

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

'One New York' would give farmworkers rights

"We are one New York, and we rise and fall together." So stated Gov. Spitzer in his inaugural State of Upstate address, in which he promised to devote \$50 million to promote agribusiness ("Spitzer's gamble for upstate," Jan. 17).

We will never be "one New York" as long as agricultural workers are categorically denied the basic rights and protections other workers have enjoyed for more than 70 years.

During the New Deal, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, whose name was invoked during Spitzer's speech, directed Congress to pass basic wage and hour protections for industrial and agricultural workers. New York Sen. Robert Wagner introduced legislation to establish what today serves as our system of collective bargaining.

Despite a Democratic majority, these protections passed only by accommodating the demands of Southern segregationists, who

objected on the grounds that the protections would put black workers (a majority of whom were farmworkers) on equal footing with whites. Thus, farmworkers were left out as they fell victim to political expediency.



Farmworkers continue to suffer from the bigotry wrought by Jim Crow-era Southern racism. Supporting New York agriculture is a worthy goal, but we cannot have a genuine "Pride of New York" campaign while the dark shame of prejudice persists.

Before updating agribusiness with 21st-century innovations in marketing and food processing, let us first update agricultural workers with 20th-century innovations in basic worker rights.

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