

Draft

The Spinach Riot: When Stockton Workers Declared War on the Bosses

Stockton's working class once risked their lives for higher wages. Many today do not know this history exists.

Working class struggle runs deep in Stockton. On April 23, 1937, about 3,000 cannery workers and comrades launched what became known as the "Spinach Riot" strike. These workers confronted their bosses, police forces, and California's governor to demand better wages, safer working conditions, and basic dignity at work

The 1937 Spinach Riot Strike

Cannery workers endured 12-hour shifts, exposure to toxic chemicals, and low wages of 35 cents per hour (about \$7.89 today). When management fired four union organizers, over 500 workers walked out during peak spinach season, a strategic move that halted production and hurt profits.

Workers' demands for fair pay, safety, and representation met violent suppression. Local police deputized 1,200 armed civilians who attacked strikers with pickaxes and tear gas. The brutal clash left one worker dead and overwhelmed hospitals with injuries.

The strike secured some concessions: shorter hours and improved conditions. But independent union recognition, a critical demand for lasting worker power, was abandoned by union leadership.

Modern Parallels

San Joaquin County workers in warehousing, agriculture, and service sectors face similar struggles today: stagnant wages, physically demanding labor, and corporate profits that dwarf worker compensation.

Employers and political elites still weaponize fear to divide us. This mirrors tactics used by the Associated Farmers of California, who ran "Red Scare" campaigns portraying workers as communist threats when their actual demands centered on workplace democracy, dignity, and respect.

A Complicated Victory

The strike demonstrated the power of collective action, yet many workers felt betrayed when union leaders accepted a deal without securing formal union recognition. This failure left workers vulnerable to future setbacks.

Betrayal

History repeats itself. Corporations discourage unionization through intimidation. Politicians make empty promises while cashing checks from the same interests workers fight against. Many abandon their collective power, placing faith in money-backed candidates like Michael Tubbs or wealthy politicians like Jason Lee. But experience proves this approach fails working people. These tactics never deliver meaningful, lasting change for us.

Learning From History

Real power emerges when workers organize collectively. The 1937 strikers knew this when they faced violence in pursuit of better lives for themselves and their families. Their courage shows what becomes possible when working people unite.

Building Working Power

Working Class Unity builds upon this history. We make no promises of easy solutions. We do not claim we will fix everything for you.

We offer something more valuable: a democratic organization built by and for working people through which we fight for and win our demands together.

The 1937 strikers risked their lives for collective dignity. Their legacy lives on in today's workplace conversations about fair pay, tenant union meetings, and workers' efforts to challenge powerful interests like Grupe, Spanos, and Amazon.

The working people of San Joaquin County have a history of solidarity against tremendous odds. Together, we continue the fight. Join us.

2025-14-1 WCU Article Workshop

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Topic: Working Class History of Local Labor - Stockton Cannery Strike of 1937 / Spinach Riot

Target audience: the average person

What is the point?:

- comparing state Stockton of warehouse work to the canneries in Stockton during the 1930s
- Portrayed as a win when it wasn't actually a victory for the working class
 - Canneries reopened 5 days later and workers felt sold out by their leadership
 - Tie it back to general assumption that unions are good, but having union leadership can lead to massive failures
- Your boss will use scare tactics to intimidate you
- Newson's recent actions
- Red Scare
- Relating it to current experiences, when wages were low, and communism (collective labor) was vilified, then it is not too much to say that we have the same conditions and the same demands today as things have not improved.

Possible Conclusions:

- No one is going to come in to save you or fix your problems, it is work that we have to do together
 - Keep advocating with yourself and your community
- Join WCU
 - We should promote ourselves at the end; talk about how we are organizing collectively, democratically, for the first time in a long time, returning to our roots as not bitches.
 - People used to risk their lives for a better wage. Now we bend the knee to internet celebrities who promise to drop their pocket change on our heads.
 - So if you want to have a different outcome or you want to change the status quo, then we need to organize differently or else we will get more of the same.
 - Even though this strike wasn't a victory for workers, it did make business people in Stockton and elsewhere, including the governor, scared of the potential of the working class mobilizing. Nowadays, people with any amount of wealth and power aren't afraid of the working class because they've been very successful in divorcing us from our communities, our histories, any semblance of an idea that things could get better. Rediscovering local histories like this cannery strike is a good first step in reclaiming our lives and envisioning better possibilities for what Stockton and the broader San Joaquin area could look like.

