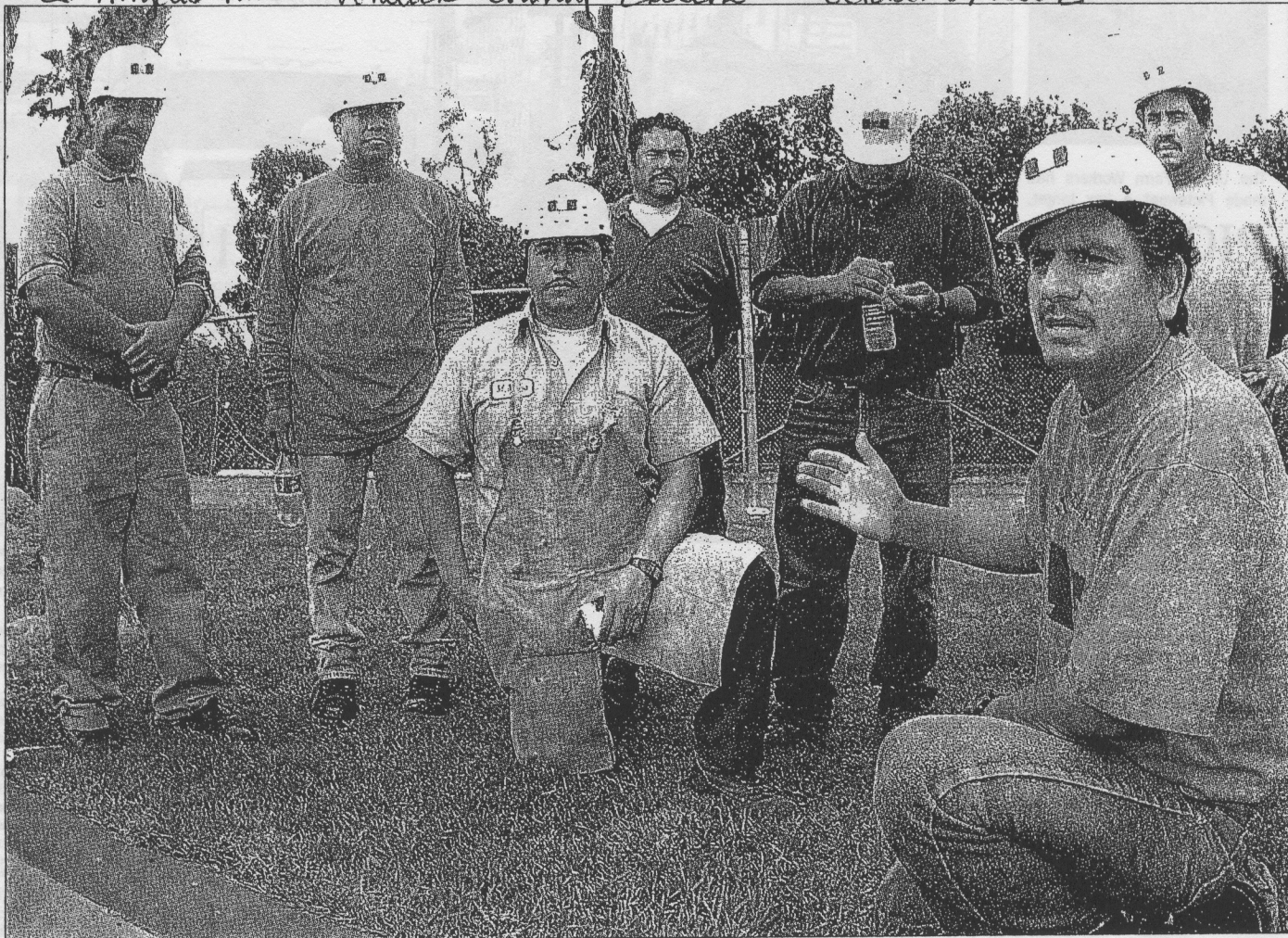


*'It is very good what has happened because it has given us the means to get a contract, so we don't have to fight any longer.'*

Manuel Solomon, picker, Pictsweet Mushroom Farm

Los Angeles Times - Ventura County Edition October 2, 2002



STEPHEN OSMAN / Los Angeles Times

Jesus Torres, far right, helped lead the push by Pictsweet Mushroom Farm workers for state legislation forcing mediation in deadlocked farm labor disputes. "We worked very hard to pass this law," he said. "We would expect to be one of the first beneficiaries."

## Ventura Farm Workers Hope New Labor Law Resolves Old Dispute

**Agriculture:** At the Pictsweet Mushroom plant, held up as a symbol of union battle, pickers believe mediation will lead to a contract.

By FRED ALVAREZ  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

First, the hard work, now the payoff.

After months of lobbying lawmakers and marching in the streets, workers at Southern California's largest mushroom farm said Tuesday that they believe they may be among the first to benefit from a new law aimed at

resolving deadlocked labor disputes.

The legislation, signed Monday by Gov. Gray Davis, permits state agricultural officials to impose mandatory mediation in cases in which farm labor negotiations reach an impasse.

That appears to be the case at the Pictsweet Mushroom Farm in Ventura, where workers have been without a contract since

1987 and talks in recent years between the company and the United Farm Workers have failed to progress.

"We have been the symbol for the need for this kind of legislation," said 43-year-old picker Jesus Torres, who has worked more than half his life at the mushroom farm and has helped lead the push for a new contract.

Over the last several months, Torres has joined other Pictsweet workers on a mission to reshape the state's landmark farm labor law, taking time off from his job in the plant's dank, dark growing

houses to testify before the Legislature and march on the Capitol in support of the legislation.

Now, armed with a powerful new negotiating tool, Torres said he believes Pictsweet workers may finally have the leverage they need to back up their demands for a pension plan, less costly medical insurance and better wages and benefits.

"We worked very hard to pass this law," Torres said. "We would expect to be one of the first beneficiaries."

A Pictsweet manager in Ventura  
Please see PICKERS, B8