

JUSTICE FOR FARMWORKERS



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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Harvest fairness: candlelight vigils in ten communities call for equal labor rights for New York farmworkers

With farmworker equal rights legislation pending before the state Senate, clergy and laity have joined students, labor, and other supporters in bearing religious witness to the plight of workers in this busy harvest season. People of faith in Albany, NYC, Middletown, Millbrook, Syracuse White Plains and Ithaca and Syracuse came together publicly over the last five days to pray for Justice for Farmworkers. Vigils in Rochester and Setauket will occur in the coming weeks. The gatherings have included a mixture of liturgy, song and testimony along with signs to draw attention to the issue in some communities.

“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,” said **The Reverend Richard Witt, Director of Rural and Migrant Ministry**, the state’s largest agricultural advocacy group “When voices cry out with excuses as to why farmworkers shouldn’t be welcome at the table, our voices become all too easily silenced. Now is the time for us, as people rooted in a faith tradition of justice and human dignity, to stand up and welcome farmworkers equally to the table.”

In a statement read at the first vigil, **Bishop Howard J. Hubbard of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Albany** said, “From the Book of Genesis to the last line of the New Testament, the Scriptures tell us that every person has been endowed by God with a transcendent dignity that is unique, sacred and inviolable. From this sacred worth there flow the basic human rights to food, clothing, health care, education and employment. That is why I support the Farmworkers Fair Labor Practices Act which seeks to insure that those who harvest our crops are provided the fundamental protections accorded other working men and women in our society: a voluntary day of rest; overtime pay; disability insurance coverage and the right to form a union and bargain collectively. I hope that our State Senate will join the Assembly in extending these basic but long-denied rights to the farmworkers in our Empire State.”

Outside the offices of the NY Farm Bureau, **CSEA Executive Vice President Mary Sullivan** said, “I am proud to stand with the farmworkers in their struggle for fairness, respect and decent treatment. The Farm Bureau ought to be ashamed of itself for standing against them.” Sullivan also serves as President of the Capital District Area Labor Federation.

Labor-Religion Coalition of New York State Executive Director Brian O’Shaughnessy said, “2009 is the year for New York State to end the exclusion of farmworkers from basic labor

rights. I do believe the Senate and Governor will act this year, and I applaud them in advance for ending what the *NY Times* calls “a perverse holdover from the Jim Crow era.”

Injustice for farmworkers was enshrined into law over 70 years ago. President Franklin Roosevelt proposed wage and hour protections for both industrial and agricultural workers, but southern segregationists objected to putting farmworkers, who were mostly African American, on an equal footing with white workers. As a result, farmworkers fell victim to racial bias and political expediency and were left out of the New Deal and subsequent labor and employment protections. New York has perpetuated this exclusion of farmworkers in its own laws.

The **Farmworkers Fair Labor Practices Act** (FFLPA, S.2247 A.1867) would remove the legal exclusions that deny farmworkers basic rights such as the right to overtime pay, to a day of rest per week, and to form a union. It was passed by the Assembly for the fourth time in June. Governor Paterson has said he would sign the bill, and even included it on a special session agenda during the June Senate stalemate. The FFLPA is sponsored by a bipartisan group of twenty-eight senators from upstate, NYC and Long Island.

Call Jordan Wells at 845-891-7046 for contact information for leaders at each of the vigil locations. Photos available upon request.

Albany	Thurs. Oct. 15, 5:30-6:30 p.m. (Outside NY Farm Bureau)
Middletown	Fri. Oct 16, 6 p.m. (United Presbyterian Church, 50 East Main St.)
Millbrook	Fri. Oct. 16, 6 p.m. (Grace Episcopal Church, 3328 Franklin Ave)
New York City	Sat. Oct. 17, 7 p.m. (Holy Trinity Episcopal Church, 316 E 88 th St.)
Syracuse	Sun. Oct. 18, 3 p.m. (Plymouth Congregational Church, 232 Onondaga St.)
Monticello	Sun. Oct. 18, 6 p.m. (St. John's Episcopal Church, 15 St John St.)
White Plains	Mon. Oct 19, 6 p.m. (St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church, 82 Prospect St.)
Ithaca	Mon. Oct. 19, 5 p.m. (First Baptist Church, Dewitt Park)
Rochester	Wed. Oct. 21, 7 p.m. (St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church, 15 St Mary's Place)
Long Island	Thursday, Oct. 29, 7:30-8 p.m. (St. James Roman Catholic Church, Setauket)

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The **Justice for Farmworkers Campaign** brings together a remarkable coalition of faith communities, students and labor to stand with farmworkers in an effort to gain equality under New York State labor law.

www.justiceforfarmworkers.org