References:

- “Remembering the spinach riot” (April 21, 2002) by Michael Fitzgerald
https://web.archive.org/web/20141220055018/http://www.recordnet.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20020421/A_NEWS/304219924
 - Current Article:
<https://www.recordnet.com/story/news/2002/04/21/remembering-spinach-riot/50758562007/>
 - 2002 column from *The Record* with a brief description of the cannery strike in remembrance of its 65th anniversary at the time.
- *Competing Voices: A Critical History of Stockton* (2019) by Ronald Eugene Isetti
 - I own a copy of the first edition, while Reilly owns a copy of the second edition from 2021. General history book on Stockton that only has a few pages about the cannery strike, but could prove a useful resource for other topics we may want to research/write about later and to possibly track down other sources. If anyone is interested, I'd be willing to let them borrow my copy of this book. **(Pete)**
- *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California* (1939) by Carey McWilliams
<https://archive.org/details/factoriesinfield00mcwirich/mode/2up>
 - Isetti seems to mainly rely on journalist Carey McWilliams' account on the 1937 Stockton Cannery Strike, more or less summarizing what McWilliams reported at the time. Mention of the strike in McWilliams' book is in Chapter 14: “The Rise of Farm Fascism,” which similarly to Kevin Starr in chapter six of *Endangered Dreams*, relates the Stockton strike as an example of farmers and growers associations employing authoritarian tactics to prevent further labor organizing in key agricultural areas in California. McWilliams also mentions in Chapter 15: “The Drive for Unionization” some of the details as to how the Stockton cannery workers were sold out by the higher-ups in the California division of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), which held a moderate, anti-Communist stance. McWilliams gets the date of the riot wrong as April 24th, 1937, when it was the day before. Isetti doesn't correct this mistake in at least the first edition of his book, doesn't seem to consult Gerald A. Rose's articles, and condenses/omits some of the details in the timeline to the strike (focusing only on the riot part when the strike had been going on for a week prior to the riot), which makes Isetti's account of this strike the least reliable, imho. Mainly using Rose and Starr to reconstruct what happened. McWilliams' account is the closest contemporary record I've found on what occurred when it happened, along with various newspaper headlines. **(Pete)**
- “Stockton in the 1930's” by Rachel Kanner in *San Joaquin Magazine*
<https://web.archive.org/web/20120504113629/https://sanjoaquinmagazine.com/sanjoaquin/2012/05/story1.php>
 - Red scare reference in this article “The largest strike occurred in San Francisco in 1933 with effects felt across the state. It began as a labor strike by the Longshoremen but turned into a general, 4-day long, citywide strike. Though quickly settled, it led to the hatred and distrust of labor unions and a communist scare. Many labor movements were seen as a communist threat to the American way of life

and thus despised, most likely because communist groups would back the strikes, as it coincided with their socialist agendas. In 1934, the California State Chamber of Commerce and California Farm Bureau created an emergency organization to prevent further strikes”

- “The organization included such groups as the American Legion and Associated Farmers of California. The Associated Farmers created a statewide strategy while the American Legion acted as the foot soldiers with the self-created title, "Strikebreaking Deputies." The organizations became known by the labor parties as the "farm fascists" and were not seen as effective. In many instances the extreme tactics used to break the strikes were considered brutal and harsh.”
- **Section about the strike**
- Stockton in the thirties experienced a multitude of strikes, the most prominent occurring in 1937. The Agriculture Workers Union and the workers at five canneries wanted higher pay, better conditions, and a closed shop promise (only hired union members). The canneries argued they would only give a wage raise. The strike started at the beginning of spinach season. "Scabs" or non-union workers were escorted past the picket line by deputies (if they were lucky) and many times faced a hail storm of rocks and bricks. The canneries closed, tired of the violence, and urged Sheriff Harvey Odell to act. Odell recruited 700 citizens, mostly farmers and nonunion workers. To prepare them Odell had a truckload of pick axes shaved down at the handles "for easy swinging." On April 23, the riot began. It started at 8:50 a.m. when a spinach truck tried to enter the Stockton Food Products Cannery on Waterloo. A mob of 850 picketers attacked the truck trying every method to prevent it from entering the facility. From the roof, tear and vomit gas was fired on the ground. Using the confusion, the truck was able to enter while the picketers threw rocks and bricks, injuring many. The battle raged for three hours with this back and forth violence. Finally the canneries agreed to close the facilities and negotiations began. The riot caused one death and an overflow of injured people at Stockton's hospitals.

