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SUPPORT FROM ROBERT KENNEDY

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It was an odd sight; Sen. Robert Kennedy in a proper pin-stripe suit moving along a line of pickets in work clothes. He was responding in his Boston manner to cries of “Welcome” shouted in Spanish accents.

The New York Democrat was there last week, outside a struck vineyard 140 miles north of Los Angeles, with Democratic Sen. Harrison Williams of New Jersey and Republican Sen. George Murphy of California.

They had come for the last of three days of hearings in the state by Sen. Williams’ subcommittee on migratory labor. This little town is at the center of Southern California area involved in a seven-month-long vineyard workers’ strike.

The welcoming shouts were loud, for Sen. Kennedy has joined Sen. Williams in promising to push hard for a bill to give all farm workers what the pickets are demanding: the chance to bargain collectively with their employers.

Sen. Murphy, a conservative under heavy home-state pressure from powerful employers, said he didn’t necessarily support Sen. Williams’ bill. But even he conceded that farm workers should have the right to unionization, provided the “proper machinery” could be set up to accomplish it.

After the Senate hearings closed, 150 vineyard strikers set out from Delano on a 25-day pilgrimage through California’s Central Valley to the state capital in Sacramento.

They hoped to get their food and shelter from workers in farm communities along the 300-mile route. They were holding rallies, trying to recruit more marchers.

By Friday night they had covered about 25 miles and reached Porterville, where area farm workers gave them food and shelter. As planned, 90 of the marchers had turned back. But 60 set out again yesterday morning.

The marchers are using back roads along the San Joaquin Valley’s eastern side to avoid heavily traveled highways.

Archbishop Joseph McGucken of San Francisco authorized three Catholic officials to join the march yesterday.

The marchers expect to reach the capital on Easter Sunday – April 20. There they will demand “justice, freedom and respect.”

The Senators were appalled during their tour of a county-operated farm workers' camp in Visalia to the north. Families of five, six and more were crowded into battered, one-room shacks – windowless, sheet metal affairs with neither heat nor running water.

But for all their support of such projects, the senators noted that the very existence of the special programs points up a great need that farm workers gain economic independence.

The independence can be gained, Sen. Williams and Sen. Kennedy asserted, if Congress will put farm workers under the legal umbrellas long ago provided many other workers – especially the guarantee of collective bargaining rights.

But growers heatedly contended that because of the “peculiar nature” of their industry it should remain free of unionization.

The high point of a day filled with booing, hissing and cheers came in Sen. Kennedy's sharp questioning of the county sheriff, a rotund figure in a rumpled suit whose manner is as distinctly small-town lawman as Sen. Kennedy's is urbane Bostonian.

The sheriff, trying to rebut strikers' charges of police harassment, testified that he arrested 44 pickets one day because they were “potential troublemakers.”

Sen. Kennedy appeared stunned. “How can you arrest someone if they haven't violated the law?” he asked.

“Well, I heard some of the people out in the fields (non-strikers) were going to cut up the pickets,” the sheriff answered. “So I arrested the pickets... for unlawful assembly.”

The rest of the day was filled with the arguments that have raged since last September, when the AFL-CIO's Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee and the independent National Farm Workers Association began picketing vineyards in the 400 square miles around Delano.

They demanded recognition of their unions and a minimum wage of \$1.40 an hour.