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Farm workers protest pay by marching near Mattawa

MATTAWA — Hundreds of farm workers marched in 90-degree temperatures Sunday near Mattawa in yet another effort to put some heat on apple growers to boost workers' pay.

Organized by the United Farm Workers of America, AFL-CIO, the five-mile march along Highway 243 from Desert Aire to Mattawa protested what union leaders say are stagnant wages paid to workers.

Workers are targeting the per-piece rate for the Red Delicious, Golden Delicious/Granny Smith and Fuji varieties. A piece is a 1,000-pound bin of apples.

The union wants growers to pay, on average, \$7 to \$15 more per bin than they now do. For example, union officials say that the current wage for picking a

bin of Red Delicious is \$8 to \$10. A fairer wage would be \$15 per bin.

For Fujis, workers now receive about \$20 a bin. That should be increased to \$35.

"Washington state produces more than half of the nation's apples and these are now sold throughout the world," UFW spokesman Guadalupe Gamboa said Sunday.

"They are showcased internationally as the finest apples in the world. The workers have made this possible, and yet they aren't paid enough to rent run-down apartments. These are men, women and children who deserve to live like people, not animals."

The Washington State Apple Commission was not immediately

available Sunday for comment on the demand for higher wages.

Jeff Johnson, a Washington State Labor Council representative, urged the workers to continue their battle for a better life.

"It is the sweat and blood of farm-worker families that have turned this desert that we stand on into pastures of plenty," Johnson said.

State Rep. Phyllis Gutierrez Kenney, a 46th District Democrat from Seattle, reminded the workers of past victories.

"We made history with the first union contract at Ste. Michelle," she said. "All of these victories came about because we marched, we boycotted, we demonstrated."

The march proceeded without incident, the Grant County Sheriff's Office and the Washington State Patrol said Sunday.