. That was the first time the employer actually knew that there

\(^{17}\) Sanchez, 17 October 1995, p. 2.

\(^{18}\) Sanchez, 17 October 1995, pp. 3-4.
was an organizing drive going on. And of course they said no, they did not want to recognize it. And that they had to talk to their lawyers and all of that.\textsuperscript{19}

\textit{The Press Democrat} reported that prior to the rally, eighty percent of the approximately two hundred workers had signed authorization cards indicating a desire for union representation.\textsuperscript{20} Only thirty percent of the workers needed to sign the petition cards in order to have an election for union representation.\textsuperscript{21}

\textit{The Press Democrat} also reported the presence of several unions at that rally in support of the workers. Included were the Teamsters, Sonoma County Organization of Public Employees, and the Carpenters Union, among others. Representatives of Resurrection Catholic Church and the Community Baptist Church also attended the rally. Pledge for Peace in Central America, the Rainbow Coalition, and the Peace and Justice Center were also there to advocate for equal rights for Mexican workers. The Peace and Freedom Party was represented by Eric Fried, who was running for Congress.\textsuperscript{22}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{19} Sanchez, 17 October 1995, pp. 3-4.
\textsuperscript{21} Delgado, \textit{The Press Democrat}. Sec. A, pp. 1 and 17.
\textsuperscript{22} Delgado, \textit{The Press Democrat}. Sec. A, pp. 1 and 17.
\end{flushleft}
The Press Democrat interviewed the company manager, Les Amundsen, who refused to meet with the workers because "they were making too much noise," and that was not the way he conducted his meetings. Amundsen said that he needed to contact his lawyers before he could talk to the workers. PSGF workers, on the other hand, felt the urge to inform the community through press coverage of their rally that PSGF employees worked under difficult and unsafe conditions and that they were treated "very badly, as if they were slaves."23

PSGF workers started their campaign for an election for collective bargaining representation immediately after the April, 1988 rally. In comparison with their fellow workers from Calliope Designs, PSGF workers utilized more sophisticated organizing tactics for the union election. For the first few days of their campaign, workers wore hand-made buttons in the plant, but they soon collected funds to purchase manufactured buttons and blue tee-shirts. Both the buttons and the shirts displayed a logo of a large fish comprised of many small fish, eating a smaller (company) fish. The slogan read: Organize/Organize.

According to interviews with PSGF workers, Herring, and Sanchez, the workers' efforts on behalf of a union organizing campaign surprised the company. Salvador Bejar stated that supervisors and managers pictured Mexican workers as people without ambition or education, whose organizing efforts would fade away a few days after the April rally.\textsuperscript{24} Bejar also mentioned that management felt that way because prior to this organizing effort, there had been two other times when workers had attempted to organize a union.\textsuperscript{25}

Mendoza stated that prior to 1988, she did not know much about unions. However, in 1988, she was determined to continue the struggle to the end. Mendoza indeed, became the leader of the PSGF union.

I do not remember the year it happened. His name was Tony, and he was from El Salvador. He was bilingual, and he was a supervisor. Even though he was a supervisor, he wanted to organize the workers...he said that we 'should have a union' and gave us [some] cards to sign. He tried to support us; he wanted us to become aware of our rights. However, when management found out, he was fired. There was also another occasion between 1971 and 1972. A Portuguese woman wanted to organize a union, and she was also fired.

\textsuperscript{24} Salvador Bejar, interview by author, 17 February 1996, tape recording, Santa Rosa, California, transcription, p. 6.  
\textsuperscript{25} Bejar, Salvador, 17 February 1996, p. 6.
After that, we did not do anything....We started organizing a union [in 1988] because, at that time, the working conditions went from bad to worse, and they were not giving us work.26

Workers held weekly meetings, where they would discuss their organizing tactics and then break into committee meetings to discuss the details of their struggle. With the assistance of community, peace and other union activists, they kept the press informed, and visited workers at their homes to talk about the benefits of organizing a union.

