

# Walk for farmworker rights

BY VÍCTOR MANUEL RAMOS  
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Farmworkers and their supporters are rallying tomorrow on Long Island and walking the first leg of a 200-mile march to Albany to call for labor rights for a largely immigrant workforce that plants and harvests crops in New York.

While the workers and their advocates are pushing for legislative action, agriculture industry officials said they need flexibility in labor rules to keep crops from being ruined and family-run farms from being priced out of the market.

The Farmworkers Fair Labor Practices Act seeks collective bargaining rights, a guaranteed day-off per week, an eight-hour workday and overtime pay. The bill, first introduced in the State Legislature in 2010, is held up in committee for the third consecutive session.

"We are striving for equality here," said Katia Chapman, education coordinator with the Rural & Migrant Ministry, a statewide group. "Basically, we are asking for the state to remove the exclusion of farmworkers from labor law... and, importantly, that they will allow it to go to the floor for a vote."

The March for Farmworker Justice, as the event is billed, is slated to start tomorrow with a 1:30 p.m. rally outside the Smithtown office of Senate Majority Leader John Flanagan (R-East Northport). Flanagan did not respond to a request for comment.

The march will proceed to Hauppauge and Brentwood. Advocates will gather again at



The Rev. Duncan Burns, right, with farmworkers rights backers at St. John's Episcopal Church yesterday.

7 p.m. tomorrow at St. John's Episcopal Church in Huntington, for a program that is open to the public.

Over days and weeks, the marchers plan to make stops in Bethpage and Garden City before moving into New York City and then north through the Hudson Valley. Clergy from various churches, farmworkers and members of an advocacy coalition will join at different points, with a handful of activists marching from beginning to end. A rally in Albany is set for June 1.

"It's a fairness issue, a justice issue," said the Rev. Duncan Burns of St. John's Episcopal Church. "We have a Gospel mandate... to support people in need" and "are looking especially for individuals just to listen to the stories of farmwork-

ers, to hear what they have to go through at times."

Representatives of farmer groups said their industry, facing new minimum-wage rules, could be crippled by additional mandates. They are subject to the whims of seasons, unpredictable weather and competing produce from other states, advocates noted.

"Most people don't understand that working on a farm is completely different from working in a store or a factory, where you can always pick up where you left off the next day," said Rob Carpenter, executive director of the Long Island Farm Bureau, a Calverton group that represents hundreds of farms in the region, with 600 of them in eastern Suffolk.

"There could be a major rainstorm coming in the next two

days and the farmer needs to harvest their crops right then and there," Carpenter said. If a farmer loses the crop because of work hours, "he is basically out of business."

Farm advocates also said New York farmers value the limited pool of workers that carries them through the seasons.

However, workers such as Antonio, a Salvadoran immigrant who plants trees year-round in Riverhead, said they want equal treatment. He asked that his last name be withheld because of fear that speaking out could affect his employment.

"Farmworkers like us haven't been a priority," Antonio said in Spanish. "We have no medical insurance, no holidays or many days of rest that are paid, and we don't get overtime."

## ACTIVISTS: MAKE IT EASIER TO BUY ZOMBIE HOMES

BY CARL MACGOWAN  
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Community activists yesterday pressed lawmakers to pass state legislation that they said would make vacant homes available for affordable housing by expediting foreclosures.

About a dozen people from the groups Make the Road New York and New York Communities for Change chanted "People over banks" and "Bail the people, not the banks" during a rally outside the state office building in Hauppauge. They said many Long Islanders seek

homes they can afford while hundreds of foreclosed houses stand empty.

"Zombie homes are rotting away while people need homes," said Mimi Pierre Johnson, political director of New York Communities for Change. "We don't want to see any more zombie homes while people need housing."

State Attorney General Eric T. Schneiderman has proposed a bill that would establish a statewide registry of vacant and abandoned houses and require banks to maintain empty homes in foreclosure.

The law also would speed up court proceedings for vacant, foreclosed homes, known as zombie houses.

The bill is awaiting passage in the State Senate and Assembly.

A yearlong Newsday investigation last year found Long Island municipalities spent millions of dollars in 2014 cleaning, boarding up and demolishing abandoned homes. More than a dozen major banks reached an agreement with state officials to maintain such homes after the Newsday series was published.

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### CORRECTIONS

The Gulls Amateur Hockey Association is a youth hockey organization whose teams play in multiple leagues. A story yesterday inaccurately described the group.

### THIS DATE IN HISTORY

**1643** Louis XIV became King of France at age 4 upon the death of his father, Louis XIII.

**1948** According to the current-era calendar, the independent state of Israel was proclaimed in Tel Aviv.

**1955** Representatives from eight Communist bloc countries signed the Warsaw Pact in Poland.

**1961** Freedom Riders were attacked by violent mobs in Anniston and Birmingham, Alabama.

**1998** Singer-actor Frank Sinatra died at a Los Angeles hospital at 82. The hit sitcom "Seinfeld" aired its finale after nine years on NBC.