

JUSTICE FOR FARMWORKERS



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KERRY KENNEDY, FARMWORKERS RALLY FOR EQUAL RIGHTS

Seventy-five years since New Deal, farmworkers still excluded from labor protections—but on the verge of a breakthrough

Albany, NY – Today, farmworkers and a statewide array of faith and labor and student allies including human rights activist Kerry Kennedy gathered at 1 p.m. in Albany’s West Capitol Park to call for passage of the Farmworkers Fair Labor Practices Act (A1867/S2247), a bill that would grant farmworkers rights equal to other New York workers. The rally was a colorful affair, which included a mariachi band, prayer vigil, folkloric dancers, large puppets and street theater.

"Sub-poverty wages, sickness and disease from poor health protections, ... abuses and humiliation—these are the conditions that exist when workers have no recourse to legal protection. The Farmworkers Fair Labor Practices Act will provide the legal remedy to injustice," said **Kerry Kennedy, Founder of the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Human Rights**.

According to New York State AFL-CIO President Denis Hughes, "The time has come for farm workers to enjoy the same rights, protections and benefits as all other workers in this state. It is a travesty that farm workers are still treated as second-class citizens. If we are to consider ourselves a progressive, enlightened society, we must raise the standard of living, and quality of life of those who have the least."

The Rev. Richard Witt, Director of Rural and Migrant Ministry, which coordinates the Justice for Farmworkers Campaign, said, "We have been blessed to be nourished by the labor of our brothers and sisters; and yet we respond by denying them a place at the table. When voices cry out with excuses as to why farmworkers shouldn't be welcome at the table, our voices become all too easily silenced.

"Now is the time for us, as people rooted in a faith tradition of justice and human dignity, to stand up and welcome farmworkers equally to the table. As people of faith we must urge the passing the Farmworker Fair Labor Practices Act. Christian Scripture calls Christians to 'love with all of our heart, soul, and mind.'"

Over 130 faith groups and religious communities have endorsed passage of the Farmworker Fair Labor Practices Act, along with dozens of student, community and labor organizations.

"We are in the twenty-first century. But when it comes to human rights and basic labor protection for farmworkers we are still living in the Middle Ages. Even though slavery was officially abolished in this country, it does not mean that it does not exist," said **Irma, a farmworker from Western NY**.

According to Assemblywoman Catherine Nolan, "These past several years, it has been my honor and privilege to work with advocates and my fellow colleagues in the Assembly to pass the Farmworkers Fair Labor Practices Act. In 2009, farmworkers must have the same collective bargaining rights, worker's compensation

rights, unemployment benefits, and other basic rights allocated to workers in other states. They have been left behind long enough. This is no longer justifiable for 2009.”

According to New York State Senator George Onorato, the chairman of the Senate Labor Committee, “Farmworkers spend long, hard hours in the fields, orchards and barns of New York State to help put food on our tables and contribute to our state’s agricultural economy. They provide essential services to our farming industry, performing often arduous work under all kinds of conditions that put them at risk of exposure to pesticides, extreme weather and other risks in the course of their day. I hope that this will be a year when the Legislature and Governor can come together to expand worker rights for these vitally important employees.”

According to New York Senator Neil Breslin, "Establishing basic workplace protections to farmworkers is long overdue in New York state. Farmworkers contribute greatly to our economy with their hard work and dedication. We must work to ensure equal rights among all laborers."

With 28 Senate cosponsors from the City, Long Island and upstate—from both parties—the bill is just shy of a clear majority. Several other senators have pledged their vote. The Assembly has passed the bill three times in recent years.