During their campaign, PSGF workers exhibited strong determination to win union representation. They risked their jobs, their livelihood, and in many cases their residence in the United States. Many of these workers were in the process of becoming permanent residents under the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986.

IRCA provided permanent residency to over two million Mexicans who were living in the United States without documents. In the process, over one million Mexicans became legal residents in California. Before IRCA was passed in 1986, more than sixty percent of Mexicans in the United States were undocumented.

IRCA allowed two groups of undocumented Mexicans to achieve legal status. The first group needed to prove that they had been living continuously in the United States since 1982. From this group, over fifty percent of the legalized Mexicans were from California. The second group of immigrants were special agricultural workers (SAWs), who became documented by showing that they had worked in seasonal agricultural work for ninety days between May 1985 and May 1986. Over eighty-one percent of the workers achieving documented status were Mexican. California accounted for over fifty-three percent of the legalized immigrants nationally.27

In contrast with their counterparts from Calliope Designs, PSGF workers were willing to take more risks in the form of political action. Their organizing was directed toward a wider political arena than that of the workers at Calliope Designs. During and after the campaign for collective bargaining, the

workers of PSGF organized mass marches and picket lines and involved other union, peace and community activists at a much higher level.

Sanchez believes that the reason the PSGF workers were more political than those at Calliope Designs was because the large majority of them came from the state of Michoacan. That state, she said, has historically been more political than any of the other states in Northwest Mexico. The most prominent leftist figure in Mexico, Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, is from that state.

I think probably PSGF [workers had more political and union organizing experience]. And the reason is because most of the workers came from [the] state of Michoacan. Michoacan, historically, has been more political [and] more militant...It seemed [to me] that this particular group of people, from that state were much more active. They were willing to take more risks than the [workers at Calliope Designs]...I just think that is because they came from the State of Michoacan...I also found out that in that group [PSGF], many of them did not even know how to read and write in Spanish, and there were a lot more people that were not educated, formal education...It seemed [to me] that people at Calliope Designs had picked up skills here, and they also came from states in Mexico that were not in as much political unrest as the people from PSGF who came from the state of Michoacan. Even though they started the union, they were not as militant...It seemed [to me] that overall PSGF workers were more militant.28

Shortly after the PSGF workers opened their campaign for the union, the company laid off twenty fileteras—the most active union members—and fifty fish packers. In total, the company laid off seventy workers during April-June, 1988. Amundsen sent the fish and shellfish to the two other plants in Oregon and Oakland.29

Faced with this problem, workers undertook two forms of action. First, workers organized picket lines outside the PSGF premises. Second, the union filed an unfair labor practice charge with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). Herring discussed the steps the union took to file the charge.

In April of 1988 the union filed an unfair labor practice charge saying that they were threatening the employees with plant closure and diversion of work because of their organizing activities. So that was one charge, with the NLRB in San Francisco. In August the regional office of the Board issued a complaint, an unfair labor practice complaint for that. For threatening employees with decrease of work because of their union activities, and telling the employees that they may close the Santa Rosa plant because of their union activities...The hearing was scheduled for October 18, 1988 on that charge and then it eventually got settled...And then, it seems to me that after the union won the election, there were layoffs, and we suspected that the reason work was slow was because they were farming out some of their processing to other plants on the coast...That charge was settled on the basis of the company posting a notice in

29 Neil Herring, interview by author, 24 October 1995, tape recording, Santa Rosa, California, transcription, p. 5.
January 1989 saying that they would not try to interfere with the workers' rights to organize by threatening to decrease the work or close the plant.\textsuperscript{30}

Mendoza believes that the company wanted to scare the workers, to dissuade them from organizing the union. She said that in addition to laying off workers, management tried to intimidate workers by interrogating some, pulling union buttons from their shirts, and offering her and some other worker better jobs. Mendoza said that Amundsen called her into his office and requested that she stop the union organizing. He promised her that in exchange, the company would cancel the \textit{filetera} night shift, and the senior \textit{fileteras} would have their working hours back. He also offered her a supervisory position. "Twenty years after I had been working for that place, he offered me a better position. I could not believe it,"\textsuperscript{31} she said. Mendoza refused to accept any of Amundsen's offerings, and she reported her conversation with Amundsen to the union members.

