

FARM WORKERS

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state laws regarding farm workers:

- Farm owners would be required to offer employees at least 24 consecutive hours of rest each week, with farm workers allowed the option of taking that time off or working.

- Farms would establish eight-hour work days, requiring overtime at one-and-a-half times the normal rate after eight hours.

- Farm laborers would have collective-bargaining rights.

- Sanitary codes would apply to all farm and food-processing labor camps housing migrant workers, regardless of the number of housing occupants.

- Farms would be required to report on-the-job injuries, and provide farm workers with claim forms for workers' compensation. Currently, state law requires farms with yearly payrolls of more than \$1,200 to carry compensation insurance.

Farm-worker advocates claim the bill is needed to raise the status of farm workers, whom they say are treated by law as second-class workers and denied the rights other New York workers enjoy. The farm-worker bill has been promoted vigorously by the Centro De Trabajadores Agricolas, known in English as the Independent Farmworker Center, which is funded in part by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, an anti-poverty program of the U.S. bishops. CITA organizer Salvador Solis, a resident alien from Mexico, said that migrant farm workers deserve the Fair Labor Act after working in New York for decades.

"I want to know why, after 50 years of being here (in the United



Lella Navidi/Catholic Courier

At the close of the "Bienvenida," or welcoming Mass for migrant farm workers June 22 in Brockport, 7-year-old Ashley Solis leads a procession from Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church to First Baptist Church. Following Ashley is her 17-year-old sister, Daniela.

States), that we have no rights," he said.

Farm owners argue, however, that many of the law's intentions — including days of rest and workers' compensation — are already in effect on most farms. Farmer advocates add that collective bargaining in particular could destroy the state's agricultural industry if workers exercise the right to strike during harvests. They also said that governmental regulations and ongoing technological farming improvements are already making farming costly.

The farm owners say they would like to raise their farm workers' wages, but that they operate in a business with slim profit margins often marked by many bad years with revenue losses. According to farm-owner advocates, farm-worker wages may range from \$5.15 an hour to \$10 or more depending on various

factors, including the type of farm and work. Dairy farmer John Lincoln, a parishioner of St. Bridget/St. Joseph Church in East Bloomfield, said Catholic farm owners feel the church uses "hurtful rhetoric" when it advocates for farm workers.

"They don't listen to the farmers' side of the story," said Lincoln, president of the New York Farm Bureau, which represents 34,000 farm owners and agricultural businesses statewide. "I'd love to pay my workers \$20 an hour, but we can't afford to do it in this global economy."

He and other farmers said the church overlooks the fact that U.S. farms must compete in a global market against nations that can sometimes offer food at prices far cheaper than those of U.S. farmers. However, CITA's director, Aspacio Alcantara, an immigrant from the Dominican Republic, said farm workers should not have to "bear the

brunt of the problems of the agricultural industry." Alcantara has organized farm workers across the state to press for better labor conditions and pay.

"Catholic social teaching recognizes and affirms the right for people to participate in the decisions that affect their lives," Alcantara said through translator Bill Abom, coordinator of Rural and Migrant Ministry's Brockport office. Alcantara expressed frustration with farmers and farm owners who oppose the right to collective bargaining. Abom added that farm-worker contracts could contain no-strike clauses.

Alcantara also said that he is also frustrated by farm owners who continually point out that farm workers make better money here than they would in such countries as Mexico.

"We should not take advantage of the problems and poverty in Mexico by exploiting (Mexican) labor here in the United States," he said.

If farm owners recognized the right of farm workers to collectively bargain in New York state, Alcantara added, both sides could cooperate on such initiatives as campaigns to promote the state's products. On that note, Abom said the fact that the state's farm workers were being treated fairly could be included as part of such campaigns.

Lincoln said most of his fellow farmer-owners do value their workers, and recognize that treating them well only comes back to benefit the farm. However, he said, farm-worker advocates must recognize that farm owners are at the mercy of many forces, from the weather to globalization, that can make or break farms.

"Basically, the farm worker isn't going to be better off than the farmer in the long run," he said.

GENERAL

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