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Farm workers complain of alleged intimidation

By The Associated Press

VANTAGE — The head of the Washington State Patrol wants to know if state troopers were used to escort replacement workers past striking apple pickers earlier this week.

Chief Annette Sandberg has ordered an investigation of trooper actions Monday and Tuesday at the Auvil Fruit Co. orchard near Vantage.

Meanwhile, strikers continued to picket the orchard Thursday. About 120 striking apple pickers are protesting a lack of job security and the firing of pickers who bruised apples.

"Our position has always been in labor negotiations and strikes that we maintain our neutrality on the issues," State Patrol spokesman Capt. Marshall Pugh said Thursday. "Our presence is to preserve the public peace."

The United Farm Workers of America complained to Sandberg on Wednesday that the troopers intimidated strikers at the orchard.

Guadalupe Gamboa, director of the state UFW, contended State Patrol officers helped lead replacement workers past strikers.

The officers "participated in actions that chilled the workers rights to organize for better job treatment," Gamboa said in a news release.

"WSP personnel took part in a massive and intimidating show of force towards peaceful protesters."

Gamboa called the law officers' actions "racist, biased and aggressive." He contended some of the troopers carried guns in their hands.

Pugh said no handguns were drawn by State Patrol troopers. Investigators are trying to learn if any troopers were carrying rifles or shotguns, he said.

Sandberg wanted a report from Capt. Tom Robbins, who heads the State Patrol's Wenatchee-area district, by today, Pugh said.