

Union tries unconventional ways to help apple farmers, laborers

Workers to join in rally, march, news conference this week

By Shirley Westworth
Herald Basin bureau

Union leaders are looking beyond traditional strike and bargain tactics to improve farm worker pay.

The United Farm Workers of America plans to unveil its Fair Trade Apple Campaign at an 11 a.m. news conference Thursday at Seattle's Pike Place Market.

Thursday's conference is a prelude to a Sunday rally and march in Yakima that also will support amnesty for about 3 million undocumented workers living illegally in the United States. The rally begins with a 10 a.m. Mass in Miller Park, followed by a three-mile march. Event organizers expect 7,000 to march.

Labor leaders have been talking for months about how growers and farm laborers can work together to gain greater returns from apple industry profits.

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a good deal of agricultural profit gets siphoned off by the middle man and doesn't get back to growers or workers," said Jeff Johnson, research director for the Washington State Labor Council. "The irony is that farmers and workers are at the bottom of the food chain."

Although labor leaders said they have put out feelers to individual growers and retailers, officials from groups such as the Washington State Apple Commission and the Washington Growers League said this week that they had not yet heard of the campaign.

Greg Batch, spokesman for the Apple Commission, was intrigued.

"I'll be interested to see what they say," he said.

Lupe Gamboa, regional director of the UFW, said the union wants to learn from farmers what sort of price they need to turn a profit and stay in business. The union would then ask retailers to seek that price and support those farmers who sign contracts with workers specifying fair wages and benefits.

In turn, union members and other supporters such as church groups would spearhead an educational campaign to tell consumers why they should buy apples labeled as belonging to the fair trade alliance.

"Up to now we've been fighting with the employers, but it's time to take on the retailers," Gamboa said. "They have to bear responsibility for worker conditions as well. I don't think they want college students, church people and workers picketing their stores to protest worker conditions."

In some states, retailers have supported the union by

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