Possible References

(<https://chat.workingclassunity.com/t/wip-wcu-article-01-local-working-class-history/308/5>) :

The March Inland: The Stockton Cannery Strike of 1937, by Gerald A. Rose - Three part series published by the Historical Society of Southern California in 1972 - Part 2 contains the most relevant facts for our article. If you don't want to read all three, Part 2 is the most essential. Part 1 talks more about internal union politics in California that informed the strike while Part 3 talks more about the aftermath of the strike.

PDFs for all three articles are available in links **(Pete)**

- <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41170399> (Part 1)
- <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41170435> (Part 2)
- <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41170423> (Part 3)
- In Ronald Isetti's history book *Competing Voices*, one source he uses is Kevin Starr's *Endangered Dreams: The Great Depression in California* (1996). In the sixth chapter of *Endangered Dreams*, "The Empire Strikes Back: Testing the Fascist Alternative", Starr talks about the Stockton Cannery Strike in the wider context of how canner and grower associations like the California Processors and Growers retaliated against emerging union organizing in the 1930s. Apparently, the same tactics used against the strikers in Stockton, such as the deputizing and arming of a "citizens brigade" by local police and the use of tear gas grenades, were used in a lettuce strike in Salinas in 1936, the year prior. **(Pete)**

Endangered dreams : Kevin Starr : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive

- [“The Spinach Riot” \(video\). 1937 | Records of Rights](#) (Found this in November when Reilly initially asked me to do some digging about this strike. It’s a 40-second newsreel clip that filmed some of the riot that broke out. As Chris mentioned, it would be nice to potentially screenshot something from this as an image to use. Will try to find some other potential visuals for the article that I’ll leave in another tab on this doc. - **Pete**)

Newspaper Articles

- [San Pedro News Pilot 23 April 1937 — California Digital Newspaper Collection](#) (Mentions that women were among some of the strikers/supporters injured, which a criticism of mine in Isetti’s book is that he didn’t make it clear as to the racial/gender demographics of the cannery workers. Starr’s book makes it clearer that canneries often had both women and men workers.)
- <https://web.archive.org/web/20240824022100/https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=2245&dat=19370427&id=ugxFAAAIIBAJ&pg=5995,6556047> (Lodi News Sentinel, April 27th, 1937)

Possible future stuff?:

<https://littlemanila.org/stockton-connection-to-delano-grape-strike>

Visuals



- Picture as tear gas was starting to be used against strikers and their supporters in the crowd.
- Found first photo through the Walter P. Reuther Library at Wayne State University which has an image gallery of early 20th-century strikes. [Walter P. Reuther Library \(6591\) Strikes, Violence, Cannery Workers, Stockton, California, 1937](#)

