

L.A. City Council president blasts 'smear' mailers by Fresno grower

By EMILY ALPERT REYES AND DAVID ZAHNISER

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Months after the Los Angeles City Council took a stand in a labor dispute involving a Fresno fruit grower, the company is spending more than \$12,000 on election mailers claiming that Council President Herb Wesson "works hard to keep Mexicans from voting."

Wesson, running for reelection March 3 in a district that extends from Crenshaw to Koreatown, angrily denounced the mailers as "a last-minute smear."

"I am absolutely livid. This is a crock of B.S. All anybody has to do is check my record and they will know this is B.S.," Wesson said Thursday afternoon.

Wesson and other council members backed a resolution last year calling on Gerawan Farming to immediately put a union contract in place. The company has been embroiled in a lengthy battle over whether the United Farm Workers should represent its employees.

The council vote had no binding effect on the Fresno company, but Gerawan denounced it at the time as a "a PR stunt by UFW."

Now the company is firing back at Wesson. Its mailers, printed in both English and Spanish, are emblazoned with "Too Many Mexicans" in quotation marks and state: "Councilman Wesson Doesn't Want You Or Your Vote in 'His' District."

The mailers quote a Los Angeles Times article from 2013 about allegations raised by a senior aide to Councilman Bernard C. Parks, who claimed in a memo that a Wesson deputy used the phrase during deliberations over how to redraw council boundaries.

In that memo, the Parks aide said that Wesson's staffer complained that one proposed map would put "too many Mexicans" in Wesson's council district. Parks and Wesson tangled over redistricting and have had strained relations in recent years.

Wesson said he "didn't even want to dignify" the claims made about his deputy. "When I was elected council president, I had the support of every Latino on the council. They would not have supported me if they thought I would tolerate a racist statement like that," he said.

Part of the Gerawan mailer also says, "Don't let more Mexicans into my district — Herb Wesson," despite the fact that the memo did not attribute such a statement to Wesson.

The mailers also criticized Wesson for voting for the resolution about Gerawan Farming this year, saying it was "against the rights of farm workers at Gerawan."

Gerawan workers voted to be represented by the UFW decades ago, but the union and the company never agreed to a contract. Union opponents, including some Gerawan workers, want to tally votes from a worker election aimed at ousting the UFW, but the Agricultural Labor Relations Board contends that election was illegally meddled with by Gerawan.

Labor leaders say the workers need a union contract, alleging poor conditions in the fields. But Dan Gerawan, co-owner of the company, says its workers are already highly paid and being forced into a labor contract that would strip them of rights.

"Herb Wesson has sided with the union that wants their ballots destroyed ... He aided and abetted the UFW's campaign of lies about our employees," he said Thursday.

When asked whether the statements about Wesson were fair, Gerawan said, "We believe his constituents deserve to know about his record of disrespecting Mexican American voters."

The L.A. council voted in October to call on Gerawan Farming to implement a contract set forward by a state-appointed mediator after the two sides were unable to reach agreement. Gerawan has balked at doing so, calling it an unfair "government order."

Wesson, who helped design that state process when he was in the California Assembly, was endorsed this month by the UFW.

"He is one of our heroes," UFW President Arturo Rodriguez said in a statement issued Thursday in reaction to the mailers, calling them "a racist attack."

Mayor Eric Garcetti also issued a statement Thursday, saying, "Herb Wesson has fought for immigrant rights and represented all people since he was speaker."

The "too many Mexicans" memo previously came up during the legal battle over Los Angeles redistricting, with challengers claiming it showed that race was improperly used to redraw boundaries for council districts. On Tuesday, a federal judge rejected the challenge to those boundaries, saying she had found no evidence that race was the predominant factor.

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