

The case for taking account of labor in sustainable food systems in the United States

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Commentary

Abstract

This commentary argues for strengthening research and analysis of food workers' rights as part of a more comprehensive sustainable food systems approach. Starting with a broad definition of sustainability, one which includes social, as well as ecological, and economic elements, the author outlines current critiques of alternative food movement actors. She then looks at existing food labor activism and successes, providing them as examples for how sustainable food movement actors and researchers should move forward.

Key words: food labor, sustainable food, food movements, food justice, workers' rights

For those that have the money, time, and interest to make educated choices about their food purchases, it is difficult to parse out the varied meanings of sustainable food. Is it locally produced? Organic? GMO-free? However, when most self-identified conscious consumers are trying to decipher the many murky varieties of sustainable food, they often overlook a large factor in sustainability, the workers doing the labor to grow, pack, ship, process and serve our food. [I am not the first to argue that for food to be truly 'good' food, it must be grown, processed and served by well-paid, healthy and well-treated workers (see Allen 2004; Jayaraman 2013; and Lo and Jacobson 2011 for a more thorough discussion).]

If proponents of sustainable food in the USA are to accept the commonly used three-legged stool approach to sustainability, then we must define sustainability as inclusive of environmental, social and economic goals (United Nations 1987; Allen and Sachs 1993). Currently, the sustainable or alternative food movement has yet to acknowledge food system labor as a key part of this larger vision. How can the sustainable food movement progress to include and promote worker justice throughout the food chain?

Although there are certainly some organic or ecologically sustainable farms who also adhere to high labor standards, there is currently no comprehensive study explicating the success or challenges of such examples. More research on the link between organic production and labor practices is sorely needed. In addition to the

activism described below, this gap in research must be filled if we are to move forward in making concrete suggestions for how organic and other producers can most reasonably improve their labor practices and standards and contribute to a fully sustainable food system.

The Jeffersonian imagery used to market organic food tends to uncritically uphold the ideal of a family farm, overlooking the racially exploitative roots of the United States' agricultural labor economy and culture (Guthman 2014). Organic production and certification, and its focus on ecological factors, does result in less harm to agricultural workers and their families, in terms of airborne pesticide drift and other health risks posed by synthetic inputs. Yet, organic growers have not proven to be more sympathetic to workers' general well-being in terms of wages and benefits (Shreck et al., 2006; Alkon 2013; Guthman 2014). In fact, due to the demand for higher quality foods associated with organic production, and the declared need for more meticulous weeding practices, organic growers were an influential lobby protesting the ban of the short-handled hoe in California, a tool that has been shown to contribute to debilitating back injuries for workers (Guthman 2003). (More recently, organic growers were successful in gaining an exception to the banned use of hand weeding in California fields, claiming it is a necessary practice if they are to not use pesticides. Labor advocates dispute this claim, saying a long-handed hoe suffices and saves workers from permanent physical damage.) Additionally,

consumers of organic and alternative foods tend to overlook exploitative labor practices of farm owners, often assuming most of the labor is done by the farm owner, and ignoring inherent social injustice in the food system (Alkon 2013).

Similar to organic certification, consumers are often led to believe that buying from smaller-scale farms within their region guarantees better treatment of workers and a higher ethical standard in terms of farm operation (Gray 2013). It is true that there are many social and economic benefits associated with household based agriculture and smaller-scale operations in general, including the presence of a rural middle-class with associated gains in social indicators such as better schools, less inequality and lower regional poverty rates (Lyson et al., 2001). Yet despite the benefits to the rural community at large, oftentimes smaller-scale producers struggle economically more than larger-scale growers, and therefore have even less money available to pay their workers' wages and benefits (Shreck et al., 2006; Guthman 2014). Additionally, food marketed as locally produced, whether defined via a foodshed measure or otherwise, provides no guarantees in terms of labor standards for farmworkers (Kloppenborg et al., 1996; DuPuis and Goodman 2005; Gray 2013).

Due to pressure on Congress from the farm lobby, agricultural laborers were left out of The National Labor Relations Act of 1935 (also called the Wagner Act), which guarantees the basic rights of private sector workers, including the protected right to collective bargaining, strikes and union organizing (Weber 1996). They were also excluded from The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, which introduced the 40-hour workweek, established a national minimum wage, guaranteed overtime pay and banned most child labor. To this day, in most states farmworkers do not have the right to organize, are not paid overtime and children as young as 12 may be employed full-time.