Despite continuing harassment by the company, the NLRB held the representation election on Monday, June 17, 1988, at 10:00 a.m. That morning PSGF attempted to persuade the Board to postpone

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\item[\textsuperscript{30}] Herring, 24 October 1995, p. 5.
\item[\textsuperscript{31}] Mendoza, 24 February 1996, p. 6.
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the election, arguing that Portuguese workers did not speak Spanish and that the signs directing workers to the voting booths were only in English and Spanish.\footnote{United States of America Before The National Labor Relations Board Region 20. Point Saint George Fisheries, Employer, and Sonoma County Industrial Union, Petitioner. (Case 20-RC-16255) Notice Of Hearing On Employer's Objections to Elections. Santa Rosa, California. August 22, 24, 25, 26, 30, 31 September 1, 2, 20, 22, 26, and 27, 1988. p. 6} The NLRB officials conducting the election reminded PSGF management that the company had not informed the NLRB previously of any special language needs, and that the two workers of Portuguese descent who were eligible to vote both spoke fluent English.\footnote{United States of America, p. 7.}

The NLRB officials tallied the ballots. One hundred seventy-eight workers voted. One hundred thirty-seven cast ballots for SCIU, and twenty cast ballots against. There were two void ballots and nineteen challenged ballots.\footnote{United States of America, p. 7.} The election marked an overwhelming victory for the workers at PSGF, who celebrated with a party that evening.

Francisca Bejar remembers the election day clearly. For her, winning the election was a triumph because Mexicans had proven to be strong in their belief in equal rights. She also explained that
"the Portuguese forewoman took some women out to lunch, according to her, to celebrate the anticipated defeat of the union. And what a surprise! We won by a big margin." 

On June 24, 1988, Littler, Mendelson, Fastiff and Tichy, attorneys representing PSGF, filed sixty objections to the election with the NLRB. The company objected to the manner in which the NLRB officers had conducted the election and requested that NLRB set aside the election. A hearing on PSGF's objections began on August 10, 1988, in Santa Rosa, California. Barbara D. Davison, NLRB hearing officer, presided over the objections hearing, which lasted twelve days.

Although Strawbridge and Sanchez had prepared the workers for the possibility of PSGF challenging the election, workers felt disappointed because they had envisioned an immediate change after the election. Workers had a difficult time understanding a law that permitted PSGF to object to an election that, according to them, was fair and legal. Everyone involved, workers, union organizers, and community members, hoped that the company would recognize the union and negotiate a contract.

Sanchez recalled the election and its aftermath:

The results of the election were incredible: one hundred thirty-seven workers voted for the union, and twenty voted against. It was a beautiful election result...The company hired Littler and Mendelson, Attorneys at Law. This is a very anti-union law firm. The minute we found out the company had hired them, we told the workers that the company was going to challenge the election. And they did it, they filed over sixty objections!

Even though you tell a worker ahead of time that the company is going to object and appeal to the legal system, I think all of us, including ourselves as organizers, we still hoped that the company would not object to the election. And that at the last minute they will not take us down this long road.36

Herring explained the complexity of the hearing process.

Despite its unfamiliarity to the workers, they did their best to understand and participate in the legal process.

Workers were very upset and puzzled about a legal system that would say you win an election by that huge a majority, but you cannot start negotiating for a contract, or let's say, the company does not have to start negotiating...I am sure I told the workers that even after the objections were resolved, if the company wanted to delay it, they could have delayed bargaining with the union for as long as two years.37

Mendoza and Salvador Bejar were union witnesses at the hearing, and they recalled their experiences with pride in their

37 Herring, 24 October 1995, pp. 3-4.
faces. According to Mendoza and Bejar, the company lawyers hoped

to intimidate them by asking the same question several times.

