

Farmworker Bill Testimony 4/18/23

Juana Rodriguez Vazquez

Executive Director, Mano en Mano

Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder and members of the Labor & Housing Committee, my name is Juana Rodriguez Vazquez and I work as the Executive Director of Mano en Mano- an organization that works alongside immigrant and migrant farmworker communities so that they can thrive in Maine. We testify in support of LD 525, LD 398 and LD 1483.

I come from a migrant family. My mother, father, sisters and brother have worked in farm work since before I was born, and I spent a large part of my childhood traveling across the United States following the harvest, and putting food on the tables of families across the country.

Throughout my life I have witnessed and experienced the many challenges that farmworkers face. These challenges are firstly found in the physicality of the work and include: grueling hours, exposure to toxic pesticides, laboring under the hot sun and winter ice, and working to lift heavy loads as quickly as possible so that you do not fall behind.

Additionally I have witnessed the structural challenges associated with farmwork, and understand them on a personal and professional level. At Mano en Mano we support seasonal migrant farm workers and their families over the blueberry, potato, broccoli, apple and wreath seasons. Each year we see thousands of workers and their families arrive in Maine and experience terrible inhumane treatment including: wage theft, unsafe working environments, poor housing, and sexual harassment and abuse.

Farmworkers are the backbone of the pine, blueberry and seafood harvests- the iconic products of Maine. They are an essential part of what makes our economy strong, and communities vibrant- yet they are not afforded basic rights. This is a problem for obvious reasons; it is a matter of survival. It is also significant, too, for our state as a whole, because it prevents us from realizing our shared prosperity and humanity.

Passing these bills to support farmworks represents a step in the right direction to recognize farm workers' humanity and dignity. Receiving overtime, and having the right to organize are all abilities we grant workers throughout our country, yet deny farmworkers due to systemic racism and historical marginalization.

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Now is the time for change! Now is the time to recognize the humanity and dignity of farmworkers in Maine, and redistribute the power and resources denied to farmworkers in our state.

I speak for myself, my family, and thousands of farmworkers in Downeast Maine when I testify in support of these bills. They hold the power to create opportunity and restore justice for our farmworker community in Maine, and our society as a whole.