

## Harvest Kennedy's legacy: State Senate must pass farmworker rights bill

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Kerry Kennedy

Kerry Kennedy, daughter of Robert F. Kennedy, has added her voice and the spirit of her slain father to the fight for equal rights for farmworkers.

Her presence in Albany, where the Legislature appears to be inching toward a historic breakthrough, is most welcome. Because this is the year when fieldhands must, at last, gain the labor protections afforded to virtually all other workers in New York.

Led by Speaker Sheldon Silver, the Assembly is again poised to pass a bill to do just that. Gov. Paterson says he stands ready to sign it. The final piece of the puzzle is the state Senate, where the legislation has languished.

Its shift from Republican to Democratic control has brought hope. The obligation to lift hope into reality is Majority Leader Malcolm Smith's.

It has been an enduring shame that, unlike almost everyone else who earns a paycheck here, New York farmworkers are not guaranteed a day off per week or overtime pay. They are denied the right to organize.

This page has long called for reform. Last November, we opined that passage of a farmworker bill would be a greater tribute to RFK than renaming the Triborough Bridge in his honor.

We recalled that he fought for "the downtrodden, including migrant farmworkers who lived in miserable conditions on substandard wages," and that he "championed the fieldhands and their families in an alliance with legendary labor leader César Chávez."

Kerry Kennedy answered the call with an appearance at the Capitol, where she quoted from a speech of her father's: "When your children and grandchildren take their place in America, when you look at them, you will say, 'I did this. I was there at the point of difficulty and danger.' And though you may be old and bent from many years of labor, no man will stand taller than you when you say, 'I marched with Cesar.'"

The farmworker bill has 28 Senate co-sponsors, from both parties, upstate and down. An additional 17 senators have pledged their support or backed the legislation in the past. That adds up to 45 votes in a chamber of 62 members. Passage appears guaranteed, provided Smith puts the bill on the floor without weakening it.

He and his colleagues would do well to be guided by Kerry Kennedy's words in remembering her father:

"Nothing will bring you more pride and honor in your life. This will be a real way to honor him and to honor his memory."