Mendoza described the nervousness she felt during the

hearing process.

The company hired the best anti-union law firm from
San Francisco to challenge the election. The Company
complained about the conduct of the election. They said that
there was nobody who spoke Portuguese fluently, and that the
Portuguese speaking workers did not have representation.
However, Portuguese people held supervisor or management
jobs, and they could not vote. I was accused of forcing people
to vote in favor of the union. They argued that I forced them
when people signed the petition form. The company also
accused us of fundraising money to give it to people, so that
they would vote for us.

When I went to testify, I was very nervous--well, not
that much. I had never been involved in something like that,
so I was afraid and kept wondering what the lawyers were
going to ask me. Well, yes, they asked questions, but that
was not so bad. I calmed myself down.38

Bejar laughed at the accusations the company made against
him and his co-workers and described his experience during the

hearing.

I remember I went to testify. Myself and other workers
were accused of pressuring other workers to vote for the
union. We were also accused of saying things to the Anglo
and Portuguese supervisors. I remember now. Yes, as I told
you previously. We used to get together and talk among
ourselves. So I went to testify. We were approximately ten
people, men and women. The company lawyers asked us

questions about the campaign for the union election, then Mr. Neil Herring, our lawyer, asked us different questions. At the end we proved that we did not insult nor threaten the white and Portuguese supervisors.39

The union organized a daily "campaign for justice" picket-line outside the front gates of PSGF, because two weeks after the election the company laid off twenty-seven workers and drastically reduced the working hours of the rest. In a two week period, most of the workers only worked ten to fifteen hours. Gomez stated that the lack of work was unusual for PSGF workers, because there were all kinds of fish to clean and pack all year round. Winter was the crab season, spring was the dover and rock cod season. Summer and fall were the shrimp and salmon season. Gomez recalled that the workers believed the lack of work resulted from the company's decision to send fish to other plants for processing.40

Kaplan remembers the support workers received from the community during the noontime picket lines. He also remembers the efforts community members and workers made to inform people about their "campaign for justice."41

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40 Gomez, 1 November 1995, p. 6.
41 Paul Kaplan, interview by author, 28 January 1996, tape recording, Dillon Beach, California, transcription. p. 4.
There were a series of noontime rallies at the plant gate that we used to build support, and there was a big effort to distribute leaflets after the election to all sections of the community, urging them to put pressure on the company to recognize the union. I remember going to churches with workers to talk to the churches about the campaign for justice...As I recall, the campaign started in the middle of the summer...We had to stop it because it was not productive, and the workers organized other activities.42

It was a difficult time for PSGF workers. They had won an election for collective bargaining representation, yet they could not negotiate a labor contract with the company. Rumors began to spread among the workers that the company was planning to declare bankruptcy because of the union organizing.43 These rumors worried the workers, because the company was simultaneously sending fish to Bodega Bay, Oakland and Oregon to be processed and packed.44 Workers became desperate for work and money. To overcome their desperate situation and to keep up their morale, workers organized themselves into different committees to appeal to the community for moral and financial support.

The large majority of the workers continued to work for a few hours a week and also received food and money--distributed in

equal shares--from a fund that other unions, churches, peace
groups and community members donated to the workers' cause.\textsuperscript{45}
However, those donations were not sufficient to support
approximately two hundred workers. Therefore, some workers
decided to apply for unemployment benefits, others took part time
employment in other factories, and a few left the company.
According to Del Campo, she had to leave because she was a single
mother of three, and she had many expenses to cover. Del Campo
began to commute to San Francisco to work for other fish
processing companies. She explained that she felt bad about
abandoning the struggle, because she had been one of the main
organizers. She later recognized that she had held expectations
that there would be fast solutions to the workers' problems, and
that was not what happened at PSGF.\textsuperscript{46}

