Food, Health, and the Environment
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Food Justice

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Slavery in the Fields

On Thanksgiving Day, 1960, Edward R. Murrow introduced his CBS Reports program with these famous words:

This scene is not taking place in the Congo. It has nothing to do with Johannesburg or Cape Town. It is not Nyasaland or Nigeria. This is Florida. These are citizens of the United States, 1960. This is a shape-up for migrant workers. The hawkers are chanting the going piece rate at the various fields. This is the way the humans who harvest the food for the best-fed people in the world get hired. One farmer looked at this and said, “We used to own our slaves; now we just rent them.”

Murrow’s documentary, “Harvest of Shame,” was talking about migrant farmworkers, primarily African Americans working in the fields of Florida and eventually making their way through the food belt up and down the southern tier of the United States. It aired at a time when the general public was becoming more aware of how food was grown and produced in the United States. Contaminated cranberries, huge fish and bird kills from unrestricted pesticide spraying, chemical food additives identified as possible carcinogens—each generated concern and calls for action. With the Murrow documentary, the horrific working conditions, substandard pay, and health hazards experienced by migrant farmworkers joined the list of concerns. Poverty and hunger were also about to be rediscovered: among the poorest of the poor were the farmworkers. Subject to myriad employer abuses, exploitation, racial profiling, and a history of policies toward immigrant labor that placed them in a kind of no-man’s-land and without rights, farmworkers were a core part of a food system whose harvest of plenty masked a harvest of shame.¹
By the mid- to late 1960s, issues regarding farmworkers had reemerged as a new cause. Thanks to Cesar Chavez and the organizing efforts of the United Farm Workers (UFW) union, farmworkers were seen as food justice champions fighting the poor working conditions in the fields. With their antipesticide campaigns, demands to include protections against pesticides in their labor contracts, and participation in a groundbreaking lawsuit against the use of dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT), the UFW and farmworkers were also drawing attention to the environmental hazards of food production. UFW’s slogan Si, se puede (Yes, it can be done) inspired a Latino ethnic identity that energized immigrant and nonimmigrant communities alike. When Robert Kennedy joined Chavez in 1968 (just prior to Kennedy’s announcement that he was running for president) during Chavez’s twenty-five-day fast to bring attention to the farmworkers’ bitter struggle with grape owners, it appeared that the struggle for farmworkers’ rights had entered a new stage in the United States. As UFW and Chavez biographer Randy Shaw put it, the photograph of Chavez and Kennedy together on the day Chavez ended his fast became “a lasting image of the 1960s.”

In 1970, two years after the Kennedy-Chavez meeting and ten years after the broadcast of “Harvest of Shame,” NBC aired another documentary, entitled “Migrant,” about farm labor abuses in Florida’s citrus groves. Touted by NBC as a sequel to “Harvest of Shame,” the documentary focused in part on abuses related to Minute Maid, a division of Coca-Cola since 1960. Because of the continuing attention focused on farmworker issues, Coca-Cola first sought to have the documentary changed, but was unsuccessful. Then the company shifted gears to try to overcome the negative press about the role of Minute Maid and its parent company. Coca-Cola chairman Paul Austin, in a Senate hearing on farmworker abuses, proclaimed that the company found the Minute Maid workers’ conditions “deplorable” and that he intended to convert the migrant workers from part-time to full-time status with a pay raise and adequate health care, as well as more sanitary dormitories. Austin also asserted that the company would create a national alliance of agriculture to provide a new approach to migrant worker conditions. With the press now applauding the Coca-Cola chairman (“Time” magazine headlined Austin’s speech “The Candor That Refreshes”), the company was able to secure an award for business citizenship from Business Week, even though Austin’s promised alliance never materialized. Moreover, the conditions on the ground changed only two years later, when the UFW led an organizing drive, accompanied by the threat of a Minute Maid boycott. The possibility of a boycott and strike terrified the image-conscious company and induced it to sign a union contract, which did far more to change conditions than any prior action by Coca-Cola had.

