

Davis signs farmworker labor bills

P E A C E



ON EARTH

Union allowed mediation in disputes; growers bitter over "illegal" legislation.

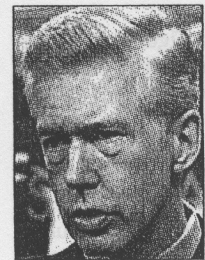
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SACRAMENTO — Forced to choose between bitter enemies in an election year, Gov. Gray Davis Monday sided with farmworkers and signed labor bills adamantly opposed by growers.

The controversial bills allow workers to seek mediation if farmers refuse to sign a contract after workers have voted to unionize.

The issue sparked months of emotional lob-



Davis

bying on both sides as well as marches and vigils by farm union supporters that recalled the era of the union's early days under the late Cesar Chavez.

"We're extremely happy that the governor signed this bill," said Dolores Huerta of Bakersfield, who co-founded the union with Chavez.

Arturo Rodriguez, president of the Keene-headquartered union, said, "The governor's signature will mean some of the poorest and most abused workers in California can win the life-changing benefits of union contracts for themselves and their families."

The governor's action was met with anger by growers, who argued that the measures would force them into union contracts that would put many of them out of business.

They also contended the bills unconstitutionally impose harsh labor rules on agriculture alone.

"Our members are shocked and angered that the Legislature has passed and the governor has signed into law legislation so patently illegal and potentially destructive to the California farmer," said Western Growers Association President Tom Nassif.

Mike Turnipseed, a Bakersfield land use consultant and farmer who is on the board of the state Farm Bureau, said the legislation is typical of the "bla-

Please turn to **BILL / A3**

BILL: Law gives 'poorest' greater clout; growers fear being driven out of work

Continued from A1

tant anti-business bills that these progressives have put forward, sending the message that California doesn't care about business."

Davis said the bills were the result of a "truly historic effort" between himself and the legislation's supporters.

He said he agreed with the union that the 1975 Agricultural Labor Relations Act, the nation's first farm union organizing law, needed revising to deal with foot-dragging by growers in signing contracts.

The union initially sought a bill by Senate leader John Burton, D-San Francisco, that would have allowed workers to seek arbitration when farm owners refuse to sign. Both sides would present their cases to an arbitrator, whose decision would be final.

However, Davis made it clear he felt that went too far, and threatened to veto the measure.

Burton then pushed a compromise bill that provided for a mediator, who would make a recommendation to the state Agricultural Labor Relations

Board, which would decide on the contract terms. The board's decision could be appealed to the state Supreme Court by either side.

In the face of more negative signals from Davis, a third bill by Assembly Speaker Herb Wesson, D-Los Angeles, limited the number of mediation cases to 75 and placed a five-year limit on the program.

Davis signed the latter two bills providing the limited mediation process.

Union officials said they would have preferred mediation, but were willing to settle for the bills they got.

"Whenever you have any kind of mediation," Huerta said, "you never come out with as strong a contract as you would like, but the main thing is, workers will have mediation, and have some way to correct the injustices that happen on any particular farm."

Grower representatives quarreled with the term compromise, saying the final negotiations were one-sided.

"There was no compromise," Turnipseed said, "because agriculture was not at the table."