From the Wagner Act (1935) to the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act (1975), agricultural employers used the political and economic ideology of agricultural exceptionalism to exclude field workers from labor relations legislation. During the New Deal, growers vigorously opposed collective bargaining and farm unionism because of agriculture’s unique position in the market and working conditions. However, California growers pioneered the development of industrial agriculture and labor intensive specialty crops, which created labor conditions applicable to the Wagner Act.

After 40 years of political stalemate, boycotts by the United Farm Workers Union (UFW) caused a radical change. During the early 1970s, growers shifted from a position of militant anti-unionism to a strategic acceptance of labor relations legislation, while the UFW rejected inclusion under the Wagner Act because of its limitation. Growers wanted to force the UFW to become dependent upon state structures and deradicalize the Union with increasing routinization—as other industries had achieved with the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947. The Agricultural Labor Relations Act (ALRA) was a more radical version of the Wagner Act, but agribusiness reestablished political and ideological control over farm labor relations. Deradicalizing the Wagner Act took other industries 12 years to accomplish, but growers deradicalized the ALRA in a matter of months.

Organized agribusiness opposition incapacitated the state mechanisms designed to support unionism and prevented a restructuring of the farm labor political economy. To retain control over the agricultural political economy, growers sabotaged both radical labor law and significant labor movements in California.