



Not fit for man or beast: State can't let horses win more labor rights than farmworkers

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The day may be fast approaching when some animals will have greater labor protections than tens of thousands of New York State's farmworkers.

The city Health Department has proposed rules that would mandate five weeks of vacation per year for carriage horses, plus limits on daily hours of work and upgraded stable facilities.

The people who plant and harvest our food should only be so lucky.

State law continues to deny so much as a guaranteed unpaid day off per week to the people who work in the fields and dairies. Unconscionable is the word for it.

As oft-noted in this space, Gov. Paterson and the Assembly back labor rights for farmworkers, but reforms have been frozen in the state Senate. There, the leaders of a narrow Democratic majority have promised - and failed to deliver - action.

They will have a new chance to end their political maneuverings - and escape the shame of dooming humans to a lesser status than animals - after the Senate reconvenes Jan. 11.

There is hope. Senate Democratic Conference Leader John Sampson has been engaged in lengthy negotiations with farmworker advocates and the Farm Bureau growers' lobby. He appears headed toward a bill that would be a major milestone toward granting farmworkers the same rights as are accorded virtually all other employees.

Not that this bill is perfect. In its original form, the legislation would have mandated a day off per week, overtime after 40 hours and the right to organize and bargain collectively. To meet the objections of the agriculture industry, the legislation would be tailored to apply to farming operations of various sizes.

How the tailoring is done will be crucial. While awaiting details, worker advocates are generally satisfied with the direction in which provisions are moving. What remains are to put terms to paper and put paper to vote.

Senate Majority Leader Pedro Espada predicts there will be action.

"I did get a commitment that we will do the farmworkers bill," he said in an interview. "It's long overdue. The core of it - overtime, day of rest, disability, workers' comp - will be there."

A spokesman for Sampson confirmed: "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."

They must. And the bill must be strong. And its provisions must meet the basic standards of human decency.