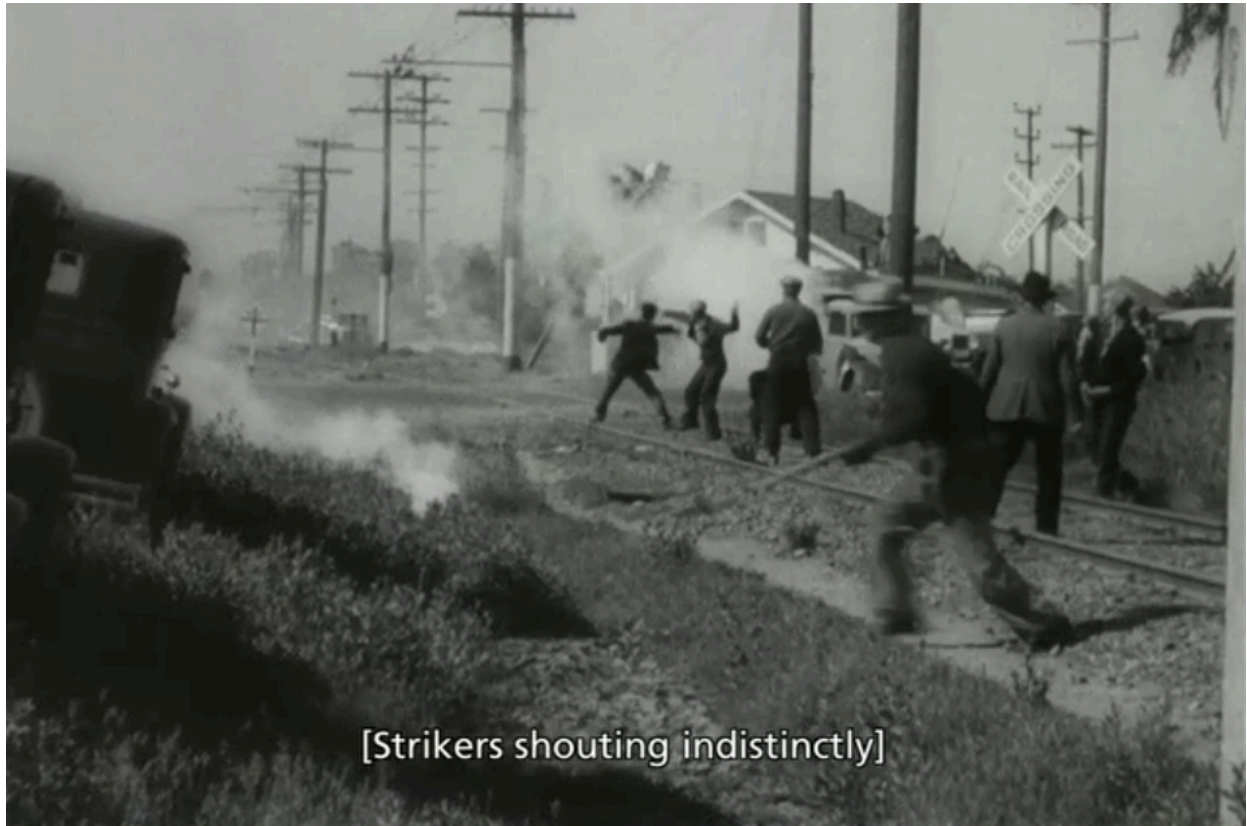
Screenshots From News Reel

- As per Chris's suggestion, here are some screenshots from an old newsreel using filmed footage of the riot.



