

Group pushes pesticide protection

The United Farm Workers of America used the FQPA hearing in Yakima as a stepping stone to call attention to their on-going efforts to unionize Washington's apple industry

By TERRY DILLMAN
Capital Press Staff Writer

YAKIMA, Wash. — At first glance, the line of picketers seemed out of place. But a closer look revealed something more at work.

A group of about 20 supporters of the Teamsters and United Farm Workers unions greeted folks attending the historic hearing on the Food Quality Protection Act at Yakima Convention Center last Saturday. A few signs urged the Environmental Protection Agency to enforce the law to help protect farmworker health.

Guadalupe Gamboa, regional director of the United Farm Workers of America, was invited to provide testimony about FQPA to Dr. Lynn Goldman, head of EPA's office of Prevention, Pesticides and Toxic Substances.

"The issue of pesticide safety is of utmost concern to our membership and their families," Gamboa said. "For them, pesticide injury is not an abstract concept but an everyday reality."

Focusing on farmworker children, he said that exposure to pesticides begins before they're born and continues unabated due to lack of adequate housing, water, plumbing and daycare.

"A healthy future for our children is much more important than the profits of Washington's agricultural industry," he said.

Three of the picketing workers also testified about pesticide

concerns during the open microphone session after the formal hearing ended.

But agriculture industry leaders said apple industry profits were the real focus for Gamboa and the union supporters, and their presence at the hearing was simply a ploy to call attention to their ongoing efforts to unionize apple workers. They said picket line signs like "Justice for Washington Apple Workers" and "Growers Grow Greed" revealed the real intent.

The unions' action at the May 30 hearing dovetails with their support of a complaint filed May 27 against the state's apple industry by a coalition of five Mexican unions under a side provision of the North American Free Trade Agreement.

NAFTA's companion North American Agreement for Labor Cooperation set up a special commission to hear labor complaints.

The one filed in Mexico City by the International Labor Rights Fund of Washington, D.C., alleges that the Washington state apple industry failed to protect the right of workers to organize, and failed to protect the health and safety of workers, leaving them at risk of exposure to chemicals and pesticides.

This is the first of the 11 complaints filed since 1994 that's against an industry in the United States, said Terry Collingsworth, lead attorney for

the nonprofit agency. The group focuses on defending the world's "most exploited workers" — including women, children and migrant workers — in international labor issues.

Washington's apple industry was a target because of the groundwork the Teamsters laid when they collaborated with the UFWA to unionize the state's 50,000 apple pickers and ware-

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house workers.

Workers rejected Teamster representation at Stemilt Growers in Wenatchee and Washington Fruit & Produce Co. in Yakima during January elections.

But in late May, the National Labor Relations Board filed unfair labor practice charges against both companies. They allege that company supervisors and labor consultants threatened, harassed or intimidated workers to keep them from voting for the union.

"These charges are an absolute

vindication," said Patrick Lacefield, the Teamsters national spokesman. "They say that workers are telling the truth and the company is lying."

Hearings are scheduled July 23 for Stemilt and Aug. 4 for Washington Fruit. NLRB officials said if the judge rules in the union's favor, they could order the companies to reinstate fired workers, hold new elections or negotiate with the union.

The unions' campaign drew national attention to the state's apple industry. Now it faces international scrutiny.

Lacefield said there was irony in the NAFTA complaint, because most of the industry's employees are either Mexican immigrants or migrant workers from Mexico, which has traditionally been the largest single export market for Washington apples.

The complaint could eventually reach an arbitration panel, which could impose fines or sanctions if it's found that the state apple industry failed to comply with labor laws or the federal government failed to enforce them.

Mike Gempler, executive director of the Washington Growers League, said the complaint isn't much more than an empty publicity stunt.

"We feel there are a tremendous number of labor laws that apply to agriculture and that they are enforced," he said.



APPLE CORPS — Supporters of the Teamsters and United Farm Workers unions took advantage of last Saturday's public hearing on the effects of the Food Quality Protection Act at the Yakima Convention Center to try to drum up support for their efforts to unionize the Washington apple industry's 50,000 orchard and warehouse workers. (Capital Press photo by Terry Dillman)