

BAK.CA
9-16-02



Vic Pollard

SACRAMENTO
BUREAU CHIEF

CAPITOL BEAT

UFW officials think better of brazen strategy

SACRAMENTO — A couple of behind-the-scenes developments you might have missed:

In the United Farm Workers union's campaign to get Gov. Gray Davis to sign its top-priority bill, someone came up with an idea for an arm-twisting tactic that nearly set a new standard for audacity.

With marches, fasts and vigils that recall the days of the late Cesar Chavez, the union is going all out to put pressure on the governor to sign legislation that would give workers the right to arbitration or mediation when growers refuse to sign a labor contract.

Union officials fear he may veto it. In a re-election campaign in which he is tapping growers along with everyone else for campaign contributions, Davis made it clear he did not want a major farm labor bill on his desk this year.

But even old-timers were startled Sept. 5 when the union issued a press release announcing it would picket a Davis fund-raising event the next morning at the Beverly Hills home of supermarket magnate Ron Burkle.

With former President Bill Clinton attending the \$2,500-per-person breakfast, workers would hold signs demanding "Governor, sign the bill," alongside red and black union flags, no doubt with TV news cameras swarming around them.

When you're trying to get Gray Davis on your side, however, the last thing you want to do is stand between him and his campaign money.

Someone in the union soon realized that, apparently — or had it pointed out to them.

Within just a few hours, the union issued another announcement saying the picketing had been canceled.

There was no explanation and there still hasn't been.

Union spokesman Marc Grossman would say only that UFW President Arturo Rodriguez called from Washington, D.C., and

ordered the protest canceled, just as he was boarding a plane and his cell phone was cutting out.

"That's all I know," Grossman said.

...

Sen. Jim Costa's proposed \$9 billion bond issue to build the high-speed rail system sailed through the state Senate rather easily this year.

That may have been partly because of votes it got from lawmakers who didn't think Costa was really serious, that he would eventually drop the plan to ask voters for an astronomical amount of money for a project they didn't view as realistic.

But it quickly bogged down when it reached the floor of the Assembly in the final days of the legislative session last month.

In short, when legislators realized the measure was on the verge of going to the governor's desk, the age-old game of pork-barrel politics came into

play.

"Unlike the Senate, some people in the Assembly want to know, 'What's in it for me?'" said Assemblyman Dean Florez, D-Shafter, the bill's Assembly floor manager.

The upshot was, to get the votes needed for passage, Costa had to agree to an additional \$950 million to be used for improvements to existing passenger rail lines that would feed into the new "bullet train" system, mostly in the Los Angeles area.

How the money will be spread around will be decided later, but that's the way the bond issue got from \$9 billion to \$9.95 billion in a hurry.

That was only the first hurdle it faced.

When the bill came up for a vote, a group of Latino Assembly members decided to withhold their votes and block its passage unless Costa agreed to vote for a version of the UFW's arbitration bill.

A moderate Democrat who has long been supported by growers, he was the only Democratic lawmaker to vote against the union on a similar measure previously.

Costa apparently refused to bend, but in the end, he didn't have to. Assembly Speaker Herb Wesson, D-Los Angeles, persuaded the Latinos to back off.

Whether Davis will sign the bill isn't certain. He's not a big fan of high-speed rail, once describing it as a "Buck Rogers transportation system."

But supporters say there is little risk for him in letting voters decide whether they want to go into debt for the rail system.

If he signs it, the measure would go on the ballot in 2004.

If voters say yes, the bond issue would be used to build the first stretch of the system, from San Francisco to Los Angeles, with a stop in Bakersfield.