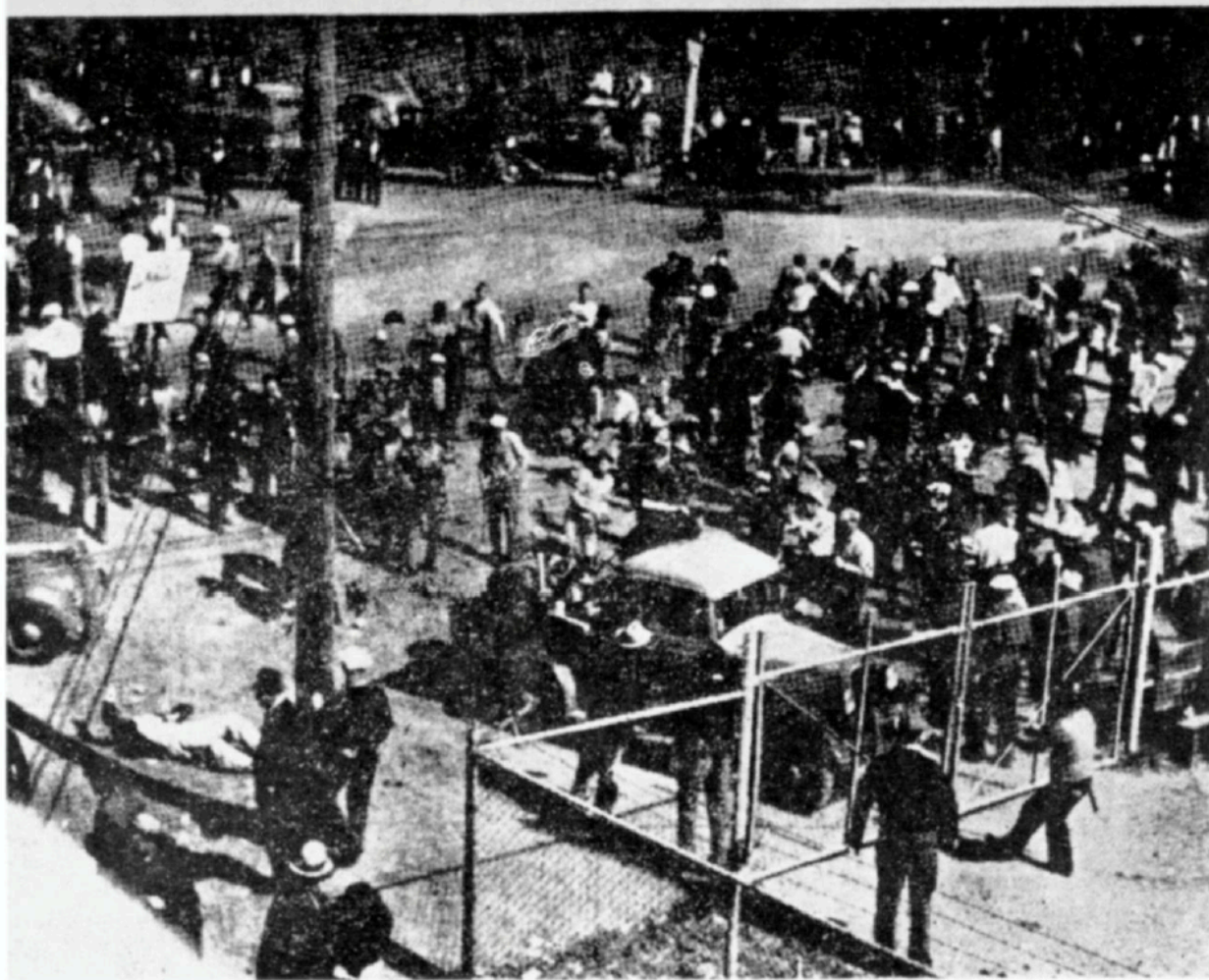


Disorder, swift and violent,



- Gerald A. Rose's three-part series on the cannery strike conveniently includes some old newspaper images in the third part. Not to sound morbid, but was looking for some of the more graphic pictures taken and Rose includes a couple. Some are on the blurrier side, so not sure if we really want to use them.

STOCKTON, SAN JOAQUIN COUNTY, CALIFORNIA — FRIDAY, APRIL 23, 1937



HIGHWAY PATROL BATTLES PICKETS



Cruising automobile loads of State Highway Patrol officers like this bore the brunt of the clash between peace officers and union pickets in Stockton's cannery strikes yesterday. Bricks thrown at the

officers' automobile littered the road where they stopped to disperse pickets with tear gas guns.—*Tribune photo.*

When Violence Broke Out On Stockton Front



These action pictures taken at Stockton this morning show (top) striking cannery workers running towards a cannery, workers hurling rocks and missiles as they go, and (lower) highway patrolmen and deputy sheriffs running

from the cannery to meet the strikers. A few minutes after the violence broke out the patrolmen opened a tear gas attack against the strikers. The strikers were beaten back temporarily.

