

Growers, labor turn up heat on three ag bills

Legislation targets changes in collective bargaining

By Jake Henshaw

Californian Capitol Bureau

SACRAMENTO — Both sides are keeping up the pressure on the governor over bills targeting impasses in contract negotiations between growers and farm workers.

The growers, backed by cases of fresh produce, held their first media event Friday to denounce the legislation, and the United Farm Workers continued their vigil at the Capitol.

At issue are three bills passed by the Legislature, all aimed at setting up a system to ensure an end to

At a glance

Three bills targeting impasses in contract talks between growers and farm workers: Senate Bill 1736 would impose binding arbitration on stalled negotiations; SB 1156 would shift troubled negotiations into mediation; and SB 2596 also would use mediation but would limit it to 75 cases over five years.

at least some cases in which workers vote for collective bargaining but never successfully negotiate a contract with a grower.

While the UFW has argued that some growers deliberating drag out these negotiations endlessly to avoid a contract, growers

had attributed the delays to various reasons, ranging from economic conditions to union abandonment of the negotiations or desertification.

Senate Bill 1736 would impose binding arbitration on stalled negotiations, SB 1156 would shift troubled negotiations into mediation, and SB 2596 also would use mediation but would limit it to 75 cases over five years.

SB 2596 was passed in the final hours of the legislative session for the year in a bid to gain the support of Davis who had signaled interest in a limited program at best. He hasn't indicated any position on the legislation.

Representatives of 20 agricultural groups said Friday that they played no role



RICHARD GREEN/THE CALIFORNIAN FILE PHOTO

Genaro Juarez harvests lettuce in August.

in negotiating SB 2596 and that they oppose all the measures because they essentially impose binding arbitration, which would give workers an unfair advantage.

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"These bills are not a compromise," said A.G. Kawamura, chairman of the Western Growers Association, whose members produce half the fresh produce and nuts in the nation.

"They represent a very, very strong attack on the agricultural industry and, the end result, a horrible attack on the economy of California."

Kawamura and Mike Webb, a lobbyist for the same association, said possible consequences of the bills include government control over cropping decisions, more unions, higher food prices and increased imports.

Growers said the governor should veto the bills and then set up a blue ribbon panel representing all interests to review appropriate changes in the existing farm labor law.

"If we are going to deal with the issue, we need to attack the issue and that is the Agricultural Labor Relations Act," said Manuel Cunha, president of the Nisei Farmers League of the San Joaquin Valley. "There's where the problems are and

that's what we need to do, rather than a bureaucratic process which the union is attempting to do."

But Grossman dismissed the notion that the limited SB 2596 threatens the entire agricultural industry, noting it could only affect 75 cases in an industry with 86,000 farmers.

"This bill will only affect one 1/1000th of 1 percent of the total farms in California over a five-year period," Grossman said. "How is that going to devastate the agricultural industry?"

He also rejected the proposal for a blue ribbon commission as more of the same.

"Farm workers have learned over the last 27 years all the ways that growers can get out of having the law enforced so the farm workers can have union contracts," Grossman said.

"We are not really interested in discussing another system that will result in another 27 years where farm workers don't get what they voted for in secret ballot election, which are the life-changing benefits of UFW contracts."

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