

# Union marchers fill the streets

4-14-97

## Thousands take up cause for strawberry pickers

By SCOTT DAVID BRENNAN  
STAFF WRITER

WATSONVILLE — "Hey, hey, what's that sound? Watsonville's a union town!"

Thousands of people marching through the downtown Sunday shouted that slogan and others during what turned out to be the largest demonstration in Watsonville's history.

According to some estimates, the city's population was nearly doubled as people from across America converged on Watsonville to support the United Farm Workers' effort to unionize strawberry workers.

More than 30,000 people came to town for the AFL-CIO sponsored march and rally at Watsonville High School's Geiser Field, according to UFW estimates. UFW spokeswoman Jocelyn Sherman said 25,600 people marched and that 5,000 others stayed at the field.

City officials estimated the marchers numbered 15,000 to 17,000.

The 2.3-mile long march, which lasted for more than two hours, was so crowded that the front of the march was returning to Geiser Field as the end of the march was just stepping off. There were no reports of injury or property damage during that march along several city streets, city and union officials said.

"It was a fantastic march and a fantastic rally," Sherman said. The march sent a message to local strawberry farmers, she said. "These workers are not alone — they are supported."

Union organizers say they are fighting for better living conditions for strawberry workers, including higher wages, medical care, fresh water, clean bathrooms and an end to harassment from employers. Growers say they are already meeting the union's demands.

UFW President Arturo Rodriguez energized supporters by telling

See MARCH, page 10



Tarmo Hannula

The UFW says more than 30,000 participated in Sunday's march and rally for strawberry workers, going shoulder to shoulder on Main Streets and other downtown streets.

Demonstrations

## Union leaders vow they will prevail

By SEAN GILLESPIE  
STAFF WRITER

WATSONVILLE — If anyone in the Pajaro Valley had not been aware of the United Farm Workers' campaign to organize the region's 20,000 strawberry pickers, they must know now.

The likes of UFW President Arturo Rodriguez, AFL-CIO President John Sweeney, and the Rev. Jesse Jackson made it clear at Geiser Field Sunday that area strawberry growers will continue to feel the unrelenting pressure of labor and civil rights organizations.

UFW officials estimated a crowd of 30,000 attended the post-march rally at the Watsonville High School football stadium. An estimate from

Watsonville city officials cut that figure almost in half.

No matter how many there were, the disciples stood fast behind their pro-union leaders who invoked the legends of 1960s labor icons such as the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Robert Kennedy, and the late UFW founder Cesar Chavez.

"Our brother Cesar Chavez is here in spirit but not in flesh," said rally emcee Luis Valdez, author of "La Bamba."

The labor leaders came from all across the country, as did their rank-and-file union members, some from as far as Wisconsin and Connecticut. Not many appeared to be from the Watsonville area, though, a point the

See UNION, page 10



Tarmo Hannula

AFL-CIO President John Sweeney and the Rev. Jesse Jackson sandwich UFW President Arturo

## UNION

From page 1

local opposition makes often.

"Those of us from afar are called outside agitators," said AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Richard Trumka, formerly the head of the United Mine Workers. "They said the same thing in Selma 30 years ago when African-Americans marched for equality. And they said it in New York City a hundred years ago when immigrants from Europe fought and sacrificed for fairness.

"But we agitated and we won. And we will win in Watsonville."

It is not clear how many local strawberry workers were involved in the event Sunday. UFW officials said "thousands" of them came out to march for more pay, clean drinking water and bathrooms, and an end to sexual harassment. But strawberry pickers were not readily apparent in the parade of banner-holding trade unionists, students and civil rights activists.

The UFW has been trying to organize area strawberry pickers for more than a year. But it has yet to call for secret-ballot certification elections and union officials will not say when those might occur.

What they will say is that they will continue to fight until farm workers are convinced that the union way is the better way. The largest obstacle, union officials say, is intimidation of workers by the growers who allegedly threaten their job security.

"I issue a warning to the strawberry growers of Watsonville," AFL-CIO chief Sweeney called out at the rally. "If you do not recognize and respect the rights of those workers to organize for their future and their families, we will take their cause into every state and every city and every community in this nation. And we will prevail."

