

New pay rules sparked farm workers' strike

Apple pickers at Auvil Fruit Co. near Vantage want more money for doing job

By DON McMANMAN

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VANTAGE — About 100 strikers and sympathizers swirled around the front gate of a large apple orchard near here Thursday morning, seeking an end to new work rules that have cut their pay.

It was the latest battle in a months-long siege by farm and packing house workers against farmers and packers in Washington.

Organized labor, with the United Farm Workers and the Teamsters in the lead, have targeted the industry. Pay is too low for workers who pick and pack the state's most lucrative crop, labor leaders say.

But the industry can't afford to pay more, said Mike Gempler of the Washington Growers League. Growing apples is fraught with risk, he said. Besides, the apple market spans the globe and U.S. farmers must be able to compete with those in nations where labor costs are much lower.

At Auvil Fruit Co.'s 900-acre orchard south of Vantage, the overriding issue is apple quality but the dispute boils down to money.

"People are pressured all the time. There's a lot of emphasis on quality," said Lupe Gamboa, an organizer for the United Farm Workers.

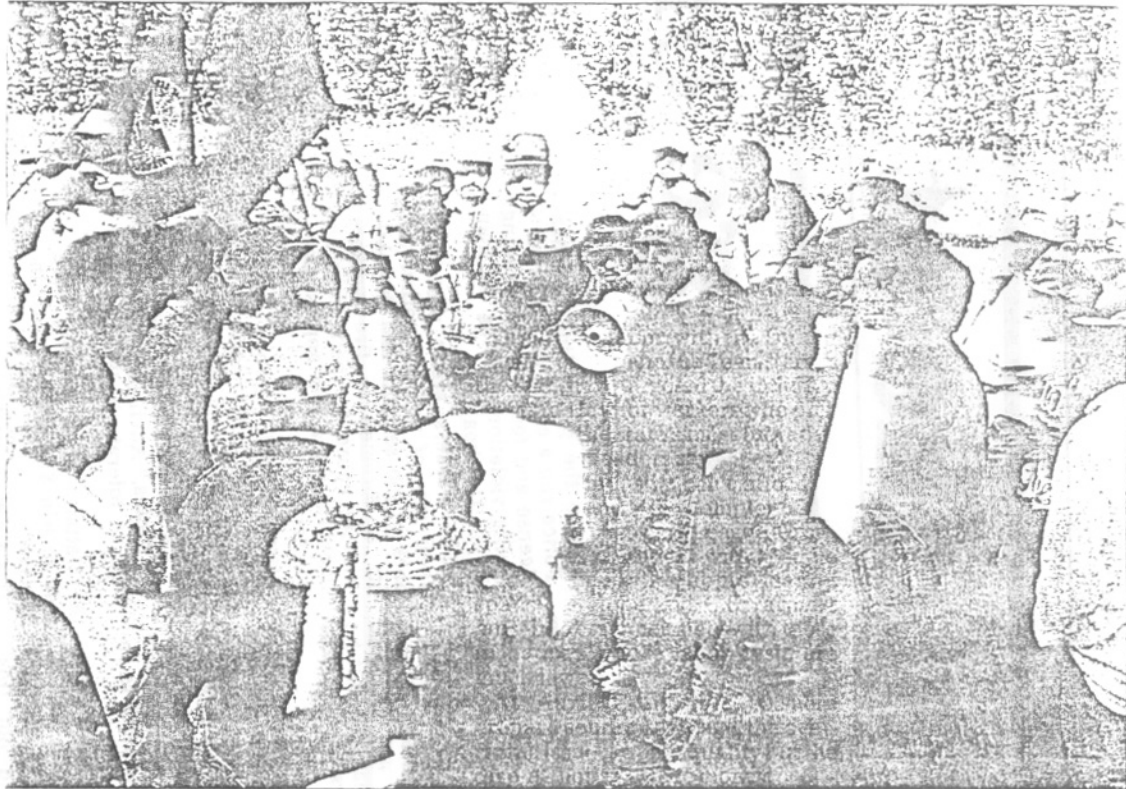
There's nothing wrong with quality, but pickers must be given time and money to ensure it, Gamboa said.

"If they find two bruised apples in three bins in a row, you can be fired," said picker Jose Nevarez, of Mattawa, through an interpreter.

By comparison, a bin can hold about 2,000 apples.

Pickers must go slow to make sure apples aren't bruised, Nevarez said.

"You can't make any money when you go that slow," Nevarez said.



Herald/Bob Brawley

Guadalupe Gamboa of the United Farm Workers uses a bullhorn to talk to about 100 striking workers Thursday at an orchard near Vantage.

Auvil workers pick only four or five bins in a day, compared with eight or 10 at other orchards, workers said.

Those in charge of checking quality have been capricious and arbitrary, Gamboa said.

"We don't think they know what they're doing," Gamboa said.

Uncertainty about holding a job has led workers to demand a change in the way they're paid.

Traditionally, orchardists pay a certain amount of money per bin, with part of that withheld as a

"bonus." The bonus is paid at the end of the season to those pickers who stay the course.

But pickers worry they'll lose that bonus if an overeager quality checker has them fired before the end of the season. Therefore, the union wants the base and bonus paid on a regular basis, rather than at the end of the season.

Gamboa said the picket line limited the orchard's work force to about 50 pickers, most trucked in from Wenatchee. He said the orchard needed between 150 and 200 work-

ers at this time of the year.

Paul King, general manager of the orchard, declined to comment Thursday, saying the company's attorney was preparing a statement.

However, he said he had 117 pickers on the job Thursday.

"The truth of the matter is we're about where we need to be. We're turning away people who want to work," King said.

More pickers will be hired in the future, King declined to speculate how the strike will affect harvest then.