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A Big Win for Farm Workers

Agriculture: Davis signs two bills mandating mediation in disputes. Growers call the new laws unconstitutional.

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SACRAMENTO—Gov. Gray Davis, caught between protests from the United Farm Workers union and political pressure from influential growers, on Monday signed legislation giving California farm laborers the right of mandatory mediation in deadlocked contract negotiations.

Davis waited until the last possible day to act on the controversial pair of bills, the focal point of one of the Legislature's most riveting battles this year. He made repeated efforts to prevent the legislation from reaching his desk, then later negotiated with UFW representatives to limit the scope of the two measures he signed Monday.

Representatives of California's \$27-billion agricultural industry condemned the legislation as unconstitutional and said it would force many family farms out of business and cause food prices to rise.

For the UFW, after years of decline and internal divisions, winning the right of mandatory mediation marks a triumph unprecedented since the passage of the 1975 agricultural labor relations law.

Under the companion bills—Senate Bill 1156 and Assembly Bill 2596—farm workers can ask the state Agricultural Labor Relations
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Board to impose mandatory mediation in cases where contract negotiations with growers have stalled, beginning in January. The bills limit the number of cases a party may bring to 75 and set a Jan. 1, 2008, expiration date on the remedy.

The legislation, which only applies to agricultural workers, exempts farmers who employ fewer than 25 people.

Farm workers, who have maintained a vigil outside the Capitol for weeks, greeted the news with shouts of joy.

"We're very excited," said UFW President Arturo Rodriguez, son-in-law of UFW founder Cesar Chavez. "Farm workers are like all working people: All they want is to be treated with respect and dignity. This ensures that is going to happen. It's definitely going to improve people's lives."

Davis' action marks the first changes in the state's landmark 1975 Agricultural Labor Relations Act, signed into law by Gov. Jerry Brown, whose chief of staff was Davis.

Growers reacted with anger and dismay.

'This law will correct a long injustice for the poorest in the state.'

Art Pulaski, secretary-general of the California Labor Federation

In a statement, Tom Nassif, president of the Western Growers Assn., which represents 3,500 farmers in California and Arizona, expressed shock and anger that Davis "has signed into law legislation so patently illegal and potentially destructive to the California farmer. This at a time when our industry is under attack by a flood of foreign imports and a weak farm economy."

Mike Webb, a lobbyist for the association and key player in the legislative battle over the bills, said there was a "good probability" that growers would challenge the law on constitutional grounds.

Growers contend that the new law actually imposes binding arbitration—not mediation—on negotiations between farmers and farm workers.



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