

Demise of Labor Board Perils Agriculture Truce in California

By LES LEDBETTER
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SAN DIEGO — A fragile peace exists in the fertile Imperial Valley, 100 miles east of here and just north of the Mexican border, where 15,000 migrant farm workers are picking lettuce and asparagus.

Since the passage nine months ago of the state's Agriculture Labor Relations Act to insure workers' rights to organize and to negotiate contracts, the often violent confrontations and boycotts and strikes and arrests that for years disrupted California's blooming agribusiness have virtually become part of the past.

But the Agricultural Labor Relations Board, appointed last August by Gov. Edmund G. Brown Jr. to implement the farm labor law, officially died early this month when a group of farmer-supported state senators blocked supplemental appropriations. And it now appears that the truce in the fields—generally considered a tribute to Governor Brown's negotiations—is in danger of coming apart.

Cesar Chavez, president of the United Farm Workers of America, which competes with the Western Conference of Teamsters in trying to organize the migrant workers, charged last week that isolated incidents of violence had broken out in the Imperial Valley, signaling a return to the "law of the jungle" that prevailed before the creation of the labor relations board.

Boycott Products

Mr. Chavez also announced that the U.F.W. had begun in 10 East Coast cities a boycott of Sun-Maid raisins, Sun-sweet nuts and processed fruits and the produce of eight Fresno-area growers.

The union leader had earlier called for a boycott of lettuce and grapes that had not been handled by union members and for a strike in the fields unless the labor board got the \$3.8 million it would need to continue operations for the rest of the fiscal year.

But spokesmen for the growers and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters say that the labor board has been favoring Mr. Chavez's union in its selection of staff workers and by its decisions and regulations. And these groups say they will continue to help block the supplemental funds, which need a two-thirds majority for passage, until the farm labor act is amended to "make it more fair and equitable to all concerned."

"We didn't want to kill the board," said Les Hubbard of the Western Growers' Association, "but we feel we'd be better off without the law than as it is administered now."

A spokesman for M. E. Anderson, executive director of the Western Conference of Teamsters, said, "It's a ridiculous situation, but we'd rather have no law than a bad law, and when a law like this is not being administered fairly, impartially, then it's a bad law."

The spokesmen for both groups insists that they want in the next fiscal year,

the labor board and both say that the board will probably be received in the next fiscal year, beginning July 1, when only a simple majority is needed for passage of operating funds.

But while they have their current leverage, the teamsters and growers are seeking amendments to the farm labor act to narrow its scope and limit the discretion of the labor board.

The teamsters seek an amendment to the farm law that would permit them, or any other party in a labor dispute, to challenge before a court-appointed arbitrator the impartiality of any board members or agents on a case-by-case basis.

The farm groups have eight amendments ranging from simple word changes to extending the time limit for holding elections after petitions have been filed from seven days to 21 days, and to



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Migrant farm workers in Calxico, Calif., waiting for bus rides to the fields of the Imperial Valley