Despite the UFW’s string of victories in the 1970s, the union still represented only a modest percentage of farmworkers. In part, the plight of the farmworkers was linked to the structure of food growing and food production. Important elements of this structure included large, concentrated and industrial-oriented farming operations, below-minimum wages and lack of overtime pay for ten- to twelve-hour workdays, abusive labor contractors, and the systematic exploitation of foreign migrant workers from countries such as Mexico, Fiji, and Haiti and of African American and Native American workers. Beyond the contractors and the industrial farms stood the food industry behemoths—the fast food giants such as McDonald’s, Burger King, and Taco Bell, the huge global retailers such as Wal-Mart, and multinational corporations such as Coca-Cola and PepsiCo, whose subsidiaries (among them Minute Maid and Tropicana) constituted the dominant players in the food system. These entities benefited from the abusive conditions on the ground but were permitted to peddle their products free of any responsibility or accountability to the farmworkers.

The idea of slavelike conditions seems as inconceivable today as it did fifty years ago. But stories of similar abuses continue to appear. Food researcher Eric Holt-Giménez recounted the case of labor contractors who had beaten, enslaved, and stolen the wages of twelve workers. These contractors were finally exposed and convicted of their crimes, but, as Holt-Giménez asserts, they were “just one of dozens of labor contractors that serve up poorly-paid day workers to the wealthy tomato growers of Florida . . . [who] supply over 90 percent of the U.S.’s winter tomatoes, and are the main suppliers for McDonald’s, Subway, Taco Bell, Wendy’s, Burger King, Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC), Pizza Hut and other retailer and restaurant chains.” Holt-Giménez also pointed out that the three main buyers of the state’s tomato crop were Cargill, Tropicana . . . and Minute Maid.
Holt-Giménez was describing conditions in Immokalee, a major center of agricultural production in Florida and ground zero for the modern-day slave trade. Immokalee is also where one of the most inspiring contemporary struggles centered on food justice has emerged. It was in Immokalee that a group of Latino, Mayan Indian, and Haitian workers, calling themselves the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), in early 1993 began exposing the horrendous farmworker abuses and organizing for change. Early in the organizing effort, the CIW also began to understand that bringing about change meant taking on some of the biggest players in the food system.

The situation in Immokalee and the CIW’s struggle for changes in labor conditions occupy a central place in the food justice narrative. At the forefront of the Immokalee chapter is the story of three immigrant farmworkers, “Adan Ortiz,” “Rafael Solis Hernandez,” and “Mario Sanchez” (not their real names), who were set up as citrus pickers by a labor contractor named El Diablo. El Diablo, as a Texas Observer story remarked, “had become notorious for illegally hiring migrant workers from Mexico and using manipulation, financial coercion, deportation threats, and even violence (up to and including murder) to maintain a work force of essentially unpaid and terrified slave labor that had little or no recourse to the American legal system.” The workers were provided with “filthy crowded quarters [and] were constantly abused, threatened, and under the watch of the contractors,” as John Bowe wrote in a 2003 article in the New Yorker.

While enduring these conditions, the three immigrant workers were fortunate to become acquainted with Romeo Ramirez, a nineteen-year-old Guatemalan who was also employed by El Diablo and other contractors who worked with El Diablo. In reality, Ramirez was an undercover volunteer for the CIW, and his work in this capacity confirmed for the CIW that the workers were being kept in servitude, a situation similar to others the CIW had begun to document. With the help of the CIW, the three friends were able to escape. Subsequently interviewed by FBI agents, the contractors, including El Diablo, were arrested, charged with conspiracy, extortion, and possession of firearms, and ultimately convicted.

The El Diablo case represents just one of several that the CIW has documented. Following are some other examples:

- In 1997, two agricultural employers were prosecuted by the Department of Justice on slavery, extortion, and firearms charges and sentenced to fifteen years each in federal prison. The slavers had held more than 400 men and women in debt bondage in Florida and South Carolina. The workers, mostly indigenous Mexicans and Guatemalans, were also forced to work ten- to twelve-hour days, six days a week, for as little as $20 per week, under the constant watch of armed guards. Those who attempted to escape were assaulted, pistol-whipped, and even shot. The case was brought to the attention of federal authorities after five years of investigation by escaped workers and CIW members.

