

## Reflection on the Farmworker Fair Labor Human Rights Hearing in Albany

Irene Thiel, [irene.thiel@verizon.net](mailto:irene.thiel@verizon.net)

On January 17, 2018 I went by bus to Albany (I might add that it was snowing) to attend the Farmworker Fair Labor Human Rights Hearing. The purpose of the hearing was to listen to farmworkers tell their stories of life as it is lived out on farms--produce, orchards, vineyards, poultry and dairy. Agriculture is a multi-billion dollar business in NY State. The hearing was held in a Legislative Office Building hearing room which could seat about 300. There were over 100 people there, remember it was snowing, from all over the state--Buffalo, Rochester, Westchester, New York City and Long Island and places in between.

The stories were shocking and compelling--folks working 55 to 80 hours a week for minimum wages with no overtime pay, in hot sun or the cold, sometimes no lunch break or any break, harassment by bosses, sexual harassment for the women, no time to visit a doctor after an accident, no job training then criticism for not getting the work done faster and better. There were many comments about being treated disrespectfully not as a human being. Some thought the cows were treated better than they were. One farmworker thought that slavery was over in this country but felt he was treated like a slave. Over and over there were stories of frustration, exhaustion, not having time to spend with children or even to grocery shop for themselves.

The workers who came to talk were very courageous in the present atmosphere of immigration. Their lives were on the line for deportation.

The panel of observers were: Sam Waterston, actor and activist; Tom Geraty, NYU professor and former head of the Brennan Center for Justice, activist for justice; Jeanne Mirer, activist lawyer practicing labor and human rights law in New York City; Sister Doreen Glynn, CSJ, activist for justice in the Albany area. After the presentations, the panel made comments. To a person they were shocked at what they heard and they were moved to say they would present their observations to legislators. They felt that this must be the year when finally, something must be done to pass laws which brought NY State up to par with other agricultural states in granting human rights and dignity to farmworkers. The bill, S2727 (Senate), A4189 (Assembly) has been in the wings for years. The Assembly has passed it each year but the Senate has not even brought it to the floor for a vote for several years. To view the bill visit <http://ruralmigrantministry.org/>, look under Accompaniment then Justice for farmworkers.

Here are some steps you can take if you care to bring justice to this situation. Call your state elected officials and ask him/her to support the Farmworker Fair Labor Practices Act, S2727/A4189

- Governor Cuomo-518-474-8390
- NY State Assembly-518-455-4218
- NY State Senate 518-455-2700