

HIGH HOPES FOR FARM WORKERS (2/03)

Slowly but surely, the United Farm Workers Union has been scoring major victories in its struggle to help win decent working and living conditions for those who harvest our food,

The UFW most recently won the right to represent workers in the Northern California fields of the country's largest strawberry grower. That's Coastal Berry, which has more than 1600 employees in Northern and Southern California.

The employees' vote to be represented by the UFW was a sure sign that the union is finally winning the drive to unionize California's \$800 million-a-year strawberry industry that has preoccupied the UFW and its many supporters nationwide for nearly seven years.

Few UFW drives have been more ambitious or more important. Victory could very well lead to a breakthrough comparable to the winning of union rights from California's grape growers that marked the UFW's first major success three decades ago.

The union won the right to represent Coastal Berry's Southern California workers three years ago, but lost out to a bogus company-dominated union in a representation election at the firm's Northern California facility. Given a chance late last year to vote again, the Northern California workers opted for representation by the UFW, whose negotiations with Coastal Berry have gained the Southern California workers much better conditions than those in the north.

The union is currently negotiating a contract for the Northern California employees that is certain to at least match the terms of the precedent-setting Southern California contract. And those are by far the best terms ever won by farm workers.

The contract provides pay of up to \$12 an hour, a half-dozen paid holidays, paid vacations, employer-financed medical and dental insurance and other benefits that also cover workers' dependents – plus formal grievance procedures and a seniority system.

The contrast with how the vast majority of farm workers are treated is stunning. Most are mired in poverty, their pay and working and living conditions a national disgrace.

Strawberry pickers, Mexicans and Mexican Americans for the most part, do some of the roughest and most dangerous work of all. Yet they are paid less than \$10,000 a year and get few, if any, fringe benefits. They're fortunate if they have fresh drinking water and field toilets at work. They have no job security and almost no protection against the arbitrary acts of employers.

They work bent in half, picking the strawberries by hand, since the fruit is too fragile to be harvested except by stooping workers who move swiftly along narrow furrows a foot deep in water, bending to ground level to snatch up a berry, then another and another. The workers scarcely pause to straighten. Back ailments are common, but health insurance coverage rare.

They do that for as many as 12 hours a day. After that, it's home to a shack or tiny apartment or motel room, or to a house shared by two or three families or by a half-dozen or more single men. Some workers don't even have that: They sleep in tents or out in the open, under trees.

Workers who fall ill – and many do because of the extraordinarily heavy use of pesticides by strawberry growers – get little or no help from their employers or the government.

In addition to winning union protections for growing numbers of the strawberry pickers, the UFW has waged new and effective organizing campaigns among workers in several other crops.

Over the past few years the union has won contracts covering, among others, more than half of California's rose growers; most of the state's mushroom growers; one of its largest lettuce growers; vineyard workers at Washington state's largest winery, and employees of Florida's largest mushroom farm.

The UFW also has won legislation to force California growers to abandon stalling tactics that many have used to avoid reaching contract agreements with workers who vote for union representation. The new law gives growers seven months to reach an agreement or have an arbitrator draft one.

That's but one of many signs that some of our most deserving workers are finally winning the decent treatment that's been denied them far, far too many years.