

A way out for farm workers

by Dick Meister



We finally have the opportunity to bring California farming into the 20th century to stay.

That 75-year-old goal might have been reached last year with enactment of the Agricultural Labor Relations Act — if growers hadn't openly violated the law, and

if their legislative allies hadn't then made the law inoperative by cutting off its funding.

The United Farm Workers Union has a plan to put the ALRA back into operation permanently, however, and to make it virtually grower-proof. The vehicle is an initiative petition which the UFW has been circulating since late March. It would put the ALRA into the State Constitution and, among other things, require the Legislature to fund it on a continuous basis.

The UFW has only until April 30 to collect the 540,000 signatures it thinks will be needed to qualify the initiative for the June ballot.

But don't bet against the UFW. The union has hundreds of members and supporters scurrying around the state with petitions. They've been working at it 14 hours a day, in what could very well be a repeat of the UFW's overwhelmingly successful campaign of 1972 against the viciously anti-union Proposition 22.

If the UFW does qualify the initiative, California voters will at last be able to grant farm workers the protections which most other workers take for granted.

Merely reviving the ALRA and making it permanent would theoretically provide those protections. But the initiative proposes to do more than that. It would buttress those protections, by requiring growers to grant access to organizers prior to the union representation elections guaranteed by the law and by subjecting growers to treble damages for unfair labor practices.

Those provisions are extremely important. For even when it was operating, the ALRA was seriously hampered by grower refusal to allow union organizers to campaign and by blatant violations of the act's prohibitions against intimidation of workers and organizers.

Growers, you can be sure, will not abandon such conduct as long as the ALRA is not strengthened. So it wouldn't help workers much even if the growers' legislative supporters did back off from their refusal to vote for re-funding the ALRA.

Those legislators, in any case, cannot be expected to make anything but a temporary retreat. As long as the ALRA is not implanted in the State Constitution, they will be constantly trying to weaken it, through withholding funds and otherwise.

What's needed, obviously, is a strengthened Agricultural Labor Relations Act, free from attack by those who refuse to recognize that unionization is a basic right of everyone in 20th century America.

The only solid hope for such a law rests with the UFW initiative.