These food worker inequalities do not stop in the fields. Most notably, Whole Food Markets have been chastised for employing prison labor in manufacturing some of its high-end 'artisanal' food products. In the restaurant industry, labor injustices are rampant as well. In some of the nation's most expensive restaurants, where locally sourced and organic foods are touted on the menus, servers, bussers and dishwashers regularly experience wage theft and racial discrimination in hiring and advancement. Possibly the most concerning for restaurant goers is the fact that 90% of restaurant workers have no paid sick leave and two-thirds admit to going to work while sick. Additionally, of restaurant servers who depend on tips (the federal tipped wage has remained stagnant at US\$2.13 h⁻¹ since 1991), 70% are women and 90% report experiencing sexual harassment (Jayaraman 2013).

There are numerous groups working on addressing workers' rights in the food system, and many of them are specifically targeting the growing sustainable food

movement, including its consumers and producers. The non-profit organization Brandworkers is a labor justice group, which focuses on specialty foods marketed as locally produced in New York City. They expose the fact that even products marketed as sustainable food in high priced food markets are often dependent on low-wage immigrant workers, frequently experiencing wage theft and poor working conditions. Similarly, the Restaurant Opportunities Center (ROC United) addresses worker abuses in the service industry and has successfully helped workers organize across the country to gain better wages and benefits, as well as start cooperatively owned restaurants where food service workers can train for higher paying jobs in the food system. Farmworker rights groups, such as Farmworker Justice and The Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) have worked to fill the void left after the demise of the powerful farmworker activism era of the 1960s and 1970s. They organize campaigns that target both growers and large-scale produce purchasers such as retailers and chain-restaurants.

Additionally, some progress has been made on the state level. In California, The United Farmworkers (UFW) successfully organized for farmworkers' right to collectively bargain via The California Agricultural Labor Relations Act (CALRA) in 1975. Farmworker groups in New York State are currently working with the New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU) to challenge the exclusion of farmworkers from the right to organize and collectively bargain.

There have also been efforts in the USA to address labor injustices through fair trade certification and labeling projects. These approaches have made many inroads in terms of consumer awareness of food labor issues. Fair trade programs were initially developed on a global scale, as certification through groups such as Fair Trade International and Fair Trade USA (formally TransFair), was intended to address uneven trade relations between developed and developing countries. More recently, domestic-based projects have been established as well. Examples include the Domestic Fair Trade Project, Food Justice Certified and The Equitable Food Initiative. Yet, in-depth research of both global and domestic certification have shown major flaws in their process and promotion, including lacking transparency between certifiers and farmers, as well as a focus on small-scale producers versus workers themselves. This critique has created much skepticism as to the effectiveness of these labels as they currently function (Shreck 2005; Getz and Shreck 2006; Brown and Getz 2008a, b; Jaffee 2014).

All of these food labor organizations are harnessing the power of the so-called good food, sustainable food, and alternative food movements, however they are defined. By calling on eaters who care about food and environmental quality to action, they are pressuring producers, retailers and restaurants to improve their labor standards and include workers' rights as part of growing US food movement expectations.

Yet, as can be seen by some of the weaknesses of fair trade labeling thus far, none of these improvements will be guaranteed by voluntary industry changes. Unlike the USA, countries with higher federal minimum wages for all workers, such as Australia, Germany, and France, also see food workers benefitting. Denmark, which has received international press on their US\$20 h⁻¹ average wage for McDonalds employees, does not have a federally mandated minimum wage, but does have a strong collective bargaining system, where unions have successfully maintained high wages for jobs that are low wage work in the USA, including fast food service. McDonalds workers in Denmark also receive paid vacation, maternity and paternity leave, and a pension, and are given their schedules four weeks in advance, unlike American employees (Alderman and Greenhouse 2014). Generally, countries with stronger unions and collective bargaining power have less inequality between workers overall (Bosch 2015).

In order to make sustained and consistent progress, as has been done for labor and environmental regulations in the past, workers, activists and all citizens who eat must pressure lawmakers to standardize just labor standards for food workers in the USA. In particular, it is necessary to ensure a living wage, overtime pay, and paid sick leave that applies to workers from field to restaurant, without exclusions. Further, research on renewable food systems must reflect these shifts. Academics and other food systems analysts can play an important role in helping sustainable agriculture practitioners better understand the social, economic, and environmental context of improving agricultural labor conditions. If our food system is to be truly sustainable in the long run, it must be assured that good treatment of laborers throughout the chain becomes the norm, not the exception.

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