

Opinion

Media might as well have joined worker march

STRANGE JUXTAPOSITIONS AROUND here in California.

So I wasn't surprised to find myself at a long-planned and well-attended health fair for farm workers sponsored by D'Arrigo Bros. Co. of California on the same day that the United Farm Workers union was demonstrating in Sacramento for Gov. Gray Davis to impose binding arbitration on growers.

Screaming that growers don't care about farm workers and that government should force them to open up their hearts and wallets, the UFW culminated an 11-day march with a vigil urging Davis to sign Senate Bill 1736. The bill would lead to binding arbitration when contract negotiations fail.

Meanwhile, in Salinas, more than 2,500 employees of D'Arrigo and their families were enjoying healthy food, health screenings, live music and educational opportunities at D'Arrigo's "Joy of Healthy Living" fair. D'Arrigo is one company that provides health insurance for all its employees. This event was part of an effort to encourage D'Arrigo employees to consume their 5 a Day and to live a healthier lifestyle through exercise, good diets and proper health care.

And half an hour south of Salinas, about a thousand more farm workers were dancing and partying at a farm worker appreciation day in Greenfield.

STATE MASCOT: That's California for you. If the state truly wanted to represent itself with an official animal, it should choose a two-headed giraffe. One head would lead the creature forward, while the other — sporting peace signs and union tattoos — would randomly turn around and bite itself in the butt.

Meanwhile, the state's media would perch like dodo birds on the butt-biting head and squawk about the lack of direction and human rights in California.

SB 1736 would give growers and workers 90 days to work out a contract after a pro-union vote by the workers. If negotiations are unsuccessful, either side can turn to the Agricultural Labor Relations Board, which would have to mandate a 30-day mediation period. If that fails, the labor relations board would then mandate binding arbitration.

Four days after the UFW march concluded in Sacramento, supporters of SB 1736 rewrote another bill, SB 1592, to include language to that of SB 1736 after the governor voiced concerns privately. The two bills were very similar.

Growers argue that the bill would allow workers to start with unrealistic compensation demands, knowing that even if the grower rejected it, they would have to go to arbitration. They say that the bill would raise the cost of doing business for growers



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and could drive some out of business and that it would increase the cost of product at the store.

Growers also say that farm workers already can turn to the Agricultural Labor Relations Board if they are frustrated in negotiations.

The UFW counters that arbitrators will be fair and would reject unreasonable demands by either side. The UFW points out that other industries have arbitration and haven't suffered, so agriculture shouldn't either.

And the UFW says farm worker protections aren't adequate because of the transient nature of the workers and the long time it takes for courts to make rulings.

As good as it is in raising public awareness of its goals, the UFW falls short in some of its slogans this time around. It called its 165-mile march from Merced to Sacramento the "March for the Governor's Signature." As inspirational battle cries go, that ranks right up there with "Don't Spill the Spaghetti!"

The Salinas paper did a good job of covering both D'Arrigo's event and the appreciation day in Greenfield. But like other California media outlets, it relied far too heavily on the UFW viewpoint in reporting on SB 1736.

Now, I'm not saying that SB 1736 is a bad idea. I tend to support the concept of living wages for workers.

Ambivalent as I am to the fate of SB 1736 — I can see the arguments on both sides — I think the California media have shown nothing but disdain for the growing community in their coverage of this issue. And that is a travesty.

Their news coverage has been terribly biased in favor of the UFW. Much of it has only included the viewpoint of agribusiness as an afterthought.

When the California media have quoted someone from agribusiness, it has frequently been from a prepared statement, while much of the UFW quotes come from live interviews and multiple sources.

In fact, the only thing that annoys me more in this situation is Ed Begley Jr.

Who's Ed Begley Jr., you ask? My point exactly.

Begley is, for the lack of a better term, a movie star. He turned up on Phil "My-Hair's-Still-Silver-and-My-Politics-Still-Pink" Dono-

hue's new ratings bomb, er, show, with Melissa Gilbert on Aug. 24. Proving has-beens of a feather do, indeed, flock together, the two Hollywood types demanded that Davis sign SB 1736 in order to make life fairer for farm workers.

With all the attention on ag workers, I reckon, stars can really stick it to their domestic help.

Even more annoying, one group of stars took out petition ads in entertainment rags beseeching the governor to sign the bill. As if "A River Runs Through It" and "Apocalypse Now" qualify Robert Redford and Marlon Brando to comment on agribusiness. And don't forget, these people come from an industry that thinks Adam Sandler deserves \$25 million per picture.

JUST THE FACTS, MA'AM: That's not to say that celebrities aren't entitled to their opinions, however irrelevant. But journalists reporting news stories are not so entitled, a basic tenet of journalism school that the members of the California media have forgotten. They are there to report facts accurately and fairly. On Aug. 25, when both sides fruitlessly waited for the governor to sign or veto SB 1736, the coverage was abysmal.

KCBS, one of the larger radio stations out of the San Francisco Bay Area, can be heard up and down the Central Coast. It considers itself a statewide news source, and it covered the UFW march with several two-minute stories every half-hour for most of Aug. 25.

Despite the fact that Western Growers Association chairman A.G. Kawamura made himself and his public relations staff available to talk on Aug. 25 — and for that matter, constantly for the weeks leading up to it — media outlets like KCBS disdained to give him the chance to air the growers' point of view.

KCBS occasionally said a WGA spokesman said the bill would hurt growers. Usually its reporters just said agricultural interests fiercely opposed the bill and then launched into another long monologue explaining how the bill would help compensate for "decades of unfair labor practices by growers."

I've been a journalist for 14 years, and I've tended to react a bit defensively when people criticize the media as biased. Too many consumers mistake editorials or columns like this one for news articles. Or, for that matter, TV news for, well, news.

But I have to admit it. Anyone who thinks the California media has been fair to growers on this issue must also think that Bill Clinton was a gentleman to interns and that George W. Bush actually cares about people who make less than a couple of hundred grand a year.

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