

Farm workers to march to Albany

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

ROCHESTER — Migrant farm workers and their supporters, including numerous Catholic labor and social-justice advocates, are marching to Albany this week to press the state Senate to pass the Farmworker Fair Labor Practices Act.

The act would require employers of farm laborers to allow at least 24 consecutive hours of rest each week — with the provision that workers could opt out of a day of rest; guarantee an eight-hour work day and an overtime rate of one and one-half times the normal rate of pay; and grant farm workers the right to collectively bargain. The act would also contain various sanitary and on-the-job-injury provisions.

The march is sponsored by the Justice For Farmworkers Campaign, a coalition of more than 200 organizations, congregations and unions. The march, slated to take place May 1-10, was preceded with a rally and dinner the night of April 30 at St. Michael's Church, a predominantly Hispanic faith community.

Speakers at the rally included Hispanic farm workers as well as area Catholic and Protestant clergy, Catholic religious, and labor and political leaders.

The march officially started the next day at 19th-century abolitionist Harriet Tubman's home in Auburn, and was expected to end with a 24-hour vigil in Albany from May 10-11, and a noontime rally at Capitol Park in Albany on May 11. Along the way, marchers were to make stops in Camillus, Syracuse, Oneida, Utica,



Mike Crupi/Catholic Courier

Salvador Solis (from left), Juan C. Ortiz, vice president of the Independent Farmworkers Center, and Aspacio Alcantara, executive director of the Independent Farmworkers Center, applaud the supportive words of Rochester and Vicinity Labor Council President Jim Bertolone during an April 30 farm worker solidarity rally at Rochester's St. Michael's Church.

Little Falls, Canajoharie, Amsterdam, Schenectady and Colonie.

More than 1,600 people from around the country are expected to participate in the march, the second such march in the same number of years, according to Bill Abom, coordinator of the interfaith Western New York Office of Rural and Migrant Ministry.

Speakers at the rally said they were marching because they want farm workers to have the same rights that other workers already enjoy. Juan Carlos Ortiz, a Mexican farm worker, said it was "incredible"

that farm workers had to press for such rights in 2004, long after other workers had gained their rights. However, he said he was heartened by the growing support farm workers are receiving in New York.

"We know that we are not alone, and we think and believe that this is a country of dreams," he said to applause from the crowd.

The fair practices act has already passed the state Democrat-dominated Assembly, but has never made it to the Republican-controlled Senate's floor, according to Joseph E. Robach, a Republican state senator who represents most of the city, as well as Parma, Greece and Brighton.

Robach spoke at the rally, and noted in an interview afterward that support for the bill is growing in the Senate, where eight other Republicans have cosponsored it. He credited the New York State Catholic Conference, the state bishops' public-policy arm, and grassroots Catholics as well, for improving the bill's chances of passage, since the church has been continually lobbying on behalf of the act.

Farm workers have waited long enough for passage of the bill, according to Aspacio Alcantara, director of Centro Independiente De Trabajadores Agricolas, known in English as the Independent Farmworker Center. During his speech at St. Michael's, the Dominican immigrant said many farm workers are suffering from being excluded from the state's labor laws.

"It is they who are treated like second-class citizens," he said. "It is they who are doing the work that others don't want to do."

In an interview after his speech, Alcantara said farm worker advocates want to work with farm owners to improve the economic climate for both groups. However, the provisions contained within the Farmworker Fair Labor Practices Act are non-negotiable, he said. He noted that farm workers in such states as California, Texas and Florida have the right to collectively bargain, and that he believes New York farm workers should have the same rights as their fellow workers.

"If the industry is to survive by excluding farm workers from basic rights and protections, then we need to change how agriculture is done," he said.

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