Sanchez and Strawbridge explained to the workers that
following the hearing, the NLRB would take a few months to rule on
certification of the union as the collective bargaining
representative. Consequently, SCIU needed to find new avenues to
assist and protect workers inside the plant. Although SCIU was not
\textsuperscript{45} Sanchez, 17 October 1995, p. 13.
\textsuperscript{46} Del Campo, 16 March 1996, p. 8.
yet certified to represent the workers in the bargaining unit,

Herring's expertise in labor laws allowed him to battle the company on legal grounds, even without a union. His first action in this regard was to charge the company with unfair labor practices for threatening the workers with closing the plant.

That charge was settled on the basis of the company posting notices in January 1989, saying that they would not try to interfere with the workers' rights to organize by threatening to decrease the work or close the plant...

In the meantime the union could not get the company to bargain about a contract, but the union did take on the workers' grievances informally. The company would not admit openly it was recognizing the union, but there were many contacts between the company and us, and things happened, you know. Some of our people were disciplined and we would complain to the company as a union, or we would file unfair labor practice charges. Or, we would fight their unemployment cases. I mean, there were a lot of attempts to intimidate the people that the company identified as the organizers.47

In November 1988, Herring took a gigantic step by suing PSGF on behalf of the union for unlawfully charging the workers for their protective gear. Under Herring's representation, workers at PSGF filed a class action complaint in the Sonoma County Superior Court in early November 1988, claiming that the company had violated

state laws by charging workers the cost of their protective gear.48
According to the suit, over two hundred workers were unlawfully charged for protective gloves, aprons, and boots.

A story in The Press Democrat dated Tuesday, November 15, 1988 reported that Herring filed the suit against the company because employers are responsible for furnishing workers with protective gear that is necessary to insure safe working conditions. According to the article, company lawyers argued that aprons, boots, and gloves do not qualify as "protective equipment" under federal and state laws. "General manager Les Amundsen said the company offers these items at cost to workers who wish to wear them."49 In response, workers stated that handling, filleting and packing of fish forces them to work in cold, wet conditions that require protective clothes. "We have no choice. It is very necessary to use protective gear, or we will get wet and pricked by fish bones,' said Celia Mendoza, a fishery worker for twenty-one years."50 Herring requested that the company repay $200 per

49 Delgado, 15 November 1988, Sec. B. pp. 3-4.
person to more than two hundred workers who had worked at PSGF during the three years prior to November, 1988.  

Mendoza reported that new workers were told on their first day of work that they should bring their own protective gear or buy it from the company. In addition to protective gear (all but gloves), the company also charged *fileteras* for the knife sharpeners they needed to perform their job duties. Below is a list of the amounts workers were charged.

- **Aprons:** $3 to $13 depending on the quality
- **Boots:** $15
- **Gloves:** $1.35 to $2 depending on the quality
- **Knives:** $6 for men who do heavy butcher work
- **Sharpeners:** $15 to $18 each.

Herring recalls the suit with a sparkle in his eyes. He was doing whatever he could to keep the workers' morale high.

We had this other law suit for the safety equipment, forcing the company to provide gloves, boots and aprons. In other words, the company would require the workers to wear that stuff, but would make them pay for it. And I think also, there was a question about knives that the workers had to use, maybe they had to use their own knives. So we sued the company in Superior Court for all the workers, and we ended up settling with the company basically with them giving us what we had sued for, that they will pay for all this

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protective gear. And I think it was a morale booster because, you know, the workers saw that it was possible to take the company on. Again the problem is, the more success you have in the legal arena, the less people rely on their own power.54

The lawsuit was a victory for the workers when it was finally settled in late April, 1990. The company agreed to pay $19,000 to workers who had paid for their own protective gear since January 1986. Seven hundred workers were paid between twenty-five cents and $200.00, depending on how much they had worked since January 1986, and what types of protective gear they had bought from the company between the years 1986 and 1990.55

