

ENGLISH SECTION

Hollywood actors lend support to farm workers' labor demand

STOCKTON, California - Scores of actors and other prominent Hollywood figures lent their support Wednesday to hundreds of farm workers who are marching on Sacramento to urge Gov. Gray Davis to sign into law farm labor legislation.

Actors Jack Nicholson, Robert Redford, Danny Glover, Sean Penn, Ed Asner, and their Hispanic colleagues Edward James Olmos, Hector Elizondo, Luis Valdez and Richard Montoya, were among the many celebrities who signed an open letter Wednesday to Gov. Davis urging him to expand farm worker labor rights by signing bill SB 1736.

The bill would require California's Agricultural Labor Relations Board to impose mediation first and then binding arbitration on stalled contract talks between unionized farm workers and California's powerful agribusiness owners.

Members of the United Farm Workers Union (UFW), who began their march in Merced and have already covered some 150 miles en route to the state capital, handed out copies of the letter here.

The letter also bears the signatures of Barbra Streisand, Warren Beatty, Marlon Brando, Annette Bening, and James Cann.

By making scheduled stops in Manteca, Stockton, Lodi and Galt, the group is following in the historic footsteps of UFW founder Cesar Chavez and his first march on the state capital in 1966.

The UFW is calling the proposed legislation the most important agrarian reform since Chavez' successful 1975 effort to get farm workers the right to unionize. In the open letter, the UFW points out that farm workers are not only the lowest paid workers, but are also among the most exploited, noting that although the agricultural industry pays some 70 million dollars a year to the state in taxes, farm workers receive scant aid to improve their living conditions.

The UFW's demand has also been endorsed by Richard Dreyfuss, Robin Wright, Valerie Harper, Esai Morales, Robert Altman, Steve Bing, Bradley Whitford, Christina Applegate, Joey Pantoliano, Dana Delaney, Frank Pierson, Tommy Schlamme, Betty Thomas and Ed Begley.

In the letter, farm workers express their belief that bill SB 1736 is a good initiative not only for themselves, but for all of California.

Other less famous people, such as the workers who have been offering the marchers a place to sleep along the way and Hispanic politicians, such as Antonio Villaraigosa, former speaker of the California State Assembly, have joined the march to Sacramento.

The 10-day "March to Request the Governor's Signature" is scheduled to arrive next Sunday at the northern steps of the state Capitol building, where another group of UFW members is holding a hunger strike to pressure Davis to sign the bill into law.

UFW leader Arturo Rodriguez expressed hope that the governor would sign the bill, which the powerful and deep-pocketed growers' lobby is asking him to veto.

"This letter signed by such famous and influential people confirms that our demand is not only fair for us workers, but for all Californians, from low-income rural communities to the entertainment industry," Rodriguez said.

The bill was introduced by Democratic state Sen. John Burton and has already approved by the California state Senate.

UFW co-founder Dolores Huerta plans to hand the letter personally to Gov. Davis on Sunday.

