THE UFW'S MARCH FOR ECONOMIC JUSTICE (8/02)

Futile, some are saying about the 10-day march up the Central Valley to Sacramento that the United Farm Workers began last Thursday in hopes of convincing Gov. Gray Davis to sign the bill that finally would guarantee farm workers the unfettered right of unionization.

Certainly growers, big contributors to Davis' campaign treasury, may indeed prevail. But history says maybe not. Such UFW marches – and there have been several – invariably have been followed by important gains.

It began in 1966, when 100 members and supporters of what would become the UFW set out from Kern County under the leadership of Cesar Chavez for a 25-day trek to Sacramento. There they demanded a law that would grant them the union rights they had been seeking in a widely publicized strike against the state's grape growers.

The marchers didn't get the law. But they gained valuable support as they made their way up the Central Valley, demonstrating the breadth and dedication of the coalition that had formed around the strike and bringing a sense of hope and solidarity to workers who joined them en route.

They were joined by more than 8,000 supporters as they paradedboldly onto the marble steps of the State Capitol to celebrate their first victory. Schenley Industries, then the owner of a major vineyard, had agreed to negotiate a union contract. Contracts with a half-dozen other wine grape growers followed quickly, and later a worldwide boycott led to contracts covering all the state's table grape growers.

But then the Teamsters Union began offering growers the irresistible option of signing contracts that allowed them to grant relatively little to their workers, who would be forced to join the Teamsters. Certain that workers would opt for UFW representation if allowed to vote on the matter, the UFW set out in 1975 to once again demand a state law that would give them that right.

As in 1966, the union pressed the demand with a march – this time a week-long march from San Francisco to Modesto, headquarters of the huge Gallo Winery, which had rebuffed vineyard workers' demands for a representation election.

More than 15,000 people marched into Modesto, convincing Gov. Jerry Brown and state legislators that the UFW retained a sizeable and influential
constituency and great organizational ability. The union soon had the collective bargaining law it had sought, the Agricultural Labor Relations Act.

The ALRA says simply that if a majority of a grower's employees vote for union representation, the grower must negotiate a contract with their union.

That's generally what happened during the first half-dozen years after the law went into effect. But since Democrat Brown left office in 1983, the law has been barely enforced, under Brown's Republican successors, George Deukmejian and Pete Wilson, as well as under Democrat Davis, who followed them.

Growers whose workers have voted for UFW representation have been allowed to stall or delay contract negotiations for months, years – even decades – in violation of the ALRA requirement that they "bargain in good faith." Meanwhile, they have continued to impose the wretched working conditions that led the workers to vote for unionization.

Contracts have been signed by growers on only 185 of the 428 farms where workers have voted for unionization since the ALRA's passage, and less than 50 of the contracts are still in effect.

Thus the vast majority of farm workers remain mired in poverty. Their pay averages less than $10,000 a year and they have few, if any, of the fringe benefits provided other workers, few rights and little protection from the arbitrary acts of employers.

The bill backed by the marchers would block growers from using delaying tactics. It mandates that stalemated contract negotiations be turned over to arbitrators who would hear the arguments of both parties and dictate a contract settlement.

Both houses of the Legislature have passed the bill, authored by Democratic State Sen. John Burton of San Francisco. But whether Gov. Davis will sign it and finally grant farm workers the basic rights promised them a quarter-century ago may very well depend on how much public support is generated by the band of marchers wending through the heart of California's fertile farmland.