The Press Democrat reported on May 1, 1990 that the company management did not acknowledge that they had violated government laws by charging workers for the protective gear. However, the paper said that the company "decided to settle the lawsuit to avoid two or three years of litigation that would have been far more expensive than reimbursement money for work gear."56

On June 15, 1989, PSGF workers were filled with happiness when Sanchez and Strawbridge informed them that the NLRB in

54 Herring, 24 October 1995, p. 8.
Washington had ruled in favor of certifying SCIU as the collective bargaining representative of the PSGF workers. Sanchez recalls that day with excitement because workers had to wait one year to be certified and, according to her, workers were becoming anxious about certification.

It took a long time, months. And then finally we received the decision from the NLRB saying that we were certified...If the company had decided to challenge the NLRB decision, the next recourse the company had was to appeal to the Ninth Circuit Court...[However], a year later we were officially certified by the Washington DC office...and the NLRB’s ruling said: "This election was valid; the union is certified." The company then would decide whether to appeal to the courts...So at that time, the company came back and said that they will not appeal any further and requested us to sit down and talk about negotiation.57

Mendoza and Francisca Bejar remember the hardships they experienced between June 17, 1988 and June 15, 1989 while waiting for SCIU to be recognized by the NLRB as the bargaining representative for the workers. For them and many other workers that year was very difficult because they did not have much work, and people's energy and hopes were fading away.

Bejar felt that since she had started the struggle, she had to finish it.

Many people felt like everything we had hoped for and battled for was evaporating. They felt like they did not want to continue in the struggle. Can you imagine? Some of the active people were fired. Those who stayed working, their working hours were tremendously reduced. It became very hard to continue in the struggle. But more than anything else we had the spirit to continue the struggle. If we had agreed from the beginning not to stop, we had to continue. Even the people that got fired, they continued coming to support us in the meetings, marches, and the picket lines. We were extremely happy when we were certified after a year of hard struggle.\textsuperscript{58}

Mendoza felt that workers who did not understand the struggle held her (and others) responsible for the lack of work, and these workers questioned the importance of the union election.

It took exactly a year for the NLRB to decide about the union. We continued working--less work, of course, the company continued taking the fish someplace else. The workers' morale was low...Some people got desperate because of the lack of work. I did not get frustrated, I understood the problems of organizing a union. One time, I got very upset because one of the Portuguese supervisors told me: "See what you won with your union? All you have achieved is losing work." I became very upset and I said to her: "That is okay, I am not so interested in working. What I am interested in is to stopping the bad treatment towards Mexicans, and for you to stop doing things to people that you are not supposed to do. We finally grew tired of your bad treatment." After the union election, they all had to stop mistreating us because they knew that Neil [Herring] would protect us. That was a big victory for us. And I always reminded the workers and supervisors of that.\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{58} Francisca Bejar, 17 February 1996, p. 12.
At the end of June 1989, the company decided not to appeal to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals to overrule the NLRB decision that certified SCIU as the bargaining agent for the workers at PSGF. Coincidentally, in the same week as the NLRB ruling, the company laid off twenty-seven men who drove trucks and worked on machines. The company attributed the layoffs to "lack of work."60

The lawyers representing PSGF contacted SCIU to begin negotiations for a labor contract. This was the beginning of a laborious negotiation process: nearly three years passed before a contract was finally signed on February 22, 1991.

Herring believes that SCIU should have been prepared with a contract proposal long before the lawyers for PSGF approached SCIU with their contract proposal. He saw a weakness in SCIU leadership because when PSGF presented its first proposal, Sanchez and Strawbridge reacted to it but did not have a draft proposal ready to counter the company's proposal.

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As the company's contract proposal thus became the basis for the negotiations, some workers were not offered substantial vacation, holidays, sick leave and insurance gains. A terrible irony resulted for the fileteras under this initial contract proposal: the fileteras had initiated the union organizing, and yet they did not receive full health insurance benefits because the contract stipulated that only full-time workers could receive full health benefits.

