



Maine Education Association

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Testimony In Support of

LD 525 An Act to Protect Farm Workers by Allowing Them to Organize for the Purposes of Collective Bargaining **Grace Leavitt, President, Maine Education Association** **Before the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing** **April 18, 2023**

Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder, and members of the Labor and Housing Committee,

My name is Grace Leavitt. My pronouns are she, her, hers. I am serving as President of the Maine Education Association while on leave from teaching Spanish in MSAD 51. The MEA is the union that represents nearly 24,000 educators in our Maine system of public education in pre-K-12 schools as well as in our institutions of higher education, both the University of Maine System and the Maine Community College System, along with students in teacher prep programs as well as many retired educators.

I am testifying in support of LD 525 An Act to Protect Farm Workers by Allowing Them to Organize for the Purposes of Collective Bargaining.

Two of MEA's Core Values are A Just Society and Collective Action. As a union, the MEA fully understands the importance of the role of collective bargaining in ensuring that employees are treated fairly, have safe working conditions, and that their rights are protected. Collective action through collective bargaining is key to having a just society for all.

Yet those who work in the agricultural sector are currently denied the opportunity to organize in our state. These are the people who provide us all with the most essential of our basic needs—they quite literally put food on our tables. Despite the critical role they play, many farm workers are exploited, experiencing high rates of poverty, food insecurity, and hazardous working conditions¹. Those who speak up about unsafe conditions are likely to experience retaliation for doing so. And in spite of at times working 12-hour shifts, agricultural workers are exempted from minimum wage and overtime pay laws.² Given the demographics³ of the workers in this industry, the issue of racial inequities evidently plays a large part in these situations.

As of July 2022, twelve states allow collective bargaining for agricultural workers⁴, with more states considering legislation to do so. It is our hope that Maine does the right thing for these most essential workers. We urge you to vote ought to pass on LD 525. It is time to address the injustices and inequities that have continued for far too long.

¹ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/labor-laws-left-farm-workers-behind-vulnerable-abuse>

² [Fact Sheet #12: Agricultural Employers Under the Fair Labor Standards Act \(FLSA\) | U.S. Department of Labor \(dol.gov\)](#)

³ [Agricultural Worker Demographics - NATIONAL CENTER FOR FARMWORKER HEALTH \(ncfh.org\)](#)

⁴ <https://nationalaglawcenter.org/collective-bargaining-rights-for-farmworkers/#:~:text=States%20Who%20Guarantee%20Collective%20Bargaining%20for%20Farmworkers&text=Arizona%2C%20California%2C%20Colorado%2C%20Hawaii,Wisconsin%20all%20allow%20collective%20bargaining.>