Leohardo Acosta, a strawberry

day. They pick strawberries and lettuce. They work everyday," Jackson said with his trademark cadence. "We have not come here today to put the growers out of business. We've come here today to put justice in business."

In an interview, the AFL-CIO's Trumka, who has been working with the UFW leaders for the past two years, said he recently visited labor camps in the Watsonville area. He said they reminded him of the camps where coal miners lived in the 1920s, small ramshackle quarters too tiny for the families they held.

On the subject of boycotts, Trumka left it open.

"That tactic will come when it comes," he said. "We want the public to know what's going on here. The eyes and the juries of the public court will put pressure on the industry."

And the UFW and AFL-CIO plan to use their public forum for all that it is worth. Today Trumka and Rodriguez, along with actor Martin Sheen and Feminist Majority President Eleanor Smeal, were scheduled to confront a local grower for not rehiring workers labeled union activists, a written UFW release stated.

Growers say they rehire their seasonal help purely based on seniority, and that those who have worked for them longest are rehired soonest. State statistics show that the great majority of workers are employed between May and October.

Nevertheless, the union will keep after the growers with all the support it can muster. More than 100 union organizers will campaign in area strawberry fields beginning today.

Gene Upshaw, the National Football League Players Association president and Oakland Raiders hall of famer, is more accustomed to the playing fields, but he came to town

## MARCH

From page 1

them they comprised "the biggest farm worker march ever" and the largest event in the recent history of the American labor movement. Rodriguez is the successor to his late father-in-law, Cesar Chavez, who founded the UFW.

The memory of Chavez, who died four years ago, was vivid in the minds of many of Sunday's marchers. Several marchers carried his picture and hundreds chanted, "Viva Chavez! Viva La Causa."

Repeatedly, "Si, se puede," (yes, it is possible) was chanted in cadence by several groups of marchers, by both Spanish speakers from California and white marchers from states back East.

The march was a showcase of unions and political movements from around the state and across the country, led by Rodriguez, the Rev. Jesse Jackson and AFL-CIO President John Sweeney.

Noticeably few, however, were the number of recognizable Watsonville strawberry workers or signs from Watsonville unions. UFW organizers would not give a specific number of local berry workers, but claimed thousands of Watsonville strawberry pickers participated in the march.

Oftentimes, the march resembled a festive parade. The route was lined with hundreds of banners and signs, dozens of dancers dressed in gold Aztec headdresses leading the parade, drummers beat out a rhythm and giant effigies of strawberry farmers and politicians, draped in black, were carried. Flags were waved all about: Mexican flags outnumbered American flags nearly four to one.

The effigies, which looked like puppets 15 feet tall, poked fun at Bill "NAFTA" Clinton, Pete "Methyl Bro-



Lia Martin

Three youngsters get a lift during Sunday's march in a wagon decorated with union signs. Many children also participated in the United Farm Workers/AFL-CIO march, accompanying their parents on the 2.3-mile circuit through the city.

**'Marching is the only way we have to fight the rich.' — Phil Ellison, union worker from San Francisco**

Angeles.

"The farm workers have got a tough row to hoe, but we're fighting for their rights and (supporting)

Eleven-year-old Charles Willis of Watsonville said he was marching with school friends for the "people's rights" and having a good time too.

"We need justice for working people."

At dawn, bus loads of people began traveling into town. An interfaith religious service was held at 9 a.m. in Geiser Field, where thousands had already gathered.

The march began an hour late, at noon, because a number of buses were still arriving and hundreds of people were still entering the field in preparation for the march, city officials said. Even so, the rally ended, and the days events were capped, at 3:30

CIO chief Sweeney called out at the rally. "If you do not recognize and respect the rights of those workers to organize for their future and their families, we will take their cause into every state and every city and every community in this nation. And we will prevail."

Leobardo Acosta, a strawberry picker for EKT, voiced his belief in what starwberry pickers deserve.

"We only ask to be paid what is just. We are not begging for a free ride from growers, only a just wage," he said.

The UFW has enlisted the support of supermarket chains representing more than 2,000 stores in many of the largest communities in the United States and Canada. Announced Sunday was that the A&P International chain and its 1,034 stores has joined the UFW effort.

