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ROBERT DURELL / Los Angeles Times

Ernestina Quinones, a United Farm Workers member, cheers in front of the state Capitol after Gov. Gray Davis signed two farm labor bills. The UFW mounted a massive campaign for the legislation.

"The mediator is imposing terms of the contract," Webb said. "They can call it what they like, but this is binding arbitration. California agriculture is the only major industry in the nation that is going to

have this draconian measure imposed on it, and that's unfair. The current system does work. Our fears are [the new legislation] is going to drive costs up for the family farmer, make it more diffi-

cult for them to compete with other states and other countries."

In a statement announcing his decision, Davis said the legislation would "offer a blueprint for addressing the most serious failings in the system when negotiations between growers and farm workers cannot be resolved."

Davis noted that in nearly 60% of the cases in which a farm workers union has won an election, the union hasn't been able to get a contract from management.

Under the system laid out by the legislation, the mediator will have the power to propose the terms of a binding contract if the two sides can't reach an agreement after 30 days of mediation.

Either side can appeal the contract terms to the labor relations board. The board's decision can be appealed to the state Court of Appeal or California Supreme Court.

The mediation will only apply to negotiations for first contracts.

Latino legislators, who united in unanimous support for the UFW legislation, praised Davis for signing the bills.

"I'm very pleased," said Assemblyman Tony Cardenas (D-Panorama City), whose father picked produce in the California fields during the 1940s and 1950s after emigrating from Mexico. "I think the Latino community is going to show a lot of appreciation for this."

Cardenas was one of dozens of legislators who joined a series of marches, fasts and vigils organized by the UFW to pressure Davis to sign the bills.

"I hope what this says is that Gray Davis appreciates farm workers," Cardenas said. "When farm workers vote for a union, the growers shouldn't be able to hide behind their high-powered lawyers."

Senate leader John Burton (D-San Francisco), who carried the original bill and subsequent versions in the Senate, had denounced Davis for trying to prevent the legislation from reaching his desk. Burton had warned that a veto would be the worst mistake of Davis' political career and would damage the governor's relationship with the Democrat-dominated Legislature, but he was gracious in victory Monday.

"I'm relieved," Burton said. "He was under tremendous pressure from growers, but I always had faith that he would do the right

thing. We're grateful that he did. It's one of the best feelings I've ever had in public life."

Supporters of the legislation said grower predictions of falling farms and rising food prices as a result of the bills were wildly overblown.

"I don't know anybody who wouldn't mind paying a little more for food for these people to have a decent standard of living for themselves and their children," Burton said. "I don't see it as hurting the economy."

UFW leaders and their supporters say loopholes in the 1975 labor-relations law—exploited by unscrupulous growers, they contend—made the passage of new legislation necessary.

"This fixes a broken law and will help farm workers have a fighting chance to win a fair contract with corporate growers," said Art Pulasaki, secretary-general of the California Labor Federation, the state's largest labor group. "Farm workers put food on our tables, but many are too poor to put food on their tables. This law will correct a long injustice for the poorest in the state."

In deciding whether to sign the legislation, Davis faced a dilemma: He could support poor farm workers, a constituency championed by Latinos and liberals, or side with California's most important industry and the growers who have contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to his reelection campaign.

With the election looming Nov. 5, Davis faced equally complex political calculations: He could shore up his base by signing the bill or veto the bill and curry favor in the Central Valley, an area crucial to a victory by GOP challenger Bill Simon Jr.

The UFW and its supporters in organized labor and elsewhere mounted a massive campaign to pressure Davis to sign the bill. Celebrities including Warren Beatty and Martin Sheen and AFL-CIO President John Sweeney were among the dozens of figures who made personal appeals to Davis to sign the legislation.

The UFW also waged a public campaign of marches, vigils, fasts and pickets to keep the issue in the public eye and on Davis' radar screen.

"Those of us in Sacramento have been seeing images five or six times a day of people fasting, praying, sitting around the Capitol," said Barbara O'Connor, who heads the Institute for the Study of Politics and Media at Cal State Sacramento. "I think it's been effective. It has kept his toes to the fire."

Other statewide officeholders—including Lt. Gov. Cruz Bustamante, Atty. Gen. Bill Lockyer and Treasurer Phil Angelides—came out in support of the UFW legislation.

"I do think that this year the governor is particularly vulnerable to issues that resonate with his traditional liberal constituency, and this is one that the liberal wing of the party has traditionally been behind," O'Connor said.

The political risk for Davis is "losing big-agriculture Democrats because it's a bread-and-butter liberal issue."

