

Worker group plans march

'March of Truth' in Watsonville

By DAVE BROCKMANN
Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — After a noon-time roadside demonstration by strawberry workers, and after the United Farm Workers union said farmworkers are being coerced by growers, the stage is set for Sunday's "March of Truth" in downtown Watsonville.

The Agricultural Workers Committee, a group which bills itself as supporting the rights of farmworkers, distributed fliers announcing the march during Monday's flag-waving, sign-carrying demonstration on Riverside Drive which they said was a show of support for fellow workers at Coastal Berry fields.

Some Coastal Berry workers said Monday they were weary of the UFW's tactics to persuade them to join the union.

In early June, the UFW filed papers with the Agricultural Labor Relations Board in Salinas for a notice of intent to access and organize farmworkers then employed by Gargiulo Inc., former owner of Coastal Berry. Union organizers have access to the fields to talk to workers in the morning, at noon and in the evening.

Jose Fernandez, who has worked two years with Gargiulo-Coastal Berry, said Monday he and most of his fellow workers want organizers to leave them alone. "We want this to stop, we don't want a union." He said he is upset organizers have come to his house at least 20 times over the past month.

He said "90 percent of Coastal Berry workers would not support a union election. That's what we want and they (UFW) know they're going to lose."

The UFW, however, says the growers are intimidating farmworkers to join Sunday's "anti-union" march.

At a press conference later in the day, a UFW spokeswoman accused the growers of intimidation and coercion.

The union's Rebecca Flores-Harrington said workers "have the right not to be forced to march against their best interests."

The UFW said workers were forced to march last summer in downtown Watsonville, pressured by field supervisors and growers. However, the UFW said it has no

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Demonstrators surround the car of a UFW organizer Monday.

March in Watsonville

Continued from Page A1

objection to workers marching Sunday if it is truly the workers' decision to do so.

The goal of Sunday's march is to tell workers of their rights as workers and as human beings, said Antonio Perez, who has worked for 10 years as a supervisor at Ramos Farms off Highway 1 in Watsonville. Perez left his job two weeks ago to join the Agricultural Workers Committee full-time.

Perez said a number of the farmworkers participating in Monday's rally on Riverside Drive wanted to take their message to Main Street seven days ahead of schedule.

"They're planning to visit other farms today and invite other farmworkers to attend Sunday's

march."

Coastal Berry has been a focal point by the UFW in its organizing campaign since the state's largest strawberry producer was sold June 16 to Washington, D.C., investors Landon Butler and David Gladstone.

The union said it had signed an agreement "guaranteeing workers the freedom to organize a union, have a meaningful election and negotiate in good faith." Butler, however, said no agreement had been signed with the union and vowed to maintain company neutrality in the UFW's organizing effort.

The union has not filed a petition with the ALRB to hold an election. UFW spokeswoman Jocelyn Sherman said, however, the union hopes to go to a vote at Coastal

Berry within six weeks. "We need to do it before the end of peak harvest season," she said.

For an election to occur, Coastal Berry must be employing at least 50 percent of its peak workforce — which tops out at 1,200.

During Monday's demonstration, about 50 Coastal Berry farmworkers followed four union organizers into the field at noon. While organizers attempted to talk to farmworkers, they were surrounded by the flag-waving, sign-carrying demonstrators. After contacting just a handful of workers, union organizers left the fields.

Sentinel staff writer Bob Linne-man contributed to this report.

Sunday's march begins at 11 a.m. at Main and Second streets.