

# Contract bill march culminates at Capitol

Salinas area residents take part in rally urging Davis to sign legislation

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SACRAMENTO — Led by flag-carrying horseback riders, dancers with feathered headdresses and elected officials, more than 3,000 farm workers and supporters Sunday marched on the Capitol seeking to strengthen their collective bargaining power with growers.

Organized by the United Farm Workers, the Capitol rally ended an 11-day, 165-mile march from Merced intended to increase pressure on the governor to sign a bill that could lead to binding arbitration when contract negotiations stall.

Dubbed the "March for the Governor's Signature," participants came from as far away as Salinas, Visalia and the Coachella Valley.

"Gov. (Gray) Davis, there is no economic, there is no moral reason why you should not sign SB 1736," said UFW President Arturo Rodriguez.

Senate leader John Burton, D-San Francisco, the bill's author, added that it is a disgrace the march was necessary to ask a Democratic governor to sign it.

"We should be here celebrating the signing," said Burton, adding that if Davis vetoes the bill "his reputation will be tarnished all throughout America."

Gerardo Leon, who lives in the Salinas-Watsonville area, said he's worked under a contract since 1976 with such benefits as a medical plan and pension as well as \$10 a hour in pay.

"What is more important than everything is the respect that the company shows us as workers" because of the contract, Leon said.

The bill is bitterly opposed by growers, who have argued that the measure would give farm workers an unfair advantage in contract negotiations and drive up the cost of agricultural products.

"Senate Bill 1736 will increase the costs of fruits and vegetables for consumers, dramatically increase farm operation costs and ultimately drive the family farmer and rancher out of business — leaving no jobs for both growers and farm workers," A.G. Kawamura, chairman of the Western Growers Association, said in a prepared statement Sunday.



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**United Farm Workers President Arturo Rodriguez, left, and union co-founder Dolores Huerta lead a march Sunday to the Capitol in Sacramento.**

## What's next

Senate Bill 1736 is expected to go to the governor soon. He'll have 30 days to act on it once it arrives on his desk.

The conflict over SB 1736 has put the governor in a tough spot, given his close association with unions and his efforts to build support among growers.

"The governor hasn't made up his mind," Steve Maviglio, the governor's press secretary, said

Sunday. "He has 20 years of working for the farm workers, but we also need to protect agriculture as more and more farms go out of business."

SB 1736 would give growers and workers 90 days to negotiate a contract after a pro-union vote. If that's unsuccessful, either side can notify the Agricultural Labor Relations Board, which would have to mandate a 30-day period of mediation.

Failure here would require the board to mandate binding arbitration, with the outcome subject to judicial review.

Assemblyman Simon Salinas, D-Salinas, who participated in the march, said there is no guarantee who would win in arbitration, so the bill may improve negotiations.

"The hope here is instead of having to go to arbitration, the parties will negotiate in good faith on both sides," Salinas said.

The UFW has made this bill a top priority, maintaining a vigil outside the Capitol since the bill was passed plus organizing a publicity event each day of the march, such as a newspaper advertisement signed by celebrities and a one-day fast by some legislators.

"This is important to tell our Gov. Gray Davis to sign the bill so we don't have to suffer when we try to make a contract with the growers," said Mamo Martinez of Indio, a one-time farm worker who worked on the march staff.

Marchers complained about what they said are delaying tactics by growers to avoid signing contracts — the UFW has said only 185 of 428 cases where workers voted to unionize have resulted in a contract in the last 27 years.

"We came here so unions can negotiate with an arbitrator or whatever they need to get it done and not just be waiting and never get an answer," said Sabina Tapia of Visalia, who was with her husband, Modesto, a nursery worker.

Gabriel Tapia of Watsonville said he has picked strawberries for 22 years without a contract, receiving about \$8 an hour with no benefits.

"We want this to be signed into law because we want to be able to sign contracts so we can live better," Gabriel Tapia said.

Without a contract, Modesto Tapia added, "ranchers can throw out the older workers and bring in the newer ones."

Martinez added that contracts allow workers to meet such needs as keeping their children healthy and paying the costs of maintaining a home.

"It's better for the whole community," Martinez said.

In his statement, Kawamura called SB 1736 possibly unconstitutional, "needless" in light of existing tools to ensure good faith contract negotiations and a danger to "our No. 1 economic benefit (agriculture) at a time when this state can't afford it"