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Chavez to plead for union's protection

FRESNO, Calif. (Reuter) — Farm labor union head Cesar Chavez said yesterday he would appeal to California Governor Edmund Brown Jr. to protect his organizers after vigilantes held them off a central California tomato ranch at gunpoint.

About 50 members of a national rightist citizens group called Posse Comitatus surrounded the ranch early yesterday when Chavez's organizers called to talk to workers about joining the United Farm Workers Union.

Three leaders of the posse were later arrested.

Under a law just signed by Brown, farm workers have the right to say in secret ballots whether they want to be represented by the Chavez union or its powerful opponent, the Teamsters union.

The vigilante group, which included one boy about 13 years old with an M-1 carbine, stopped the five organizers from talking with 160 farm workers who arrived at dawn.

Under the law the organizers have the right during the pre-vote period to talk to the field hands before they begin work.

The head of the posse, Jim McDaniel, told reporters: "We're armed and we mean a business. We don't want to hurt anyone. We just want to protect private property."

Sheriff's deputies told the union organizers they could not take action unless there was open violence.

A union organizer said: "It means we have to get shot first before we get any protection. It's suicide."

They made no attempt to force their way on to the field.

But later deputies went into the field to arrest Francis Gillings, one of the posse leaders, on an unpaid traffic warrant. As they wrestled him to the ground his gun went off, narrowly missing a sheriff's inspector.

Two other posse members were arrested when they tried to help Gillings.

Voting in the farm labor elections is expected to begin as early as next Friday on some ranches.

McDaniel told reporters that the Stockton farm his group was protecting would chase off both Chavez organizers and representatives of the Teamsters.