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## It's high noon in campaign to unionize apple workers

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Background & related info. 

WENATCHEE - Bob Mathison steers his father's white Buick Park Avenue with its vanity plate, STEMILT, up the slow climb to the top of his family's land, an empire of 1,000 acres of manicured orchards built up over five generations.

This place, locally known as Stemilt Hill, has become a symbol for both sides waging a bitter campaign to unionize workers in the state's \$1.4 billion apple industry.

A secret ballot election Thursday will determine if 581 warehouse workers at the Mathisons' company, Stemilt Growers in Wenatchee, and 306 at Washington Fruit & Produce in Yakima want the International Brotherhood of Teamsters to represent them.

Union activists bring visitors to Stemilt Hill to show them the vast orchard lands, migrant-worker camps and a grand new home under construction overlooking it all. To them, this place symbolizes a vast disparity of wealth and worker exploitation in the tree-fruit industry.

To the Mathison family, this place is beautiful, a carefully kept and nurtured family business that has prospered through hard work and enterprise despite the vagaries of weather, international markets and, now, labor strife.

"Nobody gave this to us," Bob Mathison says as he, too, brings a visitor to Stemilt Hill.

Mathison tools past a migrant-labor camp, with its cheery Bob's Camp sign over the gated, locked entrance. He said he built the circle of small homes around a shared bathhouse at a cost of \$225,000 after lying in his warm bed at night, feeling bad about his workers shivering in tents in the fall chill.

Into view comes a work camp for his brother Kyle's cherry orchard. There's a row of apartments, and behind the apartments, concrete slabs with water and electric hookups. Metal bed frames are stacked under the open sky.

Cherry pickers - who work in the summer - pitch tents on these slabs and share a common bathroom in a trailer. Kyle Mathison's new, 5,600-square-foot house perches on a hill above the migrant camp.

Kyle is self-conscious about the house, pointing out that he and his wife lived in a double-wide

mobile home for 20 years while building up their orchard business and saving money for the new house.

At the top of Stemilt Hill, Bob Mathison points to the family cemetery, the family's grange hall, and his own orchards. He gets out of the car, and there's a satisfied look on his face as he takes in the view.

"Kind of neat, isn't it?" Mathison said. "It's just like heaven. And we'd like to keep it that way."

Across town at Teamsters headquarters, a blue house with a weedy front yard and peeling paint, union organizers have been working nearly two years toward a goal that could turn the tree-fruit industry upside down.

The vote this week at Stemilt and Washington Fruit is just a beginning. Ultimately, organizers for the Teamsters and the United Farm Workers want to unionize every fruit-packing house in the industry, and fruit pickers, too. They paint a picture of bold change, with higher wages and better working and living conditions for thousands of workers.

"It's war over the hearts and minds of workers," said Lorene Scheer, the Teamsters' lead organizer. "It's a question of raising expectations that it is possible to improve your situation."

Organizers insist the mostly Hispanic work force that helped to create the success of the state's \$2 billion tree-fruit industry deserves a bigger share of that wealth.

It's hard to imagine a more revolutionary agenda in Washington's apple country, where family-owned enterprises like the Mathisons' have grown to successful, industrial-scale businesses in part because of the availability of cheap labor.

"It's an almost feudal system," said Andrew Barnes, a Teamster organizer based in Yakima. "They still have a real sense of: This is our family business, and how dare anyone make waves with how I pay my employees."

Barnes said the organizing campaign is viewed as "a personal affront" by the packing houses, "an attack on their ability to do business any way they want."

Thursday's vote is just a first step in union supporters' quest for a contract. If the Teamsters union wins, it will have been designated as the workers' bargaining representative. Then comes the hard work of negotiating a contract. The law requires employers to bargain with the union in good faith for a year. But there is no legal obligation to reach an agreement.

If the union loses, the law allows it to try for another vote in a year.

Washington Fruit and Stemilt have fought the unionization effort since its inception. But they saved their most intense efforts for the final weeks before the election.

At his Stemilt office, decorated with hunting trophies, a mounted Winchester rifle and aerial photos of the family land holdings, Bob Mathison talks about what's at stake for Stemilt in the closing days of the election.

"We are blessed with a bountiful labor supply," Mathison said. "If there is something we want done, we throw bodies at it and they cost \$7.50 an hour.

"You saw those people (in the packing plant) turning apples in the same direction? If we have to pay \$12 an hour, those people are gone." He said machines could replace many workers if wages get too high.

The company has delivered a strong message to the workers as they make up their minds.

"We tell them the union will negotiate, but we are still writing the checks," Mathison said. "And if the union demands more than we can provide, there will have to be a strike, and we will have the right to permanently replace them."

The company figures a tough-guy pitch is better than one based on the economics of the apple industry.

"They are not well-educated," Mathison said, speaking of the majority of his workers. "They don't understand the economic system. They think we sleep on mattresses full of money and the only reason we don't pay them more is because we are greedy."

