



John's harvest of shame: Senate boss Sampson must not block justice for farmworkers

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If he has not already done so, state Senate Democratic conference leader John Sampson will soon discover in his mail a note from Bono, leader of the renowned rock group U2.

Sampson will also find a card from Wyclef Jean, Grammy-winning hip-hop artist, as well as from hundreds more who attended last week's benefit dinner for the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice & Human Rights.

The cards implore Sampson to do the right thing for one of New York's most exploited workforces. They read:

"For far too long, farmworkers have been wrongfully excluded from New York's basic labor protections. I urge you to right this wrong by passing the Farmworkers Fair Labor Practices Act before Dec. 31, 2009."

The write-in campaign is being advanced by Kerry Kennedy, who has taken up the farmworkers' cause, much as her late father battled in the 1960s for California field hands with the legendary Cesar Chavez.

Kennedy has become an energizing figure in the long drive to erase the injustice in New York's law excluding farmworkers from employment guarantees that apply to other wage earners. They are barred from such basics as the right to overtime pay, an unpaid day off per week and the right to organize and bargain collectively.

Reform is tantalizingly close. The Assembly has passed an equal labor rights bill that Gov. Paterson has said he will sign. But, to the shame of Sampson and fellow Democrats, who purport to champion the little guy, the measure is frozen in the Senate.

Never mind that the bill has 28 bipartisan co-sponsors from the city, Long Island and upstate, including Sampson. And never mind that a dozen additional senators would likely vote in favor, creating an overwhelming majority for passage. Sampson is tending to the wishes of a lone upstater from a farm district who could face a backlash if the bill goes through.

Darrel Aubertine is a Democrat who won a Senate seat in a traditionally Republican area last year. Previously, Aubertine had served in the Assembly - and twice voted for the identical bill. But those votes were meaningless because, at the time, there was no chance of Senate passage.

Now, the makeup of the Senate has changed, and Aubertine's position may be on the line - along with Sampson's hold on a slim Democratic majority. And the shameful calculation appears to be: We keep our jobs; the farmworkers eat dirt.

The Dems are under intense pressure to return to principle. Farmworker advocates are receiving real support from organized labor. Says Stuart Appelbaum, president of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union: "We must fight for the rights of all workers if we want to advance the rights of any workers."

Also pushing is Arturo Rodriguez, Chavez's son-in-law and successor as president of the United Farm Workers. At the RFK dinner, the California labor leader told us the bill in Albany is "the closest we've ever come" to getting full labor rights for field hands.

Among those at the gala were three farmworkers who drove 350 miles from the blueberry fields of upstate Brockport. They were cheered by 1,000 attendees, all of whom had postcards for Sampson at their plates.

He must respond by bringing an uncompromising bill to the floor - rather than force the workers to taste the bitter fruit of betrayal.