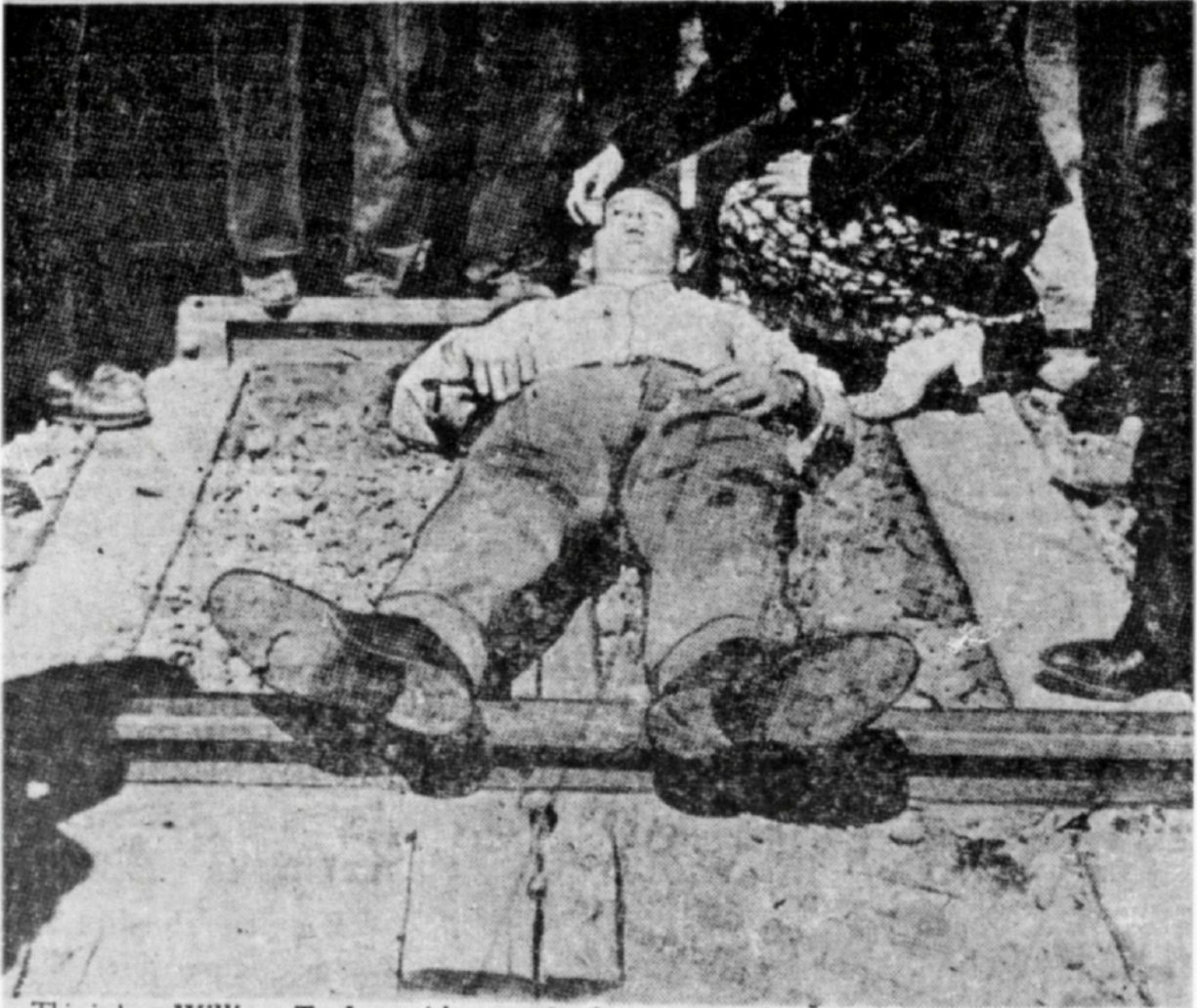
Bee Photos

STRIKER, SHOT IN STOCKTON RIOTING, BORNE FROM FIELD



Injuries were severe to many on both sides of the bloody Stockton cannery strike fighting. Photo shows John Drake, 23, seriously injured by bird-shot, being carried away to safety by other strikers

AMATEUR 'GASSED' TO GET THIS



This is how **William Tucker**, picket at a Stockton cannery, looked during yesterday's strike riot. Today he was recovering from birdshot wounds in the face, arms and chest. This unusual picture was taken during the riot by Robert Edwards, Berkeley camera fan.

Strike Timeline

- Gerald A. Rose's analysis of the Stockton Cannery Strike is the most in-depth account I've come across, but is a bit dry so I've attempted to synthesize all of the resources found so far in order to create an accessible TLDR summary that gets down the major points we might like to bring up in the actual article. Gotta do the pre-writing before the actual writing. This will be more technical than what I assume our article will sound like, in that we will not necessarily get into specifics but base things around rhetoric. This is just me trying to understand the facts of what went down to the best of my knowledge so we don't misrepresent what actually occurred. **(Pete)**

The major precipitating event for the cannery strike was that the California Processors and Growers (CP & G), an association that claimed to speak and act for all canneries in Stockton, refused to meet the demands of Agricultural Workers Union, Local 20221, which was chartered on May 23, 1936, almost one year earlier. In March 1937, Local 20221 began organizing cannery workers in the Stockton area, and by April had managed to enroll 567 workers into its membership out of the total Stockton cannery workforce of about 1,400 (about 40.5% of all workers). The local's biggest membership resided within the Stockton Food Products cannery, with about 360 union members. Stockton Food Products would be the site for the strike because there were enough union members working there in order to close down the plant. The spinach canning season was also fast approaching, giving the union a strategic advantage by threatening a work stoppage that could cost the agribusiness in and around San Joaquin over \$6 million (roughly \$135 million today when adjusting for inflation).

On April 4, four male workers from the Stockton Food Products Plant were fired for alleged unionizing. An agreement was settled between the cannery and the union on April 8 to rehire the men. The president and secretary-treasurer of the union, feeling that the cannery was testing the union's strength, took the opportunity the same day to announce demands for better hours and wages. The CP & G were willing to listen to all of the demands except for one that stipulated allowing Local 20221 to be the sole bargaining agency for all cannery workers in Stockton (i.e. a "closed shop"). Local 20221 announced a strike at Stockton Food Products on April 15.

