

## Same old politics hurts N.Y. farmworkers

By **MIRIAM PAWEL**

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Seven months ago, I predicted on these pages that leaders of the state Senate would use a time-honored technique to kill a farmworkers bill of rights: The measure would quietly die in committee, avoiding a public debate in which human decency otherwise would carry the day for farmworkers.

I was wrong. The leaders agreed to a compromise that would grant farmworkers some minimal but historic rights, including overtime and one day off a week. On Jan. 20, the Labor Committee voted overwhelmingly to move the bill toward the Senate floor.

Then the Senate leaders killed it.

In response to strident opposition from the Farm Bureau, S2247b was inexplicably re-routed to the Agriculture Committee, chaired by a dairy farmer who has promised to block the bill.

The Farm Bureau's argument is simple: These changes will cost too much. Agriculture is seasonal work, not comparable to any other industry. Apples need to be picked; cows need to be milked. But the experience in California -- the nation's leading dairy state as well as a major producer of fruits and vegetables -- belies the Farm Bureau's doomsday scenarios. California imposes far more stringent requirements, including health and safety protections, collective bargaining provisions and mandatory overtime. The state's \$30 billion a year agriculture industry thrives nonetheless.

Put aside those facts for a moment, and assume the Farm Bureau's dire predictions have some merit. Then the logic comes down to this: To avoid financial hardships that the new law would impose on employers, it is acceptable to exploit farmworkers and deny them basic protections afforded almost every other worker in New York.

Farmworkers can be made to labor seven days a week, for as many hours as necessary, with no overtime, in back-breaking work. They need not receive unemployment when they are laid off, or be housed in shelter that meets safety standards. Because that would be bad for business.

It's hard to imagine such logic would be tolerated in any other industry.

Farmworkers, with few exceptions, don't vote. They don't make campaign contributions. The Farm Bureau gives out thousands of dollars in political donations. One can only wonder what caused Senate Democratic Conference Leader John Sampson to suddenly renege. Ironically, as he turned his back on farmworkers, Sampson spoke on the Senate Web site about carrying on the legacy of Martin Luther King: "For those who are less fortunate, those who don't have a voice, be a voice for them."

For four decades, Democrats dreamed of the day they would control the Senate. They campaigned on promises of the bills they would pass, the progressive legislation scuttled year after year in the Republican-controlled Senate.

Finally, they won. And they have certainly broken with tradition -- by sabotaging a bill at the last minute through a dubious parliamentary maneuver. If a bill like this one can not make it to the floor, precisely because it has enough support to pass, exactly what difference does Democratic control make?

Forty years ago, Edward R. Murrow aired a TV program so powerful that its title became a metaphor for the plight of farmworkers. Murrow called the broadcast "Harvest of Shame," and he ended with words all too applicable today:

"The migrants have no lobby. Only an enlightened, aroused and perhaps angered public opinion can do anything about the migrants. The people you have seen have the strength to harvest your fruit and vegetables. They do not have the strength to influence legislation. Maybe we do. Good night, and good luck."

Miriam Pawel is the author of "The Union of Their Dreams -- Power, Hope and Struggle in Cesar Chavez's Farm Worker Movement."