



Their word is dirt: State Senate Dems betray the farmworkers again

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The Democratic leaders of the state Senate have sold out New York's most powerless and exploited workers, the farmhands who grow and pick crops upstate.

Conference chief John Sampson of Brooklyn promised this would be the year the Senate joined the Assembly in extending basic labor rights to field hands. Sampson broke his word.

Majority Leader Pedro Espada - he of the \$14 million Medicaid ripoff - vowed that legislation, long bottled up by opposition from growers, would come to the floor, where it was primed for passage. Espada broke his word.

Rank-and-file Democrats spoke passionately about providing the workers with protections that are afforded to virtually all other New York employees, including the right to overtime, the right to an unpaid day off per week and the right to organize and bargain collectively.

But then Democrats sat by while their leaders tortured the Senate rules to let a farm-country member bury the measure.

That lawmaker, Darrel Aubertine, who voted for the bill twice while in the Assembly, now feared passage could cost him his office in November. Sampson, Espada and their colleagues worried that losing the seat to a Republican could strip them of majority control of the house. So under the tractor went the farmhands.

The Farmworker Fair Labor Practices Act had 28 bipartisan co-sponsors and enough other members in support to get the 32 needed for passage. Labor leaders got behind the bill, as did advocates like Kerry Kennedy, who followed her father, the late Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, in fighting for farmworkers' rights.

They were heartened in August, when Espada, visiting an upstate duck farm, declared:

"What kind of place are you running here, exploiting people? We're going to pass a law" to end the abuses.

And they worked toward compromises after a spokesman for Sampson said in December: "Sen. Sampson and Sen. Espada are working diligently with their colleagues to improve farmworkers' rights and are planning to have legislation early in the new year."

Then, making up the rules as they went, Aubertine - with Sampson's connivance - hijacked the bill from the friendly Labor Committee to the hostile Agriculture Committee. Sampson's Senate lawyers said that the agriculture panel had the power only to issue a nonbinding recommendation on the measure.

After the bill's sponsor, George Onorato, filed a motion to return it to his Labor Committee, Aubertine's panel voted against the legislation. And then, Sampson's lawyers said it was dead.

The only thing nonbinding was Sampson's commitment.

As a final measure of how duplicitous he was, consider this: Sampson had co-sponsored the bill.