

Workers strike at

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Vantage orchard

By **WENDY HARRIS**

Of the Herald-Republic

More than 100 farm workers at a Vantage apple orchard went on strike Monday with the backing of the United Farm Workers of America.

Lupe Gamboa, director of Washington state UFW, said the workers walked off the job Monday morning in protest after several workers were laid off at Auvil Fruit Co., which is about 10 miles south of Vantage.

The Labor Day strike, with workers rallying along Huntzinger Road adjacent to the orchard, drew more than two dozen patrol cars to the scene Monday after-

noon, Gamboa said.

A total of 26 patrol cars from the Kittitas County Sheriff's Office, the Grant County Sheriff's Office and the Washington State Patrol were dispatched to the strike, a dispatcher confirmed.

Workers were warned to stay off the road and not interfere with traffic, Gamboa said. But he said several officers carried guns in their hands.

"Their rifles were drawn when people are just trying to exercise their First Amendment rights," Gamboa said. "No other group of workers gets treated this way."

One protester was detained and then arrested after he tried to re-

turn to the picket line, Gamboa. Police ran a check on his driver's license and found an outstanding traffic violation, landing the man in jail, Gamboa said.

The workers aren't protesting their rate of pay, but rather the lack of job security and the ability of foremen to fire workers without cause for petty reasons, like bruising a few apples, Gamboa said.

Grady Auvil, owner of the ranch, said eight workers were laid off in recent days for bruising apples.

"We do not tolerate bruising of our apples," Auvil said. "We don't have to tolerate it. We pay them

well to do it well."

Auvil said the workers were only laid off for a day and were allowed to come back to work.

"If they had bruised apples again, they would be fired."

If fired, workers lose their bonus pay, which isn't paid until they've completed working the entire season, Gamboa said.

For example, workers are paid \$25 for each bin of Gala apples they pick, and are given an additional \$5 per bin as their bonus, Gamboa said.

Auvil said that while the company has withheld bonus pay in the past as an incentive to keep workers for an entire season, he

believed that these workers were being paid a straight \$30 a bin.

"As far as I know, there has been no bonuses held out this season," Auvil said.

Auvil said workers earn on average \$15 an hour, which is far better than wages paid at neighboring orchards.

"We've always tried to treat our workers right, and we've always tried to pay them as high as we can," Auvil said. "This is clearly a game for the union people to organize the apple people."

The strike becomes the fourth in recent months led by the UFW at Eastern Washington orchards. During the three other strikes in

the Mattawa area, workers were able to win \$1-per-hour wage increases.

The UFW is working to organize the state's some 40,000 agriculture workers with backing from the Teamsters union and the AFL-CIO.

The UFW and Teamsters are working collaboratively on their "United for Change Campaign," where the Teamsters have taken on the state's some 15,000 apple warehouse workers.

"This was a great day to celebrate Labor Day for the workers," Gamboa said. "This is the first strike during the apple harvest and could have a lot of impact on other strikes."