

## **Robert Keefe, farm worker and worker organizer**

Good morning everyone, my name is Robert Keefe, I live in Waterbury and have worked in several areas of the agricultural sector here in Vermont. I am here today to speak in support of the Protecting the Right to Organize act. All of us can attest to the notion that the backbone of any community is the farmworkers that feed us all. This classification of Vermont's farmworkers under the labor relations act extends to workers from vegetable farms in the Champlain valley to livestock farms in Orange county, to various forestry and maple sugaring operations throughout the state. Agricultural workers not only provide us with the food we eat and the 1.5 pounds of wood we use each day but also with the things we as Vermonters take pride in, including local cheese, beer, and maple syrup. Those of us who work in our agricultural trades do so because we enjoy it. However, as with any occupation, this should not come at the cost of our physical well-being, safety, and access to fair wages on which we can live within our means.

Despite playing such a critical role in the community, farmers in Vermont and nearly every other jurisdiction in the US are not included under the Labor Relations Act, meaning we do not have access to collective bargaining rights as workers in all other sectors. Farmworkers can be terminated or heavily disciplined simply for speaking up about hazards on the jobsite, or for attempting to organize a union in the workplace. I am asking you all to lend your support to the VT PRO act to help us as farmers gain the right to organize and advocate for equality in our workplaces without fear. This bill will lay the groundwork for all workers to have a loud and clear voice through implementation of just-cause termination, backing up those who have lost their livelihoods for simply speaking up. Disciplining of workers who refuse to attend captive audience meetings will be prohibited, putting much needed regulation on the illicit practice of union busting. This would not only benefit farmers, but workers across the board, reducing barriers to union organizing in both the public and private sectors. Too often, unionization is supported by a majority of workers of a given company but the notion is swiftly put down before a vote can even be held; the PRO Act would help prevent this by greatly reducing the power of captive audience meetings and other scare tactics. Through lending your support to this act, you will make history as the people who stood up for workers, the reason future workers will be able to advocate for fair wages, safety, and benefits while having a seat at the negotiating table on the matters that affect all of us, from factory to field. In the words of Margaret Mead, you will be a part of the small group of thoughtful and committed citizens who work together to change the world.

As agricultural workers, expanding collective bargaining to our sector is critical to giving a voice to workers who may avoid speaking up due to a lack of protection from existing

laws. Such is true especially because of the nature of our jobs, working in the elements from hard rain to 3-foot deep snow, and operating equipment including chainsaws, tractors, and power tools of all types. Many of us including myself have seen long-term injuries as a result of our occupations, including damage to fingers and joints, concussions, and in select cases even death in the workplace. Time and time again, these injuries have resulted in no significant changes to employee safety protocol from employers and a continued lack of regulation from the government. Passing this act would give farmers a much-needed source of leverage for the protection of not just our own well-being, but also ensuring that we have a safety net in the instance of (god forbid) injuries occurring on the job. On top of this, it will help us to ensure that we provide quality taste and nutrition with a good quality of life for farmers.

Having worked in sectors from vegetable gardening to restoration forestry to maple sugaring, I can personally attest that we can stand together as workers and begin to remediate the aforementioned frailties in our sector through organizing, advocacy for our fellow workers not just in our workplace, but throughout Vermont. A workplace runs most smoothly and efficiently when workers have a voice that is listened to and taken seriously, and the passage of the PRO act is a necessary first step in ensuring that we have the ability to advocate for necessary changes without fear of losing our jobs, or seeing our colleagues set straight for speaking up. Passing this bill into law is a moral imperative, and I can confidently say that everyone, across all sectors, will benefit from the collective equity fostered by this act.

Thank you all for your time and consideration.