Mendoza explained that she felt abandoned because she had struggled for the union so long, and after waiting almost twenty years for substantial benefits, she did not receive any of the negotiated benefits.

It was the fileteras who started the organizing, and the fileteras could not receive health insurance coverage because [we] did not work more than thirty hours a week. A person who worked full time received full health insurance coverage. The people who did not work full time had to pay part of their health insurance. Fileteras were the only people who did not work full time. And the union did not do anything to protect us. I hardly remember, but no, nothing.61

Sanchez recalls the negotiations with PSGF, and she stated that negotiations took close to three years because the company

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61 Celia Mendoza, interview by author, 16 March 1996, tape recording, Santa Rosa, California, transcription, p. 2.
did not want to agree to union security, and it was offering very little to the workers.

It was at the beginning of 1990(sic)\textsuperscript{62} when we signed the contract. We had been negotiating with them for a while, but the only thing they were giving was a small increase in wages. The wages were not raised very high. But they gave some insurance to the workers and some holidays. I think the hardest aspect in the contract was that workers could not keep the union security and we lost that one. Because of the absence of union security, we started collecting signatures to do a boycott, and we presented thousands of signatures to the company. We informed them that if they did not sign a contract with union security, we would soon start a boycott on their fish...Finally it was close to three years later that the company agreed to sign a contract. On that day that we signed the contract, as I mentioned, all the people who were present were all women.

And we signed it, and we voted to have a contract. So three years later, we voted among the workers, whether they accepted or not the contract. It was not the best contract because they had to come from nothing to just a little [wage raise], not as much as we would have liked to have gotten them. But they obtained vacation, holidays and had some insurance.\textsuperscript{63}

In three years of struggling for a better contract for the workers, SCIU never instituted a serious boycott in restaurants and food stores that sold PSGF products. The community petitions were never used for any boycotting purpose, and the two other

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{62} Sanchez stated in her interview that the contract was signed in 1990. Union files showed that the contract was signed on February 22, 1991.

\end{flushright}
PSGF plants were never boycotted. All the plans Sanchez described above never matured because according to Sanchez, the company started negotiating just about the time Sanchez was ready to launch the boycott.

The contract ratified by PSGF workers in 1991 was not much different from the initial contract proposal in 1989. The senior workers did not obtain any kind of seniority-based job security. The fileteras did not receive substantial health benefits. The company was asking them to pay almost eighty percent of their health insurance coverage.64

In September 1993, two years after the contract was signed, the company closed its doors, leaving over one hundred workers without any pension or compensation for the years they had worked for PSGF. With a combination of sadness and bitterness, Mendoza described the lack of support from the union when the plant closed. Mendoza discussed her experiences at that time.

The company was closed in September of 1993. After we affiliated with SEIU--well, I had been working for Point Saint George Fisheries for close to twenty-five years--I wanted to talk to the union representative. I do not remember his name right now --a man from San Francisco because, after affiliation, our representation was moved to

64 Mendoza, 16 March 1996, pp. 3-5.
San Francisco. So, I called him to find out what I could do to protect myself when the company closed down. I had been working for many years, and I did not receive any compensation from them. However, I was never able to see him. I do not remember when Alicia left the union. She did not have a meeting with us, nor explain to us the reasons for her leaving SCIU. We only knew about it when we called her to find out about what kind of rights we had with PSGF closing. She told us that she was going to be working in Oakland and that we had been transferred to the Janitors Local in San Francisco. Alicia told us that she was not going to be our union representative because she was transferred to another local.

