

## Farmworker rights in the spotlight Monday



David Riley, Staff writer 2:15 p.m. EDT September 19, 2014



(Photo: Staff file photo)

A state proposal to offer farmworkers job protections that are common for employees in many other industries, including overtime pay and a day off per week, will be the subject of a League of Women Voters forum Monday evening in Rochester.

Speakers will include Dean Norton, president of the New York Farm Bureau, and Lewis Papenfuse, co-executive director of the Worker Justice Center of New York. The forum will discuss the Farmworker Labor Practices Act, a state bill that has been around in one form or another since 1930.

The legislation passed the Democrat-controlled state Assembly last year.

Senate.

Advocates for farmworkers say the bill would help end what they see as discriminatory treatment of farmworkers. The Farm Bureau opposes the legislation, saying it fails to grasp basic realities of farmwork and will hurt an important part of the state's economy.

Two League of Women Voters branches from the Rochester area and Wayne County are co-sponsoring the forum Monday at Asbury First United Methodist Church, 1050 East Ave.

The discussion is part of a series on farming, said Sandra Frankel, who was Democratic supervisor in Rochester and is now with the League of Women Voters.

"Agriculture is one of the key areas of focus for the league this year because of the fundamental importance of the industry to the state and the cost to consumers in New York state," she said.

The league has not taken a position on the farmworkers bill, and the forum is meant to be educational.

The version of the bill that passed the Assembly last year would have granted collective bargaining rights to farmworkers who work more than 60 hours a week or more than eight hours a day, and established a mandatory day off. The bill also included Assemblymen David Gantt and Harry Bronson, both D-Rochester.

Other versions of the bill have varied, including a proposal from state Sen. Diane Savino, chairwoman of the Senate Labor Committee, who would have ordered a study on collective bargaining rights instead of granting them outright, among others.

Papenfuse, of the Workers Justice Center, said that labor protections extended to other workers generally. He said farmworkers deserve overtime pay and the right to organize, he said.

"For us, it's really about the idea that equalized rights were denied, and continue to be denied, since the '30s," Papenfuse said.

Steve Ammerman, a spokesman for the Farm Bureau, said his group supports ideas like a day of rest, but that the bill that passed the Assembly was unworkable for farmers. On paying overtime for working more than a certain number of hours in a day, for example, he said rain might mean going one day without work, but laboring from sunrise to sunset the next.

It comes down to whether struggling farms can survive with additional costs, Ammerman said.

"We lost 2 percent of farms in our state since the last agricultural census," he said. "It's a tough business."

Papenfuse said there have always been excuses for why certain classes of workers should be excluded from protections. It's a matter of equal rights, he said.

"If you create a just workplace ... then I think that minimizes their fears," Papenfuse said of the Farm Bureau's objections.

An open question-and-answer session will follow Monday's presentation. The league is asking attendees to preregister at (585) 262-3730 or [www.lwv-rma.org](http://www.lwv-rma.org) (<http://www.lwv-rma.org>).

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