

Farm Union Ordered to Pay \$3 Million to Grower

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An Arizona jury has awarded nearly \$3 million in damages to a produce grower in a suit charging that the United Farm Workers used illegal tactics in a boycott of the company's lettuce. The Thursday verdict is likely to deal a severe blow to a union still recovering from the death of its dynamic founder and leader, Cesar Chavez.

It took the Yuma County Superior Court jury less than a day to return the verdict in favor of Bruce Church Inc., an agribusiness concern with large land holdings in California and Arizona. The suit alleged that the union illegally threatened grocery chains that sold the company's lettuce. The suit said the chains were told they would be linked to child abuse, pesticide contamination and sexual harassment.

Bruce Church had asked for \$9.7 million, but the jury awarded it \$2,898,280 in compensatory damages and \$1,000 in punitive damages, court officials said. The union was expected to appeal the verdict, but it could face bankruptcy if the award is upheld. The United Farm Workers has assets of about \$2 million, money that it had hoped to spend on membership drives and other programs in a hoped-for rejuvenation after Mr. Chavez's death. Chavez Testified at Trial

The verdict came less than two months after Mr. Chavez died in his sleep after he had testified for a second day in the trial. Mr. Chavez, who was 66, had been staying at a friend's house not far from the Yuma-area farm where he grew up. His family lost the farm in the Great Depression, sending Mr. Chavez on an odyssey that led to his founding the union in 1962 in Delano, Calif.

If an appeal is filed, the union is likely to argue, among other things, that the trial judge wrongly allowed the trial to proceed after Mr. Chavez's death. Lawyers for the union had asked for a mistrial on the grounds that they were deprived of the opportunity to question Mr. Chavez.

An earlier \$5.4 million award against the union in the same case was thrown out after an appellate court invalidated one of two Arizona laws upon which the suit was based. Mr. Chavez's boycott of Bruce Church, which involved picketing outside stores that sold its lettuce, was part of an intensive but largely ineffective campaign in the 1980's to force growers to the bargaining table by getting consumers to stop buying nonunion grapes and other produce.