

A Stronger Simon Could Have Helped Farmers

There's a good chance that mushroom on your pizza came from a farm in Oxnard, and I don't mean to alarm you, but I might have touched it.

Curiosity got the best of me, but I only fingered a few nubs while touring the Pictsweet Mushroom Farm. I went up there because the mushroom finds itself at the epicenter of California politics these days.

Barbra Streisand, Warren Beatty, Martin Sheen—the usual suspects—stand in unison behind the rights of California farm workers and a bill that would give them greater bargaining power with employers. The bill has cleared the Legislature and now sits before Gov. Gray Davis.

It's classic Gray's Anatomy. On one hand, he's got a relatively pro-labor record, and happens to be the guy who officially designated the state holiday for Cesar Chavez.

On the other hand, he has an undiagnosed compulsive fund-raising disorder, and growers just forked over \$100,000 to his campaign.

Unsurprisingly, insiders say Davis is leaning toward growers and a veto of the bill. Or, as a Davis flack explained it to me, "He's going to do what's best for the economy."

Yes. And George Bush is going to do what's best for the environment.

On Monday, I met with a Pictsweet employee named Alfredo Zamora at a downtown

Oxnard cafe. Zamora, 43, works between seven and 12 hours a day, six days a week. This was his day off.

Zamora and 20-plus colleagues grub away in dank, primitive growing rooms that smell faintly of barnyard manure, giving them a great deal in common with the state Legislature. He wears a miner's flashlight helmet and climbs mushroom bunk beds to pick the vegetable, secured against falls with a ceiling cable attached to a belt harness.

For each 3-pound basket of mushrooms Zamora picks, he gets 48 cents. In 14 years, he said, his annual pay has gone from roughly \$18,000 to \$22,000, which means he's losing ground in real dollars.

"If you don't like it," Zamora quotes his boss as saying, "there's the door. And the door is wide."

Pictsweet workers are represented by the UFW, but the union hasn't been able to negotiate a contract with Pictsweet the entire time Zamora's been there. Dozens of farm worker groups are in the same boat across the state, and the bill on the governor's desk would send such disputes to an arbitrator.

Growers cry that the UFW doesn't bargain in good faith, and they claim many farms will go under if forced to make concessions.

This whole mess can actually be blamed on Bill "Simple"

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Simon.

If the Republican candidate for governor weren't such a brick, farmers would have hopped aboard his wagon, and Davis would have signed this bill by now.

The poor, put-upon ag industry loves to bankroll pols who wave the flag for smaller government, even as farmers scam public subsidies like champs. But with Simon showing no detectable pulse, the aggies threw money in the direction of Davis, who fetches like a wirehair terrier: He's up to \$1.5 million, and still sniffing.

I don't know what pizza toppings the governor likes, but ordering a pie with him could get very complicated. Did the olive lobby write him a bigger check? Or was it the bell pepper cooperative?

Back to Pictsweet. There is another side to the story, and I found it when I drove out to the farm. "If it's so horrible here," a plant official asked me, "why have some of these guys stayed 20 and 30 years?"

Because in relative terms, it's a pretty good deal. Unlike itinerant pickers who slave away in the fields, this is a year-round operation, with limited medical benefits and three weeks of paid vacation after two years, plus bonuses. The plant official claimed

A union mushroom farm in Monterey offers a slightly better package, and employees can more easily air grievances. But at Pictsweet, I saw employees wearing "No to UFW" T-shirts. The union calls them company stooges, but many Pictsweet employees have tried to dump the UFW, claiming it hasn't done a thing for them.

"We are not willing to pay another tax/fee of any kind to the union," one employee wrote me in a four-page screed.

I'm not sure how Pictsweet workers became Exhibit A in the argument for the arbitration bill. But it seems to me a much better case can be made for the hundreds of people I saw bent over the fields of the Oxnard Plain as I drove away.

Many of those workers have union representation but no contract, just like Pictsweet employees. But they make half the salary and have none of the benefits.

That's \$10,000 a year or so. Certainly not enough to take up a collection and match the campaign contribution made by their ag bosses.

I had a cup of coffee recently with Peter Camejo, the Green Party candidate for governor, and he had a thought.

"Do you know how to get Gray Davis to change his position on an issue?" he asked.

No, how?

"Tell him the check bounced."

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