- In 2000, a South Florida employer was prosecuted by the Department of Justice on slavery charges and sentenced to three years in federal prison. He had held more than thirty tomato pickers in two trailers in the isolated swampland west of Immokalee, keeping them under constant watch. Three workers escaped the camp, only to be tracked down a few weeks later. The employer ran one of them down with his car, stating that he owned them. The workers sought help from the CIW and the police, and the CIW worked with the Justice Department in the ensuing investigation.

- In 2002, three Florida-based agricultural employers were convicted in federal court on slavery, extortion, and weapons charges. The men, who employed more than 700 farmworkers, had threatened workers with death if they tried to leave, and had pistol-whipped and assaulted at gunpoint passenger van service drivers who gave rides to farmworkers leaving the area. The case was brought to trial by federal authorities from the Department of Justice’s Civil Rights Division after two years of investigation by the CIW.

Since 1997, seven slavery operations in Florida involving more than a thousand workers have been brought to light by the CIW. Exposing these episodes contributed to the development of the CIW’s extraordinary national campaign. While similar in some ways to the heroic organizing in the vineyards of Delano in the 1960s, the CIW’s campaigns have focused on the role of the huge food industry players and fast food companies in influencing the wages, working conditions, and abuses experienced by farmworkers. The workers who picked the tomatoes for the large growers that supply the giant food companies and fast food
chains are still subject to what Laura Germino, the co-founder of CIW, has called the “modern-day version of slavery; [working in] the only industry in America where employers have that level of power and those types of abuses take place.” Fifty years after the broadcast of “Harvest of Shame,” it is shocking that such abuses still prevail. But as the CIW organizers have also learned, in order for significant change to happen in the fields, the entire range of food industry players needs to be challenged and new kinds of organizing strategies need to be developed.

Farmworkers at the Margins

Immokalee is not an isolated case. Whether African American sharecroppers in the South, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Mexican, Haitian, or Mayan Indian workers in California, Texas, or Florida, or Dust Bowl migrants from Oklahoma and Arkansas during the Depression farmworkers have been exploited in the United States for more than a century. In the 1930s, failure to include farmworkers in the National Labor Relations Act (and its provisions regarding the right to form unions) and the Fair Labor Standards Act and the Social Security Act underscored the marginal status of farmworkers in U.S. farm and labor policy. In the heat of the most bitter and often violent struggles between farmworkers and growers during the Depression, major growers from the industrial agricultural heartlands in California and Texas would claim that their labor relations were harmonious. As Miriam Wells notes in her book on work and class issues in the strawberry fields in California, the growers would invoke “the image of the Midwestern hired hand, farmers and farmworkers . . . kneeling together in prayer and eating from the same table [while] unions were portrayed ominously manipulating the nation’s food supply.”

The push by industrial agricultural interests in California, Texas, and Florida in part has reflected a desire to maintain control over the labor supply by controlling the flow of workers across the southern border of the United States. Immigrant labor has long been part of the farming economy, including in the most industrialized version in California, which dates back to the mid- and late nineteenth century. California food growers and producers first utilized Chinese workers, then Japanese, followed by Filipinos and Mexicans, as well as internal migrants from the U.S. Midwest and South. Thereafter, and especially from the 1940s on, industrialized food production in the southern tier of states began to rely on a complex system of organized international labor flows that encompassed the guest workers as well as migrant workers, both legal and illegal.

The most elaborate of those systems was the Bracero or Mexican Farm Labor Program, initiated in 1942 to meet the need for manual labor during World War II. The Bracero Program represented a huge migratory flow; it sponsored nearly 4.5 million border crossings of sanctioned guest workers from Mexico into the United States from 1942 to 1964, when the program was officially discontinued. The number of braceros in the program peaked at 450,000 in 1956, with more than 90 percent working in the Imperial Valley and other Southern California counties on labor-intensive crops that required a seasonal workforce, such as tomatoes, lettuce, strawberries, and sugar beets.

The Bracero Program was notable for its large size and because it established a type of linked legal, semilegal, and illegal status for farmworkers that could be used to keep wages low, allow for abuses, break any organizing or strike effort, and take advantage of the fear of deportation to maintain control. As farmworker historian Varden Fuller puts it, the Bracero Program “was the closest that California farm employers ever came to realization of the labor supply dream they cherished; it was an even better arrangement than the slave owners of the South had.” Braceros were used when needed, were under federal authority (but saw only limited intervention by the government regarding conditions on the ground), and were fearful of complaining, given the real possibility of deportation.

