



New York State Catholic Conference

Issue in Brief

Justice for Farmworkers

ISSUE

Support Equitable Labor Standards for Farmworkers

BACKGROUND

Farmworkers in New York State are excluded from many of the laws that establish worker protections, including overtime pay, a day of rest, collective bargaining, employer contributions to the unemployment and workers' compensation funds, and some public health protections. Laws that currently prevent farmworkers from accessing rights and privileges available to other workers in New York State are rooted in the attitudes of the past and must be changed.

There is no legitimate reason for treating farmworkers inequitably, and they should be afforded the same rights, protections and benefits that all other workers in the state receive. In every other sector of society, employers must provide basic worker protections as a cost of doing business.

By recognizing the rights of farmworkers and the unique contributions of agriculture, New York can develop policies which bring economic fairness, safety and dignity to the production of agricultural goods from which we all benefit.

MESSAGE POINTS

- Support passage of the Farmworkers Fair Labor Practices Act (A1792/S1743).
- It was not until 1999 that legislation was passed eliminating farmworkers' exemption from the minimum wage laws. Economic justice for agricultural workers requires eliminating the remaining farmworkers' fair labor exemptions.
- The history of farmworker exclusions from these basic rights is the product of another era and is rooted in bigotry. The exemptions were part of a compromise necessary to get "Dixiecrats" to support post-depression-era labor legislation. It is time to recognize that farmworkers should have the same rights (not special rights) as other workers.
- Many farmers treat their workers with dignity and exceed minimum requirements. But sadly many others do not. All employers should be held to a basic standard of fairness.
- Agriculture is a critical industry in this state, much too important to carry with it the stain of the bigoted policies of the past.

Church Teaching

"Agricultural labor involves some of the most dangerous jobs in the United States, with workers exposed to harsh working conditions, pesticides and other chemicals, and long hours of labor-intensive work. Labor protections are currently inadequate; for those protections that do exist in law, enforcement is random and ineffective. Labor protections for agricultural workers should be guaranteed in law, consistent with protections for other workers in the country.

– *"For I Was Hungry & You Gave Me Food: A Catholic Agenda For Action - Pursuing A More Just Agricultural System,"*
USCCB, 2003