



They broke their word: State Senate hypocrites betray farmworkers again

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The state Senate, to its disgrace, has denied farmworkers the basic labor protections taken for granted by other New York workers. The harvest of shame lives on.

This is particularly appalling because a bill that would have extended the right to overtime, to an unpaid day off per week and to collective bargaining went down to defeat in an explosion of broken promises.

That the measure came to the floor is a credit to Democratic chief John Sampson of Brooklyn, who had committed to allow a vote.

Credit also goes to Pedro Espada of the Bronx. Disreputable on so many other fronts, Espada pledged to force a vote and made it happen.

The tally was 28 in favor of farmworker rights and 31 against. Three stalwart Republicans - Frank Padavan of Queens, Carl Marcellino of Long Island and Joe Robach of Rochester - had the fortitude to make the vote close.

A shift of a few members would have won the day - but avowed supporters broke faith.

There was Brooklyn's Martin Dilan, a Democrat, who last year wrote that he was "fully in support" and "happy to vote in favor of" the bill. He didn't. He abstained in an act of cowardice.

There was Nassau Democrat Craig Johnson, a sponsor of the bill who threw the farmworkers over. And there was Suffolk Democrat Brian Foley, who similarly flipped after vowing a yes vote.

The GOP betrayals were even more extensive.

The list of those who voted against the measure after either promising support or previously backing it includes Long Islanders Dean Skelos, John Flanagan, Chuck Fuschillo, Kemp Hannon and Owen Johnson. Upstaters Vincent Leibel, James Alesi, George Maziarz, John DeFrancisco and Hugh Farley are similarly guilty.

All broke their word out of fear that voting for the farmworkers could cost either party upstate support - along with control of the Senate.

It was cheap politicking and an eye-opening lesson for a group of Long Island eighth-graders.

Inspired by a visit from Kerry Kennedy, daughter of the late Robert F. Kennedy, who had campaigned for farmworker rights, Brentwood West Middle School students wrote to their senator, who happened to be Flanagan.

They urged him to back the bill. The local weekly, the Smithtown News, reported:

"Senator Flanagan said that he still supports the Farmworkers Fair Labor Practices Act."

Said Flanagan, "I think it is really great that children are involved in this issue, and I appreciate Kerry Kennedy's advocacy, but it is unlikely that this bill will pass in the Senate this year."

Right. Because he helped kill it.