Even though the Bracero Program was discontinued, the use of a similar linked system of “illegal” and “legal” migrant labor in agriculture is still widely prevalent. The counties where migrant farmworkers are utilized are among the poorest in the United States, with the highest unemployment rates, the most people living below the poverty line, and the most severe forms of food insecurity. The uncertain legal status of farmworkers further marginalizes them, making them more vulnerable to poverty and food insecurity. Even when legal provisions are added, such as the Special Agricultural Worker provision in the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, it remains an essential part of a cheap
labor system in which legal guest workers become undocumented ("illegal") workers if they fail to return to their country of origin or if they cross the border again looking for employment in the North.

The development of this multilayered migrant labor system, particularly in California, where large-scale industrial agriculture first took root, came to mean that farmworkers, as historian Cletus Daniel puts it, would be subject to "irregular work, constant movement, low wages, squalid working and living conditions, social isolation, emotional deprivation, and individual powerlessness so profound as to make occupational advancement a virtual impossibility. To the typical large-scale farm employer in California, seasonal farm laborers had become faceless, nameless units of production."

Of the three million people currently employed in agriculture in the United States, nearly a third, or one million, are undocumented farm laborers, mostly of Hispanic origin from Mexico and other South and Central American countries. Raul Delgado Wise, executive director of the International Network on Migration and Development, refers to this phenomenon as the "Mexicanization of U.S. agriculture." A majority of these migrant workers take seasonal jobs and are employed in three major food sectors: farming and fishing, meat and fish processing, and food service. These workers experience far higher rates of unemployment than other workers. Women farmworkers, for example, are three times more likely to experience unemployment than women workers in general. Almost all farmworkers—more than 90 percent—are also without health insurance.

Mike Anton in an article profiling grape pickers in California's Coachella Valley, states that when they are on their own, farmworkers share stories of being cheated out of pay, forced to skip a rest or lunch break, and even fired if they discuss these issues outside the fields. In the sweltering fields, farmworkers are often without drinking water or shade, a situation that has led to severe illness and death. Women farmworkers in these fields have been sexually harassed by their employers and have been too afraid to complain for fear of losing their only livelihood.

The hazardous conditions of farmworkers in the United States are further worsened by the exploitation of the most vulnerable of those workers in the fields: children. Children as young as fourteen years are allowed by federal law to work in agriculture, and children as young as sixteen years are allowed to perform field work defined as particularly hazardous, whereas the minimum age for performing hazardous work in all other industries is eighteen (and sixteen for nonhazardous work). Often children as young as nine or ten accompany their parents to the fields, with the only restriction being that such work not occur during school hours. Since 1938, exemptions in the federal child labor law, the Fair Labor Standards Act, have excluded child agricultural workers from many of the protections afforded almost every other working child.

Although there are few estimates of how many children are working in agriculture, a 1998 study by the Government Accountability Office identified 155,000 youths between the ages of fifteen and seventeen years working in the fields, nearly all from Hispanic or other minority families. Farmwork is difficult, physically demanding, and sometimes backbreaking, creating particular health burdens for children that could become chronic physical ailments. Children are more vulnerable to pesticides and chemicals sprayed on fields than are adults. Yet there are no additional protections for children working in the fields.

Where farmworkers are housed has also become part of the system of abuse and unhealthy living conditions. When employers have provided housing for farmworkers, the conditions have at times been scandalous, including barbed wire encampments and even five-by-five caves that the workers had to dig themselves, as a California Rural Legal Assistance lawyer documented. There continue to be problems of enormous overcrowding, leading to farmworkers' suffering from poor sanitation and proximity to pesticides. Such overcrowded units have included garages, sheds, barns, and various temporary structures. A California Agricultural Workers Health Survey (CAWHS) found that nearly half of the housing of California farmworkers was overcrowded and a quarter extremely overcrowded. In fact, nearly one-third of that housing was not even recognized by the local county assessor or by the U.S. Postal Service. "Many of these dwellings are irregular structures not intended for human habitation, and one-sixth (17 percent) lack either plumbing or food preparation facilities, or both," researchers Don Villarejo and Marc Schenker said of the CAWHS survey results. They also noted the handful of studies that have linked substandard or overcrowded conditions to such health problems as "gastro-intestinal illnesses associated with the
lack of a refrigerator and significantly elevated levels of anxiety and depression associated with poor living conditions."\(^{16}\)

