

## FARM WORKERS NEED DRASTIC CHANGE (7/11)

No workers are more in need of union protection than the nation's miserably treated farm workers. Yet a promising new effort to ease their path to unionization has been blocked by one of their former champions, Democratic Gov. Jerry Brown of California, the nation's leading farm state.

Brown was rightly hailed for signing, in an earlier term as governor, the 1975 law that granted farm workers in California the collective bargaining rights denied them nationwide. It's the weapon farm workers must have if they are to escape poverty and the arbitrary and often harmful actions of grower employers.

But now, Brown has vetoed a bill sponsored by the United Farm Workers union, the UFW, that would have made it much easier for farm workers to unionize. Currently, they can be granted bargaining rights only if a majority working for a particular grower votes for unionization. The vetoed measure, the so-called Card-Check Bill, would have granted bargaining rights simply on the showing of union membership cards or petitions for union recognition signed by a majority of workers.

Farm workers, of course, are among our most important workers. They help feed us, after all. Their pay nevertheless averages less than \$10,000 a year, and most lack employer-paid health care and other benefits. They work hard, frequently under the blazing sun, with few – if any – rest breaks and without even such simple on-the-job amenities as fresh drinking water and toilets.

The UFW, which sponsored California's 1975 law, has been trying for many years to remedy farm workers' conditions by leading them in drives aimed at winning union contracts that promise them decent treatment and an effective voice in determining their wages, hours and working conditions.

It's not been easy for the UFW, even with the law in effect. Thanks mainly to employer intimidation and high worker turnover, the union has been able to sign up only a small part of California's farm labor force and to win only a relatively few contracts from growers. But it's an important start. Without the law, it would have been nearly impossible.

So why in the world did self-proclaimed farm worker advocate Jerry Brown veto the bill that would have strengthened the union rights granted farm workers in the bill he signed 36 years earlier?

Well, Brown didn't say much, but did say he didn't like the bill because it called for "drastic change." Which it did, of course. That, as Brown must know, is exactly what's needed.

Requiring union rights to be granted only by elections gives growers a great opportunity to unfairly pressure workers into voting against unionization – and many take full advantage of the opportunity.

It's common for growers faced with elections to require workers to attend meetings at which they rail against unions, threaten to fire union supporters and warn that they might have to go out of business if their farms are unionized, or at least greatly curtail operations and thus job opportunities.

"You're talking about voting on the employer's site, with foremen and supervisors making eye-contact with you after they've alluded to or flat out threatened you with the loss of your job or your housing," notes a UFW vice president, Armando Elenes. "It takes a lot of strength to even vote."

There's plenty of evidence that employers do indeed put lots of pressure on workers to vote against unionization. UFW President Arturo Rodriguez notes, for example, instances of growers pulling guns on workers who were trying to organize. That may seem exaggerated – but not to anyone who's experienced the superheated grower-worker confrontation up close.

The UFW is not giving up the struggle for Card-Check recognition. The union will soon re-introduce the Card-Check bill in Congress with the strong backing of the nation's labor leaders. Some of them call it the single most important labor bill in the country this year.

It certainly is for farm workers and should be for workers in other industries throughout the country who also seek Card-Check rights, and for anyone who wants decent treatment for those whose vital work helps put food on our tables.