

Farmers appeal to Davis

Labor bills would cripple industry, growers say in face of UFW campaign.

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SACRAMENTO — Grower organizations Friday pleaded with Gov. Gray Davis to veto farm labor bills they said would put many farmers out of business.

In their first press conference on the issue, farm groups sought to counter a nonstop publicity campaign by the United Farm Workers union, which wants the governor to sign one of the bills.

One of the measures would allow workers to seek binding arbitration if they voted to unionize but a farmer refused to sign a contract.

Another, put together by UFW supporters as a compromise, would substitute a mediator for the arbitrator. The mediator would recommend contract terms to the state farm labor board, and its decision could be appealed to the state Supreme Court.

Still fearing a gubernatorial veto, the union agreed to a third bill that would allow no more than 75 contracts to be mediated, and the law would go out of existence in five years.

Farm leaders insisted there is no difference between the bills as far as growers are concerned.

"These bills are not a compromise," said A. G. Kawamura, chairman of the Western Growers Association. "They represent a very, very strong attack on the agriculture industry of California.

He said both bills "would allow a third party ... to force a contract on a grower." The farmer's only choice, he

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said, "will be to accept the contract or close up his business."

Manuel Cunha, head of the Nesei Farmers League, called for the governor to veto the bills and appoint a blue-ribbon panel to recommend changes in the state's basic farm labor organizing law.

A spokesman for the UFW, which says most farmers drag their feet indefinitely on signing a contract after workers vote for the

union, said the growers' claim that the legislation would put them out of business is "ludicrous."

The spokesman, Marc Grossman, said the mediation limit of 75 cases means that the law would apply to "one 1/1000 of one percent" of the 8,600 farms in California.

"The growers will never be satisfied with any compromise other than the status quo, where farm workers don't get contracts," Grossman said.