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EDITORIAL

Justice on the Farm

When the New York State Senate reconvenes on Thursday, it can strike a powerful blow for equal rights and justice by passing the Farmworkers Fair Labor Practices Act. The bill guarantees farmworkers basic protections — like overtime pay, a day of rest and the right to collective bargaining — that have been denied them for generations.

The legislation has repeatedly passed the Assembly but always stalled in the Senate. It is now being pushed by the Senate majority leader, Pedro Espada Jr., but don't hold that against it.

Mr. Espada, a living embodiment of Albany cronyism and self-dealing, has recently attached himself to this cause, perhaps in hope of expiating his past sins or at least diverting attention from them. No matter. The bill deserves to pass on its own overwhelming merits.

It may still surprise workers in other industries that the labor rights they have enjoyed since the days of the New Deal are a distant dream to farmworkers. The vulnerability of these men and women has bred appalling conditions and indecent treatment. Mr. Espada highlighted some of these in a recent visit to a duck farm in Sullivan County where workers toil through exhausting shifts to force feed poultry for foie gras.

After his role in the legislative coup that paralyzed Albany for weeks, the campaign violations, misuse of funds and murky issue of residency, Mr. Espada will need more than one righteous bill to right his reputation. But we are counting on him — and the powerful Democratic conference leader, Senator John Sampson, a co-sponsor of the bill — to get this measure passed. If Mr. Espada, with all his obsession with power, helps bring about a historic victory for New York's powerless farmworkers, that is an Albany irony worth celebrating.