

# JUSTICE FOR FARMWORKERS



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## **FARMWORKERS, BETRAYED BY SENATE LEADERS, REFUSE TO GO QUIETLY** **Kerry Kennedy, labor leaders join farmworkers in rally for equal rights**

*Albany, NY* – Today, farmworkers from across the state gathered with faith, labor, and student allies including human rights activist Kerry Kennedy, at 1 p.m. in Albany's West Capitol Park to protest the New York State Senate's continued denial of their most fundamental rights. The workers are calling for passage of the Farmworkers Fair Labor Practices Act, which would grant farmworkers basic labor rights enjoyed by all other New York workers: the right to organize, to a day of rest per week, and to coverage under the state's Temporary Disability Insurance program.

"New York State institutionalized the Jim Crow-era exclusion of farmworkers from federal labor laws by passing state laws that reaffirmed their exclusion. It is time to rectify that injustice and bury Jim Crow," said **Kerry Kennedy, Founder of the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Human Rights**. "Senator Sampson owes the farmworkers of New York State a floor vote on their rights."

"No more delay. No more excuses. 75 years is too long to wait for basic rights. NYSUT and its 600,000 members will never sit back idly as our brothers and sisters working on farms are exploited and ignored," said **Lee Cutler, Secretary-Treasurer of New York State United Teachers**. "This has to change."

"The challenge for New York State, as I noted in my 2000 testimony before the Senate, is to find a way to protect the well being and to honor the dignity of both farmers and farmworkers. An important first step in this process is the removal of the exclusions that legitimize discrimination against farmworkers. A decade has passed, but the moral and ethical issues remain. The time to act is now," said **Bishop Howard J. Hubbard of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Albany**.

**The Rev. Richard Witt, Director of Rural and Migrant Ministry**, which coordinates the Justice for Farmworkers Campaign, said, "We have been blessed to be nourished by the labor of our brothers and sisters; and yet we respond by denying them a place at the table. When others give excuses as to why farmworkers shouldn't be welcome at the table, our voices become all too easily silenced. As people rooted in a faith tradition of justice and human dignity, we stand up and welcome farmworkers equally to the table."

Over 130 faith groups and religious communities have endorsed passage of the Farmworker Fair Labor Practices Act, along with dozens of student, community and labor organizations.

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“We are in the twenty-first century. But when it comes to human rights and basic labor protection for farmworkers we are still living in the Middle Ages. Even though slavery was officially abolished in this country, it does not mean that it does not exist,” said **Irma, a farmworker from Western NY**.

**According to Assemblywoman Catherine Nolan**, “These past several years, it has been my honor and privilege to work with advocates and my fellow colleagues in the Assembly to pass the Farmworkers Fair Labor Practices Act. In 2010, farmworkers must have the same collective bargaining rights, worker’s compensation rights, unemployment benefits, and other basic rights allocated to other workers. They have been left behind long enough. This is no longer justifiable.”

Following extensive consultation with all interested parties, the amended **Farmworkers Fair Labor Practices Act** would strengthen NY agriculture while making substantial progress toward the just and dignified treatment of farmworkers. The amended bill thoughtfully accommodates the concerns raised by agriculture industry lobbyists, while leaving intact the bill’s integrity and purpose. As of this writing, the Senate has failed to bring forward the compromise bill for a floor vote.

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Rural and Migrant Ministry works for the creation of a just rural New York state by nurturing leadership, standing with the disenfranchised, especially farmworkers and rural workers and changing unjust systems and structures. For Justice for Farmworkers Campaign background, visit <http://www.justiceforfarmworkers.org/> For updates, visit the Web site of the Campaign’s partner organization, the [Labor-Religion Coalition of New York State](http://www.labor-religion.org/farmworkers-updates.htm): <http://www.labor-religion.org/farmworkers-updates.htm>