

Winery's Field Workers Break New Ground in Union Election

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Farm workers at Chateau Ste. Michelle, Washington state's largest winery, made labor history on Friday: They voted to unionize.

In a secret ballot, a two-thirds majority of the winery's voting field hands chose the United Farm Workers as their bargaining agent, marking the first time in 25 years — and the second time in state history — that farm workers in Washington have even voted on union representation.

"This is precedent-setting," says David Olson, director of the labor studies center at the University of Washington.

Labor experts are incredulous that the winery's field workers got to vote at all. There is no federal law guaranteeing the rights of farm workers to organize; among states, only California offers such protection. But the winery and its workers agreed voluntarily to submit to the authority of a neutral commission, whose chairman was Thomas Foley, former speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives. The commission set rules over campaigning and monitored the vote.

Outside California, "this is the first time a mechanism has been found to let farm workers decide on union representation," says Don Villarejo, director of the California Institute for Rural Studies.

Just as unusual is the certainty that the vote will lead to a union contract: The winery agreed before the vote to submit to arbitration if it can't reach a contract with the union.

This prevote agreement has nationwide implications, raising new possibilities for voluntary ways to improve standards for farm workers, who number among the

most poorly compensated in the nation. "We're hopeful we can use this [model] to help farm workers in Arizona, Florida and Texas, too," says UFW President Arturo Rodriguez.

Some growers say such voluntary understandings are preferable to government intervention. "If this structure [works], employers should seize it," says William H. Williams, president of Bear Creek Corp., a Medford, Ore., producer of fruits and roses.

Other growers disagree. Michael Gempler, executive director of the Washington Growers League, a trade group, says he considers the Chateau Ste. Michelle almost unique "and not [an option] for the rest of the agricultural industry." There is "no evidence," he says, that workers throughout the industry want unions.

Groundbreaking or not, the Chateau Ste. Michelle vote illustrates how difficult it is for farm workers to win representation. The farm hands at the winery, which produces the Chateau Ste. Michelle and Columbia Crest labels, began talking of unionizing in 1987, but discussions with management quickly deteriorated. The then-independent farm-worker group called a boycott against the winery's labels and vowed to continue it even if it lost an election.

The winery said it wasn't averse to dealing with a union for its 200 field hands; its cellar workers, Teamsters Union members, are covered by federal law. "But we were concerned that with field hands we were dealing with an environment that had no rules," says Theodor Baseler, who oversaw the winery's handling of the mat-

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Winery Field Workers Break Fresh Ground By Voting to Unionize

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ter. "We wanted to create rules and avoid chaos."

The answer, Mr. Baseler believed, was state legislation, modeled on California's law guaranteeing farm-labor rights. The problem: Most growers opposed it. For nearly six years, Chateau Ste. Michelle pushed a farm-labor bill, finally achieving enough support in 1993 to apparently guar-

antee approval in the then heavily Democratic state legislature. But considering the bill too weak, some farm-labor advocates publicly spoke out against it and the coalition fell apart.

Meanwhile, the boycott persisted. While it didn't hurt Chateau Ste. Michelle's sales, which totaled \$89.2 million last year, it was an embarrassment. Church groups persuaded dozens of restaurants not to carry the wine, and shareholder activists pestered the winery's parent company, UST Inc., a tobacco company based in Greenwich, Conn. Last summer, employees of Alaska Airlines, objecting to the winery's refusal to recognize the union, canceled a big party at the winery's main facility in Woodinville, Wash.

"We don't believe the boycott cost us

sales, but it was a nuisance," Mr. Baseler acknowledges. "Here we were trying to put Washington on the map as one of the finest places to grow grapes, and if we have to spend a lot of energy on the nuisance of the boycott, it is just counterproductive."

Early this year, the winery relented, agreeing to an election. The deal between the two parties was signed on May 3, the day before scores of activists planned another protest at UST's annual meeting; Mr. Baseler says the winery agreed to the accord because it finally had the right rules in place.

Under the agreement, the union was allowed to visit the winery's ranches for two weeks before the election. Protected by the agreement, workers wore pro-union buttons on the job, with messages such as

"Vote Fuerte, Contrato Fuerte (Strong Vote, Strong Contract)."

Now that the union has won the election, Jose Ruiz, a tractor driver at the winery for 19 years who speaks only Spanish, is eager for a contract. Not that he without benefits: Mr. Ruiz, married with two children, earns \$9.30 an hour, gets three weeks' paid vacation and has a health plan. But his employer — perfect legally — never pays him overtime even when he works 60-hour weeks during harvest season; and despite his tenure, he can be fired without cause.

"To me, what's most important is job security," he says. "I like my job. I want to keep it."