Mike Gempler of the Washington Grower's League, which opposes unionization, said the market determines how much workers can be paid, and employers need to retain a "flexible" force of workers who can be laid off, recalled and reassigned as the employers require. The Teamsters are making unrealistic promises to workers - promises that defy economics, Gempler said.

The unionization campaign has arrived along with the state's world-class status in the tree-fruit industry. Washington's apple industry has become a \$1.4 billion business that provides 60 percent of the nation's apples. Washington also grows and ships 95 percent of the country's apple exports.

Mom-and-pop operations are being pushed aside by industrial-scale agriculture, as growers and distributors consolidate to compete in an increasingly global marketplace.

Employers say they can't be locked in to big wage increases in an industry with unpredictable profit margins, volatile markets and big capital expenses.

Rick Plath, president of Washington Fruit, a family-owned partnership in business since 1916, said packing houses have to keep costs low to remain competitive.

"We give raises annually, and we are at the upper end of the industry as far as wages we pay," he said. "But half the fruit we handle is someone else's, and our packing charges need to be in line with the rest of the industry."

Advances in technology now allow growers to store their fruit for as long as a year. That has turned apple warehousing and packing into a year-round business. The work force, in turn, has evolved from a largely migrant base to year-round residents with more of a stake in their communities and their jobs.

Union supporters say the average annual wage for warehouse workers is \$12,000. Employers say it is \$15,135. Either way, it is below the average annual wage in all five of the state's apple-growing

counties.

The county with the lowest average annual wage in 1996 among major apple-producing counties was Okanogan County with \$17,364. The highest was in Chelan County with \$21,068, according to the state Department of Employment Security.

Both Stemilt and Washington Fruit & Produce say they pay more than \$8 an hour on average. That's above the industry average of \$7.50 per hour paid at the state's 100 or so tree-fruit warehouses, according to a survey by the Washington Grower's League.

Some workers say pay isn't the major issue for them in the campaign. They say they want more control over their working conditions. They want a seniority system, a grievance procedure and more affordable health benefits.

Ultimately, workers will have to decide whom they trust most: union organizers who tell them they deserve better, or their employers, who say they provide as much as they can.

### **Campaign strategies**

In this campaign, employers have access to their workers as a captive audience for anti-union literature and activities. Employers also have the unspoken power of direct control over their jobs, working conditions and pay.

Both sides are waging hardball campaigns.

The packing companies have hired a \$185-per-hour consultant from California to help deflect the union. They are staging contests in which employees are awarded prizes, such as TVs and stereos, for guessing the most correct answers in anti-union true-or-false quizzes.

With 22 years and 150 anti-union campaigns under his belt, the consultant, Stephen Highfill, delivers a persuasive anti-union message in meetings held on company time. Workers are shown anti-union videos and are inundated with anti-union flyers.

The Teamsters counter the employers' pitches with promises of more control over working conditions and better wages and benefits.

They tell workers if they stick together they may be able to negotiate a seniority system governing layoffs, recalls to work and job assignments. The union also promises to work for a contract that establishes a grievance procedure to negotiate disputes with employers. It also holds out hope for better wages, lower-cost health care, and better retirement and pension benefits.

Nine professional union organizers imported from across the country visit employees at home, often bringing along a pro-union worker, to wage a patient and personal campaign to build and shore up support. The union refuses to disclose how much it is spending, nor will it say how much the nine professional organizers are paid.

### **'Shell-shocked'**

Workers are in the crossfire, expressing a range of emotions as the campaign intensifies in the final

days before the election.

They are sick of the stress. They hope for a better life. Some are frightened of change, others convinced things are fine the way they are.

Inside the Stemilt packing plant in Wenatchee, some say they are just eager for the conflict to be over.

"It's been like hell," said Deresa Gimlin, a clerical worker who wears a large anti-union badge on the job. "I was for the union at first. But then they came to my house uninvited. It was really tacky. I thought maybe they could make the company better. But they are interested in lining their pockets" with dues from workers.

Gimlin, who has worked at Stemilt for 14 years, said the campaign has taken its toll. "It used to feel more like we were a team. We were like a family. Now it's pro-union or pro-Stemilt. . . . We are sick of it."

Other employees are having a hard time making up their minds. "I pray for an answer," said Anna Blanchette, an hourly worker on the packing line. "I ask God to help me make the right decision, for me and for everyone else."

The struggle has changed the mood at the plant. Workers' family members used to be allowed to visit at break time to share meals. Now there's a guard house and gated checkpoint at the plant entrance. Everyone has to wear a picture identification badge.

During the course of the campaign, workers have filed more than 20 unfair-labor-practice complaints against the two companies, with complaints that range from unjustified dismissals of union supporters to intimidation. Some charges are still pending before the National Labor Relations Board. Others have been withdrawn, decided in the employees' favor or settled.

Jorja Starr, an apple sorter, said Stemilt's anti-union campaign has left her feeling "shell-shocked."

"Ever since we went for an election, a day hasn't gone by when we weren't forced to watch a video or go to one of these meetings or given some literature," she said.

