

L.A. City Council backs union contract for Fresno farmworkers

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By EMILY ALPERT REYES

Hundreds of labor activists, farmworkers and their allies marched on Los Angeles City Hall on Wednesday demanding that a Fresno fruit grower recognize a union contract -- the latest turn in a long-standing dispute over whether the United Farm Workers should represent the company's employees.

The marchers crowded into a City Council meeting, where lawmakers unanimously approved a resolution that calls on Gerawan Farming to immediately put a union contract in place. The resolution, presented by Councilman Paul Koretz, said that for most workers the contract would have provided roughly \$1,480 in added pay over the course of the previous year.

"These matters affect all of us as Angelenos," Koretz said. "These workers may not work within our city limits, but the fruit they pick you buy and eat The men and women here with us today have been mistreated."

Wednesday's L.A. City Council vote has no binding effect on the Fresno grower. But UFW spokesman Marc Grossman said winning support from Los Angeles officials was important and took "a page out of Cesar Chavez's playbook."

"In the 1960s, when the growers dominated rural California, the way that the farmworkers remedied that was taking their case to the city" through the grape boycott and other actions focused on urban consumers, Grossman said.

In addition, he said, L.A. is a major market for Gerawan produce, sold under the Prima label. Maria Elena Durazo, who heads the county labor federation, hinted that a boycott could be next.

"You will not be welcome in the stores of Los Angeles if that's the next thing these workers ask us to do," she told a cheering crowd of marchers in front of the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels.

These workers may not work within our city limits, but the fruit they pick you buy and eat The men and women here with us today have been mistreated. - Paul Koretz, L.A. city councilman.

Though Gerawan workers voted to be represented by the UFW decades ago, the union and the company never agreed to a contract. The union says worker efforts were repeatedly thwarted by the company, while union opponents say the UFW abandoned the Gerawan workers.

When the two sides failed to reach agreement, a state-appointed mediator set forth terms of a union contract -- a [process](#) approved by state lawmakers more than a decade ago when City Council President Herb Wesson was in the Assembly. Wesson helped design that process, which was seen as a milestone victory for agricultural unions.

Earlier this year, the state Agricultural Labor Relations Board issued a complaint alleging that Gerawan violated state labor law by failing to implement the contract set forward by the mediator.

"All we're asking ... is to follow the process that was set in place," Wesson said.

At Wednesday's meeting, several farmworkers told city lawmakers that they needed the contract and described poor conditions in the fields. Some asserted that Gerawan would withhold their pay if a single rotten grape was found in their daily pickings.

Farmworkers did receive raises without the union contract, said Eleazar Mulato, who said he had worked for Gerawan for four years. "But we also need our rights," he said.

Union opponents, who have banded together in a group known as Farmworker Rights, counter that the labor pact would cost workers because they would have to pay union dues. They have sought to tally votes from a worker election last year aimed at ousting the UFW as their labor representative.

"The right thing is to support the worker, not the UFW," said Silvia Lopez, a Gerawan worker who has championed the campaign against the union and said employees are already treated fairly.

Jesse Rojas, who does not work for Gerawan and identified himself as an activist, said Gerawan paid its workers extremely well and that "the real Gerawan farmworkers" wanted their votes on UFW representation counted.

The Agricultural Labor Relations Board contends that Gerawan and its representatives illegally meddled in the campaign to reject the union by telling workers that their jobs would be at risk and allowing UFW opponents to pressure other employees to sign the petition.

In a statement last month, Gerawan called the allegations "biased." The matter is now before an administrative law judge in Fresno.