

IAM Members Dig In for Foster Farms Negotiations

At first glance, Local Lodge 2005 in Livingston, CA looks like any other: the front window with the local's name and number and, of course, the IAM logo. Local 2005 has all that plus a small laser-printed sign translating the same information into Punjabi.

To say that the 2,400-member local is multicultural would be an understatement. Although most members are Hispanic, there is a sizable percentage of Punjabis (natives of India's Punjab province), as well as Anglos, Portuguese, and Hmongs.

The entire membership is employed by Foster Farms, a poultry producer for food stores in the western United States.

While few members speak English, the local finds ways to communicate with the entire membership, including the use of interpreters.

"We need to communicate with all of our members," said Local 2005 President Ralph Meraz. "It's a matter of respect."

More than just union business goes on at Local

2005. Members can also stop by the union office and get interpreting and translation help for personal and family needs.

Represented for years by the United Food & Commercial Workers (UFCW), the Foster Farms workers disaffiliated with the UFCW and formed an independent union.

The company recognized the fledgling union, but took advantage of them and stripped benefits workers had enjoyed for years. Contract talks went nowhere and a contract was never ratified.

The workers realized they needed heavy-duty support and voted in September, 2005 to affiliate with the IAM by a 98 per-

cent margin. The IAM immediately established a local lodge in Livingston and opened up a union office only minutes from the plant.

Foster Farms refuses to recognize the IAM as the workers' union and the IAM filed unfair labor practice charges with the National Labor Relations Board. A ruling is expected in March 2006.

Workers have held three work actions since joining the IAM and the company has retaliated. Meraz said the membership knows the challenge it is facing.

"There are no cracks in the armor; these Machinists are committed," said Meraz.

"We're digging in and getting tougher."



Local 2005 President Ralph Meraz and District 190 Organizer Jesse Juarez outside the local's Livingston, CA office.