Starr sat stone-faced through one of Highfill's recent presentations at Stemilt. "Everything he said hit home with us," she said. "But what I really resent is how Stemilt has talked about how they respect their workers and this is how they show it. Hiring this union buster to squash people like me who make \$7.25 an hour, who just want something better.

"At this point it's clear they will do anything to stop the union."

Tom Mathison, patriarch of the family and president of Stemilt Growers, said the company is simply trying to defend itself against the union's all-out attack.

"I have had the worst possible allegations made against myself, my company, and my family that you can imagine. Our company has been demeaned, and everything I've ever done has been attacked. For them to say we are bad people for trying to defend ourselves is obscene."

Starr said she takes big risks in supporting the union. "I'm single, I own my own home," she said. "I have a lot to lose if I get fired. My mother is scared to death. But I believe in it. I've become very firm in what I'm doing. We need the union. Stemilt is a good-old-boy industry."

The management pitch

Standing up for the union amid the tension of the campaign takes courage, said Juan Manuel Granados, a warehouse worker who makes \$7.24 an hour.

"We have to deal with dirty looks for wearing a (union) button or a (pro-union) shirt," Granados said. "It's hard to wear these things. You walk in there. You feel like a neon sign."

Tim Simmons, who makes \$8.14 an hour as a box-machine operator at Stemilt, was on the fence before a recent presentation by Highfill, management's consultant, and two assistants.

About a dozen employees gathered on company time in the fluorescent-lighted packing-house lunchroom, and Highfill began his pitch.

He thumped a stack of papers he said documented more than 1,200 pages of complaints filed by workers against their own unions for abuses ranging from assault to discrimination.

His assistant, Mayra Berrelleza, told of losing her job at a California cannery when workers there were on strike for 18 months. Workers were grave and silent as she spoke of strikers living on \$54 a week paid by the union - and having to pay union dues even out of that sum.

Berrelleza described strikers who smashed windshields, flattened tires and followed replacement workers home at night to break their windows and throw Molotov cocktails at their houses. In the end, she said, strikers faced going back to their jobs making less than before.

"We said that's it. People had lost their homes, their cars. They went back to Mexico," she said in Spanish, as Highfill translated. "We went looking for work, but there was no work. No one would hire us because they knew we were strikers.

"Think about it," she said. "It could happen here. Is it really worth it, to risk what you have right now, your job, for something you don't really know will be better?"

The presentation appeared to hit its mark. "That was very impressive," said Simmons, the box-machine operator after the meeting. "Here's people from the inside, giving us this horror story and talking about having to deal with strikes.

"I've made up my mind. I'm going to vote against it. This sort of work, the blue-collar thing, is only going to be so good. You are not going to get rich doing it. Why have higher expectations?"

Highfill, who runs a consulting company in Salinas, Calif., called Ag Relate, is also using a second assistant, Maria Carmona. She describes manipulating workers when she was an organizer for the United Farm Workers in California. She paints a picture of false promises and union leaders working to whip up conflict and discontent among workers.

In videos, workers are told collective bargaining is a gamble, that the Teamsters are crooks and

union organizers are professional salesmen interested only in collecting more dues.

The union accuses both employers of running a campaign of terror. "They focus on two things. Fear and futility," said Patrick Lacefield, spokesman for the Teamsters. "It's meant to break the workers' spirit."

### **11th-hour campaign**

The apple campaign is a high-profile fight. National labor leaders have marched on the streets of Wenatchee, and Vice President Al Gore has talked with embattled union supporters.

A coalition of nine state leaders, including former Democratic Gov. Mike Lowry, a retired Lutheran bishop, a former justice of the Washington Supreme Court, and professors of law and labor, have formed the Committee on Justice in the Apple Industry, which is offering itself as a neutral observer of the campaign.

Tom Mathison will close the company's campaign in meetings with small groups of workers in the last days before the election. His will be an emotional pitch that portrays the union organizers as outside agitators and company leaders as the ones workers can trust.

He'll tell workers success can only come when workers and Stemilt stick together against the outside threat of the union.

He likes to make rounds at his warehouse and packing plant every day, greeting workers and checking to see how things are running. Some employees greet him warmly. Others, wearing pro-union shirts and buttons, keep their distance.

Direct, firm-jawed and attentive to detail, Mathison swoops a stray apple off the floor as he tours his facilities with a visitor, and whips out a pocketknife to check a gleaming box of Golden Delicious apples. "Let's see how it eats," he said.

Mathison helped to build the business over the past 37 years from a packing shed behind his home, financed with a second mortgage on the family homestead, to one of the largest, most successful fruit-distribution operations in the Northwest

To him, the union campaign is just one more competitive force to weigh, counter and defeat. "I'm a big believer in competition," he said. "So here we are, going head to head with the Teamsters for our employees' loyalty."

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[Change in Teamster leadership could dampen state organizing effort](#)

[Teamsters' home page](#)

Yahoo coverage of Teamsters' election controversy

Teamster.com (Web site forum for rank-and-file)

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