



OPINION:

Time to end Jim Crow's reign on New York's farms

BY KERRY KENNEDY

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June 6 marked the 41st anniversary of Robert Kennedy's assassination. One of my most poignant memories of my father is of his visit to a farm labor camp in upstate New York, where he had gone to inspect living conditions for the men and women who give us our daily bread. He and Sen. Jacob Javits were thrown off the property by a grower threatening them with a shotgun.

The conditions he witnessed that day were horrific. People stuffed into overcrowded tin shacks, with little access to running water after 14-hour days blackened by pesticides and dirt in the fields. Drudgery, subjugation and humiliation characterized life for people who planted vegetables, picked fruit and milked cows.

Sadly, most of what my father fought to change in 1967 remains unchanged in 2009.

The legacy of Jim Crow lives today in the state of New York, resulting in near-slave conditions for children, women and men across our state. While preparing foie gras for fancy restaurants, a farmworker feeds 350 ducks four times a day for 32 days in a row. During that entire period, he is not allowed more than four hours of rest in a row, receives no overtime, is paid minimum wage and, if he dares to attempt to form a union, he can be fired. In the fields, children 14 and 15 years old make a mere \$3.20 an hour for their back-breaking servitude.

All this is legal in our state, and we have got to put an end to it.

In the 1930s, when Congress passed the New Deal labor laws, they provided protection for practically every member of America's workforce - except farm laborers. The farm owners and Dixiecrats in Congress simply didn't want to give their African-American workers benefits that would cost growers money, cause them inconvenience or put the sons of slaves on par with white factory workers. Consequently, farm laborers never received the rights most workers take for granted.

While other states jettisoned the archaic laws that kept their farmworkers in poverty, New York passed laws that reaffirmed the federal exclusions.

Change has been painfully long in coming. Some members of the State Legislature have ignored the issue because they had nothing to gain - after all, most farmworkers can't vote.

But over the past 10 years, hundreds of faith, labor and youth organizations have aligned to move the process forward. Now, the state Senate is poised to vote on a law that will eliminate the exclusions of the bad old days. Thirty-two votes are needed to pass the bill, and 45 senators have indicated support. The Assembly is committed, and Gov. David A. Paterson has said he will sign it. We are one short step away from introducing farm labor conditions in New York to the 21st century.

All that's required is for Majority Leader Malcolm Smith (D-St. Albans) to allow the bill to the floor for a vote - and for the Republican senators who have pledged their support to be told by their leaders to vote their conscience.

For years, Long Island's Republican senators have carried the farmworker-rights banner. Their continued support will prove crucial to finally achieving justice. But they are under pressure to vote this bill down from the agriculture industry and partisan pols who think voting as a party is more important than serving the people of New York.

When Robert Kennedy broke bread with Cesar Chavez in 1968, he addressed a crowd of farmworkers in California: "When your children and grandchildren take their place in America . . . you will say, 'I did this. I was there at the point of difficulty and danger.' And though you may be old and bent from many years of labor, no man will stand taller than you when you say, 'I marched with Cesar.' "

Today, all New Yorkers, and especially Long Islanders, have the opportunity to join the struggle. And when we are old and bent, we can turn to our children and grandchildren and say, "I was there at the point of difficulty and danger. I helped the New York farmworkers."

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