

With these friends, who needs enemies?

The old gangsters advise: Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. Now the recent trials of the venerable United Farm Workers suggest turning the old saying on its head: Keep a close eye on your enemies but an even closer eye on your friends.

It is getting difficult for the union, founded by the late Cesar Chavez, to know who its friends are in California. UFW officials are fighting for legislation to make more evenhanded the lopsided process through which farm workers and growers negotiate labor contracts. The 428 certification elections that the union has won since 1975 have resulted in less than 200 contracts with growers.

The union says growers are negotiating in bad faith; the growers say the union is just bad at negotiating.

Enter SB 1736 and SB 1756. The two measures, which have passed both chambers of the Legislature and now await action by the governor, are backed by California Senate President Pro-Tem John Burton, a top Democrat and the UFW's unofficial guardian angel in the state Legislature. SB 1736 provides for binding arbitration, forcing growers to play fair or else have a contract imposed on them by an arbitrator.

Growers hate it. Why would Goliath need an arbitrator to deal with David?

SB 1756 is a watered-down version that is believed to stand a better chance of becoming law. It dumps binding arbitration in favor of a mediator, limits the number of contracts the UFW may dispute, and "sunset" the whole deal by requiring that it be reauthorized by whoever is governor five years down the road.

Growers hate that bill too. They would just as soon leave



RUBEN NAVARRETE JR.

things the way they are — stacked in their favor.

It was a concern over such inequity in bargaining that, 40 years ago, prompted the founding of the UFW in the first place. The assumption was that if farm workers organized into a collective, they could resist being mistreated.

Nowadays, the union says it is getting mistreated by someone it once considered a friend: Democratic Gov. Gray Davis. Aides to the governor say he is concerned about what could be a devastating impact on the state's largest industry if binding arbitration prevails.

In his first term in office, Davis has cemented a reputation for being one of the most calculating political animals in American public life. The current calculation: Governor Davis would like to become President Davis, and he knows that the only friend he needs to get there is about \$100 million in ready cash. So the UFW — and anyone else — would be wise not to get between the California governor and that giant ATM known as political fund raising.

Agriculture interests have contributed nearly \$2 million to Davis' re-election war chest, and they will likely give millions more if Davis runs for president in 2004. That includes more than \$100,000 last month, around the time that the Democratic-controlled Legislature was debating SB 1736, which growers are demanding that Davis veto.

Davis got the message. Obediently, he seems ready to let SB 1736 die on the vine by signing the more lenient SB 1756. Growers who like the status quo won't be thrilled, but they can stomach this weaker tonic for five years.

What is harder to swallow is what has happened to farm labor politics in California in recent years. Once upon a time, the UFW could bank on support from Democrats such as former Gov. Jerry Brown, who in 1975 signed the landmark Agricultural Labor Relations Act.

That law was supposed to do exactly what the state Senate bills are attempting to do now — level the playing field in farm labor talks. The reason you need these new bills is because growers have showed that they would rather pay lawyers exorbitant fees to find and exploit loopholes than pay Mexican farm workers a little respect.

In the 1970s, the roadblocks to achieving better treatment for farm workers were usually put down by Republicans. Former Gov. Ronald Reagan was not above gobbling down grapes in front of television cameras to show his contempt for the UFW's grape boycott.

Now everything has changed. Pragmatic Democrats like Davis — who served as Brown's chief of staff — have grown tired of conceding the agridollars to Republicans.

California agribusiness is a \$27 billion-a-year industry, and its lobbyists in Sacramento and Washington buy themselves into the good graces of elected officials in the state as effortlessly as one might purchase new farm equipment.

Talk about equity. The way Democrats like Gray Davis see it, why should only one party's principles be up for sale?