There are two parts to the 1937 Spinach Strike, the initial strike on April 15 and the forced opening of the Stockton Food Products Cannery on Friday, April 23. Both parts resulted in melees between police. On the morning of April 15, 250 - 300 cannery workers, consisting of both men and women, began to picket outside of the cannery entrance on Waterloo Road. Deputy Sheriff E.G. Hill and a group of his officers were at the cannery to get non-striking workers past the picket line. This triggered a riot, with strikers throwing rocks at Hill's truck as he and other deputies were throwing tear gas grenades. As Hill prepared to throw a grenade at the crowd, he was struck on the head by a rock, causing the tear gas grenade in his hand to explode and burn several deputies, including himself, most likely. Hill and his party proceeded to flee onto the highway, which is when some of the picketers pursued Hill's truck to the nearest hospital, where a second melee ensued.

In the midst of the violence that occurred on April 15, all other Stockton canneries were shut down. A "Citizens Committee" made up of corporate farmers, large growers, food processing and packing companies, met at the City Council Chambers of Stockton City Hall on how to plan and prepare to break up the strike. Colonel Walter E. Garrison, the President of the Associated Farmers of California, with assistance from various law enforcement agencies around California had developed a plan that had been used to break up a lettuce strike in Salinas in 1936, only several months earlier. The Citizens Committee's intention was to force the strikers to resort to violence in order to turn public opinion against the union. The Citizens Committee pressured San Joaquin County Sheriff Odell to do something about the strikers, viewing him as the person to blame for what had transpired on April 15. Odell called for a "citizen's army" of 1,200 deputized civilians to help the local police in breaking up the strike. The San Joaquin County Bureau of Investigation placed a hidden camera around the cannery to record any violent acts committed by strikers. Local highway patrol officers were alerted about the strike in advance in order to clear the highway from the cannery to the city limits. The sheriff's office had bought more tear gas grenades in anticipation of quelling more strikers than had been there on April 15. Odell had also employed a spy to infiltrate Local 20221's inner circle, enabling the sheriff's office to have pre-informed knowledge about the union's tactics.

Governor Frank F. Merriam attempted to mediate the strike between union representatives and the CP & G and set up a meeting in Sacramento on the night of April 19. The meeting was stalemated, although both sides agreed to a 24 hour truce. A second meeting occurred on April 21, but fell apart almost immediately over the predominant issue of allowing for Local 20221 being the sole bargaining agent for all Stockton cannery workers. Union leaders agreed to calling off the strike on the condition that the CP & G would resume negotiations on May 1. Seeing it as an opportunity to strike with an element of surprise, the canners and their allies in the Citizens Committee decided to forcibly open the Stockton Food Products Plant on a Friday, April 23, about a week before negotiations were supposed to resume. In the days before the riot on April 23, Odell began recruiting for his citizen's army, composed mainly of farmers who were won over by Red Scare propaganda. These deputized civilians were armed with pickaxe handles and arm shields, along with pistols and shotguns.

At 8:45 AM on April 23, a spinach truck reached the gates of the Stockton Food Products Plant, escorted by highway patrol cars. A crowd of about three thousand pickets and their supporters blocked the convoy, resulting in what newspapers would later refer to as the "Spinach Riot." Sheriff deputies began firing tear gas into the crowd, just as truckloads of citizen deputies reached the cannery, getting into melees with the strikers. One person was killed from buckshot, while around 58 in total were injured. The fighting ceased by 10 AM.

The violence that ensued was heavily reported on at the time. Around 50 journalists were on the scene of the strike to record. It is likely that given the orchestrated planning done by the Citizens Committee, that local journalists from *The Record* and elsewhere in California were tipped off about the police breaking up the strike. Newspapers, big and small, from across the nation reported on the strike at the time. Many papers focused on the violent imagery that occurred,

framing the event as a “riot” rather than as a “strike,” thereby making the strikers appear violent and disorderly, obfuscating why they were striking in the first place.

Usable Quotes

Union: You say you will not recognize the Agricultural Workers Union as the sole bargaining agency of the Stockton cannery workers?

St. Sure: Yes, that is right; that is our position.

Union: Then you will have a picket line.

- Phone call conversation between Vance Ambrose, president of the union, and J. Paul St. Sure, attorney representing the California Processors & Growers. Cited on p. 156 in part 2 of Gerald Rose's series on the Stockton cannery strike.