

Davis mulls farmworker labor bills

Union continues vigil at Capitol; growers wage letter-writing campaign.

By KIM BACA

The Associated Press

FRESNO — With a looming deadline to sign or veto a trio of bills that would revamp the state's farmworker labor contract negotiation process, both sides continue to pressure Gov. Gray Davis.

The United Farm Workers Union continues a vigil at the Capitol until Monday and plans a 36-hour vigil in Los Angeles on Sunday in hopes Davis will sign one of three bills designed to amend the 1975 Agricultural Labor Relations Act, which protects seasonal workers' rights to bargain with employers.

Growers are continuing a letter-writing campaign, calling the bills "unconstitutional and legally flawed," according to a form letter from the Western Growers Association.

Farmworkers are pushing for SB1736, which would require binding arbitration between farmworker unions and growers when they reach an impasse.

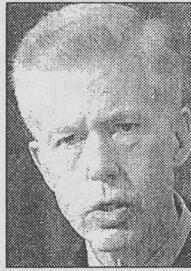
The bill would help them get raises,

health care and other benefits like other workers in America, farmworkers say, adding that growers often stall during contract negotiations and let the process drag on for years.

"We're only asking for what's fair," said Juan Negrete, 45, a father of six children who lives with several farmworkers in a two-bedroom apartment in Hanford to save money and send it back to his family in Mexico.

But farmers and other leaders of the state's \$27 billion agriculture industry strongly oppose SB1736 and related bills, saying they could put them out of business, especially when competing in the global market.

"The buyers of this country are buying products from outside the United States and they can get it tremendously cheaper," said Manuel Cunha Jr. of the Nisei Farmers League. "We won't be able to farm if the binding arbitrator says, 'You have to pay \$10 an hour and pay all these benefits.' There is going to be no more farmer."



Davis

In the final days of the legislative session last month, legislators and union officials worried about Davis vetoing the original bill, and passed two weaker versions, AB2596 and SB1156, which would require a mediator to recommend a labor contract that would be forwarded to the Agricultural Labor Relations Board. The board then would approve or reject the contract.

Davis is expected to veto the original bill, but may consider the second set of bills, which were created by his suggestions, said Marc Grossman, spokesman for the United Farm Workers Union.

"We feel hopeful the governor will sign the legislation because the last two bills are really his proposal," Grossman said.

Grossman said Davis' office met the union after UFW leaders, Hollywood stars and Democratic politicians pressured Davis to sign the original bill, an effort highlighted by a 10-day march through the Central Valley ending at the Capitol last month.

Davis has not taken a formal position on any version of the bill, but during the past month, Davis' staff has held teleconferences highlighting bills that improve agriculture operations.



Strawberry workers bent over in wet ditches.