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**Second-class Workers:  
Three Generations is Enough  
Solidarity America  
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If the New York State Senate were not in chaos, it would be considering a bill that would rectify in small measure the imposition of second-class status on farm workers that was perpetrated in America some 75 years ago. They're not the only workers to have been left out of the Wagner Act, to be sure, but they were the most negatively affected and have lived with it for seven decades. Their families and communities have suffered.

When the labor law was passed three generations ago in the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt, the agribusiness lobby was so powerful that FDR was forced to negotiate with those interests to get the right to unionize for the millions of workers in the industrial sector - auto, mining, glass, rubber, steel - when the U.S. still had a vibrant industrial sector. The president at that time, in the middle of the Great Depression, capitulated to the giant farming interests, wrongly thinking that he could include farm workers and the others in a year or two. That capitulation cost millions of workers untold misery and a place among workers at the end of the line.

This year, it's nearly 75 years later and the right to be covered by a humane labor law and the right to join unions is yet to be realized. There are a few states where some farm workers have unionized - California, for one - but most farm workers are still waiting to be included in the ranks of workers who have rights.

Even in California, the agribusiness interests are so powerful that the late Cesar Chavez, founding president of the United Farm Workers union, once half-jokingly

commented that, because of the power of the growers in the halls of the legislature in Sacramento, it might be worth scrapping that progressive (if it were enforced) state labor law and starting over again.

The business interests in New York State are no slouches in the legislature in Albany, either. It has been as difficult for workers to get any labor law reform in New York as it has been for farm workers to get fundamental rights in the workplace. Their lobbyists work overtime, warning about "collapse" and "the end of (you pick the subject) as we know it." So far, it has worked. Their think tanks work overtime, pumping out the propaganda and spinning labor and economic statistics to show that any advance for workers will bring something to an end - usually the economy, sometimes, though, civilization, itself.

This year, however, until the New York Senate recently engaged in a palace coup involving all of the Republicans and one Democrat, who promised "reform" and declared themselves kings of the Senate, there was a bill that would at least give farm workers in New York some rights, S.5212. For about two weeks, that bill and hundreds of others have languished in locked drawers in the chamber and, since no one was the clear leader, no work has been done. The governor this week announced that he would call them into special session every day until they do their work and a judge was to preside over the body (no pun intended).

The bill would, among other things, provide a defined work week, overtime pay, and a day of rest for those who work on the farms. The outcry from the giant farm lobby has been great, but what one would have expected. The farmers, who fear yet another expense, have been stirred up. This, they say, would be added to their growing debt.

Dairy farmers, for example, are being paid less than half what it costs to produce their milk. That's not just New York, but in all of the dairy states. Some 20,000 small-to-medium family farms are threatened nationwide with sale or foreclosure, if the prices continue to be as bad as they have been in recent months. This is a recurring theme in American agriculture.

It's easy to see why there is hysteria among small farmers about the bill, if they hire even one worker. Many, though they are on the edge of exhaustion, do all of the work themselves - and they're still losing ground every month. These are people - both farmers and farm workers - who actually produce something of value and they are at the tail end of the nation's economy. It's all part of the cheap-food policy of the federal government. If you don't think Americans are the beneficiaries of a cheap-food policy, take a look at the percentage of income that is spent on food in the U.S. and compare it with the percentage in other countries, rich or poor.

The only ones who are surviving well in the agricultural sector are the investors, who own large parts of industrial farming, as well as the giants in agribusiness which are vertically and horizontally integrated. Ever wonder why big tobacco companies own food conglomerates? That's where the money is.

All of that income is based on cheap labor - low wages for farm workers and low incomes for family farmers. It's the same in the U.S. factories that still exist and it's the case in Rural America. As long as all of them do their work without asking for just pay

and decent working conditions, the cheap food keeps flowing into the supermarkets and fast food emporiums.

Control of everything farmers produce is complicated by federal and state regulations, but, under it all, is the aim to pay as little as possible. Prices paid to farmers are fixed by powerful agricultural corporations and financial, investment, and banking interests. That's what we've had for 75 years. Periodically, farmers rebel, in a manner of speaking, and the powers-that-be give them a few pennies to keep them quiet for a short while.

Farm workers have few advocates and little voice. If they had been included in the labor laws of the 1930s, we would not be having the conversation about the threat to modern agriculture represented by a law that gives farm workers their just rights. America long ago would have adjusted to full rights for such workers.

The demise of family farmers (especially dairy farmers) is a real possibility, but it too would be a non-issue if they received a just price for what they produce. A just price for farm produce would include, after seven decades, fair wages and benefits for both the farm workers and the farm families, themselves. It's not too much to ask, but that's hard for farmers to see and they, too, need to fight for a fair price.

They have been told for generations that their interests are the same as those of Cargill and ConAgra, Archer Daniels Midland, Monsanto, and Perdue Chicken. They have virtually nothing in common with them, but most believe what they're told.

And small business owners have been led to believe that their interests are the same as those of General Electric, Dow Chemical, General Motors, Wal-Mart, Exxon Mobil, or Microsoft.

Not to be left out are the workers who believe that their interests are the same as their employers' interests and would vote against a union and their rights on the job in an instant. They are in the minority of workers, but fear keeps them in line.

After all, the big boys are still in charge and, until workers, farmers, and small business owners realize where their interests lie and together stand up to demand change that will allow them to survive, they will stay far back, at the very end of the line. Until then, we will still be fighting the battle for the workers left out of the Wagner Act in the mid-1930s. We should be well beyond that battle of our grandfathers and on to the problems of the present.

Whether the New York Senate is functional or not, neither S.5212 nor the "debate" about whether farm workers should be brought up to equality with other workers would be necessary, if they had been included in the law during the last time the country was undergoing profound economic upheaval. In New York, a state considered to be progressive and which has a relatively high rate of unionization, it's embarrassing to be having such a debate.


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**BlackCommentator.com** Columnist, John Funciello, is a labor organizer and former union organizer. His union work started when he became a local president of The Newspaper Guild in the early 1970s. He was a reporter for 14 years for newspapers in New York State. In addition to labor work, he is organizing family farmers as they struggle to stay on the land under enormous pressure from factory food producers and land developers. Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Funciello.

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