

Chavez' Farm Union Voted Out at Coachella Valley Vineyard

Negotiators Say They Are Stunned by Sudden Action, Declare Talks to Renew Contract Were Under Way

BY FRANK DEL OLMO

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Workers at a Coachella Valley vineyard with a United Farm Workers of America labor contract voted Thursday against renewing the pact.

K. K. Larson, one of only two growers in the state still having UFWA contracts, immediately broke off negotiations aimed at renewing his contract with the Cesar Chavez-led union.

Union negotiators said they were stunned by Larson's announcement in Palm Springs and angrily charged that they had not been informed that any vote was to take place.

"It's outrageous," said a union attorney. "There were no union representatives present and we were still negotiating with him last night. There's no way it can be a valid vote."

Larson said the vote, taken in his vineyards near Thermal, was 60 to 28 against renewing a contract with UFWA, with five workers abstaining.

The balloting was done under the supervision of a Roman Catholic priest, the Rev. Richard Humphrys, a long-time critic of the UFWA and Chavez. Union officials were critical of his participation in the surprise election.

Larson said he decided to take the vote after he was approached by a delegation of his workers Wednesday afternoon. They presented him with a Spanish-language petition asking him "not to sign another contract with any union."

The voting was done so suddenly, Larson said, because he wanted to protect his workers from the "harassment and pressure" they would have faced from UFWA and the rival Teamsters Union in a preelection campaign.

Larson owns and manages 200 acres of desert farmland in the Coachella Valley. His regular work

force at peak periods is approximately 100 workers.

In the past, regular workers such as Larson's have been the most resistant of all field hands to organization by the UFWA, union officials said.

Lionel Steinberg, the largest single grape grower in the Coachella area, is now the only California table grape grower still having a UFWA contract. He could not be reached for comment Thursday.