I was unable to find another job, and I was left without retirement and a job. A month later one of the foremen called me to ask me to work for them in a new company they had opened in Bodega Bay. So I agreed and it is where I am now working. We are six fileteras and four packers.65

3. Affiliation and subsequent demise of SCIU

At the beginning of 1989, Strawbridge and Sanchez, the union organizers, decided to seek affiliation with Service Employees International Union (SEIU), Local 707. According to Sanchez, she and Strawbridge had grown exhausted from holding two full time jobs. In addition to the countless hours they were spending as unpaid organizers for SCIU, Sanchez worked full time for California Human Development Corporation (CHDC), and Strawbridge was conducting wage-and-hour investigations for local attorneys.\(^1\)

Sanchez explained that after several discussions between her and Strawbridge, he initiated the steps towards affiliation with SEIU and shortly after, SEIU requested an affiliation proposal from Strawbridge.\(^2\) SEIU requested that the proposal include winning a contract with Point St. George Fisheries (PSGF), a commitment that SCIU start collecting dues, and additionally, the prompt

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\(^1\) Alicia Sanchez, interview by author, 17 October 1995, tape recording, Sebastopol, California, transcription, p. 16.

\(^2\) Alicia Sanchez, interview by author, 6 November, 1995, tape recording, Sebastopol, California, transcription, p. 1.
organizing of other plants. The proposal was presented on February 2, 1989. Both parties signed the affiliation agreement on March 26, 1989.3

After presenting the proposal to SEIU, Sanchez and Strawbridge met with the rank and file to inform the workers of the SCIU-SEIU affiliation proposal. From the beginning of SCIU's formation, workers had resisted the idea of affiliation with other unions, because they wanted to form their own Latino union and to maintain their autonomy. However, when Sanchez and Strawbridge presented the proposal to the workers, they agreed to hold a secret ballot election. According to Sanchez, a Catholic priest conducted the election. The results showed that workers were overwhelmingly in favor of affiliation.4 Eighty-four workers voted for affiliation, three against, and one vote was challenged.5, 6

SCIU's decision to affiliate brought immediate benefits to the union. SEIU offered two paid union organizing positions to

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4 Sanchez, 6 November 1995, p. 1.  
5 SCIU archives, February 16 and 17, 1989.  
6 During the interviewing process, Sanchez indicated that a Catholic priest conducted the election for affiliation. The union files showed that a community member, Lucy Forrest, counted the votes and stated with her signature that the number of votes described above were counted by her.
SCIU. According to Sanchez, workers overwhelmingly decided that
those two paid positions should go to her and Strawbridge because
they had been donating their time to the union for over a year.7

Affiliation benefited Sanchez and Strawbridge because they
began earning an income from their union organizing work. This
enabled them to leave their other full-time jobs and, according to
Sanchez, to focus their efforts only on SCIU.

In addition to the creation of paid positions for Strawbridge
and Sanchez, SCIU made another important structural change at
this time. Sanchez stated that soon after affiliation the decision
was made to elect two executive boards, one representing the
Calliope Designs workers and the other representing PSGF workers,
to help insure SCIU's autonomy in decision making.8

The decision to affiliate reflected a change in the SCIU
membership's attitude toward affiliation. Approximately one year
earlier, in early February 1988, the workers from Calliope Designs
had expressed strong opposition to affiliating to other unions.
During the interviewing process, the workers' answers were not
clear about their reasons for remaining independent, or for

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7 Sanchez, pp. 4-5
8 Sanchez, 6 November 1995, p. 1.
subsequently affiliating. Furthermore, when they were questioned about the election process and the subsequent affiliation, none of the workers from either plant remembered the process of affiliation or the formation of the boards.

It is difficult to assess why workers did not remember the affiliation process. A possible explanation for the Calliope Designs workers would be that they were overwhelmed by the problems they were still having at work. They were working without a contract, and the union seemed unable to assist them in their struggles with the company owners. PSGF workers were similarly absorbed at their workplace: participating in weekly picket lines outside the plant, waiting for union certification from the NLRB, and in the process of winning a major suit against the company on the issue of protective gear.

In early 1990, several workers from the Calistoga Bottling Company in Napa County approached Sanchez and Strawbridge, seeking help in organizing a union at their worksite. A large majority of people working there were Mexicans, and they felt they