The poor status of farmworkers and the hazards and abuses they are subjected to receive scant attention compared with the attention lavished, relatively speaking, on food quality, food safety, accessibility, and affordability concerns. When food is purchased for home consumption or ordered at a restaurant, the conditions experienced by the farmworkers are not a visible part of the consumer’s experience. Even for food advocates who seek out local and organic foods and are willing to pay a higher price for those qualities, ensuring justice at all levels of the food system has not become as central as the UFW, the CIW, and other farmworker organizing campaigns would like. For example, at Slow Food Nation 2008, a first-of-its-kind event in the United States that drew thousands of food activists and other attendees to taste and advocate for what the slow foodies call “good food,” advocacy for farmworkers still remained a marginal issue. While applauding the concept of good food and opportunities for food advocacy, *Fast Food Nation* author Eric Schlosser pointedly asked the audience, “Does it matter whether an heirloom tomato is local and organic if it was harvested with slave labor?”\(^{17}\)

It is a question that lies at the core of food justice advocacy.

**The Canary’s Song: Chemicals in the Factories and on the Land**

When two young filmmakers made their way to the Occidental Chemical pesticide manufacturing plant in Lathrop, California, they intended to document chemical exposures in the workplace. The year was 1977, seven years after the passage of the Occupational Safety and Health Act. An emerging worker health and safety movement, allied with unions and environmentalists, was beginning to bring attention to the problem of toxic overload in the workplace. The toxic exposure came from the large number of chemicals being introduced each year and the more than 70,000 chemicals that were then already on the market and that had not been adequately evaluated for toxicity.

That huge volume of chemicals, including pesticides, had already emerged as a critical issue fifteen years earlier, when Rachel Carson presented her dystopic vision of a world in which pesticides and inse-}


ticides were ubiquitous, “robin, catbirds, doves, jays, wrens, and scores of other bird voices” were silenced, and “the earth itself” was under threat. Carson was writing in a period when the extraordinary growth in chemical use and the lack of any effective regulations had created the kinds of huge and visible environmental and health impacts she so eloquently described. Many of the new pesticides, fungicides, and chemical fertilizers had been developed for military purposes during World War II, and their introduction for commercial purposes was a key element in the postwar agricultural restructuring and related environmental and community impacts on the land, the water, and the ambient environment. The huge fish kills and the deaths of hundreds of thousands of birds and other wildlife that resulted could be seen as an indicator, foreshadowing the kinds of issues the filmmakers would soon encounter in Lathrop regarding those who were producing and utilizing those same chemicals.\(^{18}\)

Fast forward to 1977. As the filmmakers made their way to the homes of the workers and the bars where workers hung out in Lathrop, their filming unexpectedly developed into something like investigative journalism. At one home, a union shop steward spoke about the different pesticides that had been manufactured at the plant, from DDT to, more recently, 1,2-dibromo-3-chloropropane (DBCP), a soil fumigant produced in the United States since 1955. As he talked to the filmmakers, the shop steward kept trying to stop his nose from bleeding, an indication that exposure to these chemicals was involved. Interviews with workers in the plant over the next few days uncovered even more health problems. As the interviews accumulated, the filmmakers began to piece together a key pattern—workers seemed no longer able to have children. The filmmakers, along with the union local, decided to have the workers, all men, tested. The result: nearly all the workers were sterile. As they continued pursuing the story, the filmmakers realized they had stumbled on explosive information. They soon learned that research funded by the DBCP manufacturers that had been published in an obscure journal in 1961 (and known to the company but not the workers) indicated that DBCP exposure could lead to potentially irreversible testicular damage. Subsequent studies would link high DBCP exposure to other health impacts, such as stomach cancer and toxic effects on the female reproductive system.\(^{19}\)