"Today the whole world is watching as thousands of strawberry workers battle nonviolently against the racism and exploitation that have plagued them for generations," said Rodriguez, who is the son-in-law of Chavez. "Today the whole world is watching this wealthy industry as it conspires to crush workers seeking to improve their lives.

"But every time strawberry workers have organized for a better life they have faced certain retaliation. When strawberry workers have tried to improve conditions, the strawberry industry has laid off workers, plowed under fields, and shut down operations."

Rodriguez said the UFW has been successful in all 14 of its recent elections and vowed that success will continue with the strawberry workers.

"Decent people of good conscience cannot tolerate these injustices. The times demand action. We must all become angry," he said. "We must be unwilling to witness the misery and poverty that have plagued strawberry workers for generations."

The Rev. Jackson, long-time civil rights activist and founder of the Rainbow Coalition, said that to win over the strawberry workers union organizers will have to fight a "mean spirit" which creates a climate of selfishness in America.

"Most poor people are not on welfare. They work every day. They're not lazy. They work every

union organizers will campaign in area strawberry fields beginning today.

Gene Upshaw, the National Football League Players Association president and Oakland Raiders hall of famer, is more accustomed to the playing fields, but he came to town Sunday to lend his name to the UFW cause. He said that living in California, he's followed farm labor issues for a long time.

"I'm here because I'm supporting workers who are mistreated," said Upshaw, who also is a member of the AFL-CIO executive council.

Upshaw said while the NFL players' union and the UFW have different members and organize in a much different manner, the concept of organized labor is universal.

"The interests, the issues are the same. It doesn't matter if you're a football player, a strawberry worker, or an auto worker," he said.

Union supporters are determined to put Watsonville and the strawberry industry under a national microscope and take their fight to anyone who will listen.

"We will win because we are right," Jackson proclaimed.

berry farmers and politicians, draped in black, were carried. Flags were waved all about: Mexican flags outnumbered American flags nearly four to one.

The effigies, which looked like puppets 15 feet tall, poked fun at Bill "NAFTA" Clinton, Pete "Methyl Bromide" Wilson and local growers like Driscoll Farms, Gargiulo, Naturipe, Well-Pict and B&J Strawberry. One puppet had wads of cash in its hands labeled, "filthy money from strawberry workers."

UC-Santa Cruz student Eli Salzman came dressed in stilts as a 12-foot-tall man named "Big Money." He walked around with oversized dollar bills asking rhetorically, "Want some money? Well, you can't have any! Ha, ha, ha."

Salzman said his message was that "big money" isn't looking out for working people.

Several marchers said they were fighting for a cause bigger than strawberries alone. "It's a show of solidarity and taking a fighting stance for all of labor," said Ely Green, an Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers union member who works for Atlantic Richfield in Los

## Francisco

Angeles.

"The farm workers have got a tough row to hoe, but we're fighting welfare cuts and (corporate) downsizing too," Green said.

Vivian Price with the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers in Los Angeles said she was marching for a number of issues. "I'm disgusted with what (Gov. Pete) Wilson has been doing with methyl bromide in the fruits and just Friday ending the eight-hour work day." She referred to the Industrial Welfare Commission vote to peg overtime to a 40-hour week rather than an eight-hour day.

Eleven-year-old Charles Willis of Watsonville said he was marching with school friends for the "people's rights," and having a good time too. Farm workers need to get paid better, he said, plus the march was "really cool."

Phil Ellison said he and 80 other bus drivers from the United Transportation Union in San Francisco volunteered to drive marchers into town early Sunday morning. Officials estimated that a total of 300 buses were parked around Watsonville.

"Marching is the only way we have to fight the rich," Ellison said.

at noon, because a number of buses were still arriving and hundreds of people were still entering the field in preparation for the march, city officials said. Even so, the rally ended, and the days events were capped, at 3:30 p.m. as planned.

UFW spokeswoman Sherman said, "This march will help lead us to success. We are going to continue to organize," she said. Farms in the Pajaro and Salinas valleys produce nearly 50 percent of strawberries nationwide.

Union officials hope to sustain the enthusiasm of the march by making door-to-door "house visits" seeking support from more local strawberry workers.