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Farm workers rally in Mattawa

◆ **Thousands gather to protest low wages; speakers call for amnesty for undocumented workers**

MATTAWA, Wash. (AP) — Some 2,000 farm workers, joined by religious, civil rights and political supporters, joined in the 4 1/2-mile march Sunday between the small towns of Desert Aire and Mattawa along the Columbia River.

With temperatures in the mid-90s, the marchers — including a troop of

drum-beating Aztec dancers from Oregon — were joined by about 2,000 more backers for a rally in a park in Mattawa.

The demonstrators want higher apple-picking wages, amnesty for undocumented workers and protection for labor organizers from reprisals by employers.

"(Amnesty) is something that's very much needed in this country," Arturo Rodriguez, the national president of the United Farm Workers of America, said after addressing the crowd in Spanish from a stage.

"We have literally millions of Latinos and people of other ethnici-

ties performing the work that other people don't want to do ... and they're treated like second-class citizens," he said.

Rodriguez is the son-in-law of farm workers union founder Cesar Chavez. He came from California to lead the march and rally.

"Cesar Chavez marched and sacrificed and worked, and we have to continue the same practice," he said.

In February, the AFL-CIO Executive Council passed a resolution calling for federal legislation granting amnesty to the 6 million undocumented workers in the United States. Most of Washington state's more

than 100,000 agricultural workers are undocumented.

One worker, Miguel Velasquez, said he participated in the very first Bracero Program, a guest worker program that brought Mexicans into the United States to work on a temporary basis in the '50s and '60s.

He pointed to the many young children, some in strollers, who joined in the march and rally.

"This is what you call education," he said. "These kids are going to remember this for the rest of their lives."

Many marchers said they make \$6.50 an hour. Others said they get

"We cannot feed our families with these low wages and we will stop working if necessary to get a fair wage."

— Arnulfo Ramirez, Mattawa farm worker

paid \$9 or \$10 per bin of apples — about \$5 less than they got three year ago.

"We cannot feed our families with these low wages and we will

stop working if necessary to get a fair wage," said Mattawa farm worker Arnulfo Ramirez.

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Rally: Mayor says march could have been planned better

From front page

Lupe Gamboa, director of the union in Washington state, noted that in the early 90s only about 300 undocumented workers turned out for such rallies, many of them afraid to show their faces for fear of deportation.

"Everyone knows (agriculture) depends on the undocumented workers, and we think that isn't just," Gamboa said.

"You can't rely on this work force and at the same time deny them basic legal stature. ... More of them are willing to stand up for their rights."

Former Washington state Gov. Mike Lowry, state Rep. Phyllis Kinney, D-Seattle, Jim Davis,

Democratic candidate for 4th District congressional seat, John Boonstra, executive minister of the Washington Association of Churches and Virginia Nesmith, director of the National Migrant Ministry also attended the rally.

The Mattawa march also is aimed at pressuring U.S. and Mexican governments to hold public hearings on allegations that Washington's apple industry is guilty of numerous violations of minimum wage, health and safety regulations and labor laws.

Nesmith said her organization would write letters to industry and legislators, and would arrange boycotts or raise money to help those who have been unjustly fired.

"We're with you all the way in the struggle in whatever you need," Nesmith said.

If growers and packers are found at fault, it could lead to economic sanctions against apple exports to Mexico under the North American Free Trade Agreement, Gamboa said.

When asked if the march will do any good, Mattawa Mayor Judy Esser said she didn't know.

During her 8-year tenure as mayor of the tiny Eastern Washington community, Esser has rallied for decent housing for both migrant workers and farm workers who swell the town's population

during harvest times.

Seasonal wages, she said, don't go far enough to pay rent.

As for the march, Esser said organizers should have planned better. One young boy, she said, was bumped by a car on the march from Desert Aire to Mattawa.

"To try and handle 3,500 marchers on the road with only three officers was bizarre," said Esser, who rode with the police during the march. "No body was here from the state (Washington State Patrol) and no one was here after noon from the county. There was a lot of confusion."

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