



Plowed under by Sampson: State Senate boss' lie buries hopes of farm worker bill

EDITORIALS

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It was easier for state Senate Democratic boss John Sampson to break his word than to deliver the basic labor rights he had promised to New York's most exploited workforce, so Sampson broke his word.

He broke his word to rank-and-file Democrats. He broke his word to committee chairs, in the process trashing Senate rules. And, worst, he broke his word to the tens of thousands of farmworkers who plant, tend and pick crops in this state without even a guaranteed day off per week.

This was supposed to be the year fieldhands were finally granted a semblance of the labor protections that are provided to all other workers. These include the right to overtime pay, the right to have even minimal time off and the right to organize and bargain collectively.

The Assembly has passed such measures time and again, and now, a clear majority of Democrats and Republicans in the narrowly divided Senate support such legislation. And it was moving ahead in the appropriate committees, albeit watered down to ease objections from growers.

The Labor Committee, which has jurisdiction over changes in the labor law, voted 9 in favor and 3 against, with four members moving the bill forward without expressing an opinion.

The next stop was to be the Codes Committee, which has jurisdiction over laws that impose fines. Action in the affirmative was scheduled for tomorrow, but then Sampson pulled a switch.

Under pressure from farm country Sen. Darrel Aubertine, who faces intense political heat because of the bill, Sampson sent the measure suddenly to Aubertine's Agriculture Committee.

It does not belong there. Under the Senate rules, that panel covers only changes to specific agriculture laws, not amendments to labor laws. No matter. Sampson is terrified that Aubertine could lose to a Republican in the fall, so he chose to let Aubertine's panel smother the bill.

Sampson did so even though his party - with a few exceptions, like Aubertine and Brooklyn's Martin Dilan - is standing tall for the farmworkers. Less than a year ago, Dilan wrote that he was "fully in support" and "happy to vote in favor of" the bill. Now, profile in cowardice, he has flipped.

Sampson's aides and lawyers and parliamentarians scrambled to explain and/or justify his maneuver. In the end, his chief spokesman claimed that Aubertine's committee would have only an advisory say on the bill. Which would be news to Aubertine, who put out word that he intends to hold extended hearings on the legislation.

Should that happen, should Sampson not find a way and the courage to get the farmworker protection bill back on track this week and through the Senate, he will forever be known as a man whose word is dirt.