

# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## The Radical Potential of the Food Justice Movement

By Nancy Romer



FARMERS' MARKET  
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The two main threats to our people and planet are climate change and corporate control of our economy and polity.<sup>1</sup> These intertwined issues will take a mass movement of epic proportions to shift. Time is of the essence as climate, economic, and political disasters keep occurring, gaining in intensity, impoverishing people while enriching the transnational and national corporations. Agreements like the Trans-Pacific Partnership could further strip national governments of their rights to protect labor and the environment in favor of protecting corporate profits. The need to build dynamic and effective movements that embody our needs is an imperative for those who believe that only democratic struggles, led by the most oppressed and joined by allies, can create a new world. The Food Justice Movement (FJM) offers an entry into the complicated labyrinth of issues, analyses, and strategies of movements that exist and need to expand and form coalitions.

If you talk to people about these issues, particularly people who are not “in the movement,” they back away, overwhelmed by the enormity of the problems. How can we engage people to be moved into consciousness and action? How can we learn from each other and understand what is happening to our planet? How can we build the kind of organizations with staying power that we need to sustain us emotionally and socially as we build new understandings, new alliances, new movements, and a new world?

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Smaller problems, more manageable in scope, that still reflect the larger problems at hand can be entry points for learning; for building skills, confidence, and relationships; for creating a culture of participation and community; for generating the courage to participate in analysis, strategy, and change. That is what the FJM has to offer: it addresses our most critical problems and offers concrete projects that can be transformative for people who begin to engage politically, often for the first time in their lives. This is a global movement that has been growing over the last 20 years with institutions, organizations, and alliances of which most people in the U.S. have been unaware.

We’ve seen, quite recently, what happens when a mass movement such as Occupy Wall Street or the Arab Spring in Tahrir Square can be derailed without long-term strategies and organizations. These movements have contributed crucial popular concepts, such as “the 99%,” class solidarity, mass uprising from dictatorships, and are likely to have far-reaching influence; right now they seem dormant. The more we build grassroots organizations of trust and shared experience, communities of learning and analysis, experiments in structure and action, develop

leadership of those most oppressed by the system, and, most importantly, create alliances and broad strategic approaches, the more our movements will sustain us in the future. The FJM has the potential to tackle cross-cutting issues of equality, environment, democracy, resilience, health, and power. It also has the potential to bring in crucial leadership of youth, people of color, women, the poor and working class -- the people most marginalized by the present food system -- and unite across class, race, gender, language, and nation.

Many North Americans and Europeans think of the “food movement” as “foodies” and gardeners: people who want to make sure they have their organic arugula and those who enjoy growing their own. The image the corporate media project is people, young and old, having a good time eating and enjoying their privilege or, in other words, recipes without politics.<sup>2</sup>

The Food Justice Movement is different: FJM wants everyone to have organic arugula and knows that the food system must radically change to achieve that goal. It sees race, class, and gender as central to food oppression and leadership. It sees the food crisis as a result of corporate control over our land, water, agriculture, food processing and distribution with heavy assistance from neoliberal governments and the corporate media. It sees the necessity of sustainable food systems (agriculture, distribution, processing) to mitigate climate change: that means an end to factory farms. It sees feeding the world’s people as dependent upon decentralization of the food system so people can build resilient, culturally-appropriate systems that meet their own needs. It sees renewable energy as critical, and food workers and small family farmers as central to the fight to create a healthy, resilient, and just food system. It sees solidarity across the globe, in particular within the Global South, where the struggle for democratic control of the food system or food sovereignty has been developing exponentially.

The FJM is one of the largest cross-cutting movements today and, therefore, has the potential to create alliances, to understand how the present corporate-controlled world functions, and to create strategies for building a multi-sector movement.<sup>3</sup> The FJM has many parts, potentially creating a multifaceted and powerful movement for change. The parts, demands, and strategies, however, do not always fit neatly together, and there is sometimes conflict. The challenge of making these parts work provides creative organizational work for those who see its potential. For activists and students, it provides insight, hope, and endless opportunities for direct participation. In the next sections I will briefly describe and analyze the major parts of the Food Justice Movement and present directions for its future.

## Sectors of the Food Justice Movement

**Farmers in the U.S.** Farmers are the central sector of the food movement, globally more than nationally. In the U.S., farmers working small- and medium-scale farms and connected to progressive farmer organizations are advancing the important idea of food sovereignty or

maintaining control over farmland, practices, seeds, and distribution of food to feed people. Many of these farmers use agro-ecological methods that are as or more productive than factory farming methods.<sup>4</sup> These farmer activists bemoan the reality that too many of their decisions around seeds, land use, and markets are taken out of their hands by agribusiness that works to control agricultural markets and determine farmers' practices.<sup>5</sup>

In the U.S., the National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC) represents family farmers struggling to earn a living, maintain the family farm tradition and practices, and provide food for the local food economies in which they are embedded. Too often farmers are caught between being a subcontractor juggling agribusiness's demands for use of their seeds, chemicals, and equipment and the finance industry that provides credit with which to buy these "required necessities."<sup>6</sup> They are outraged by the arm-twisting of the multinational agriculture, chemical, fossil fuel, and pharmaceutical corporations and their cronies in government. For the U.S. family farmer, these are the real enemies of food justice and the instigators of climate change, hunger, and poor health.<sup>7</sup>

Many of these U.S. farmer activists are keenly aware of their place in the class structure. NFFC and Family Farm Defender leader Joel Greeno led a "tractorcade" across the state of Wisconsin to Madison, the state capital, in 2012 to support public service union members who occupied the State Legislature to protest attacks on union members. Many independent family farmers see their future as connected to the success of an independent and organized, class-conscious movement standing up to corporate domination of our society.

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NFFC advocates a return to agricultural supply management which attempts to keep farmers from going out of business, the result of decades of deregulation and "get big or get out" legislation. These policies insure the overproduction of genetically engineered corn, soy, wheat, and rice; these subsidized crops then are used in cheap,



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and often hormone and antibiotic-laden, feed used in animal factory farms. The overproduction of corn is processed into high fructose corn syrup that infuses junk food and contributes to obesity and disease. U.S. small and medium-scale farmers ask for price floors, guaranteeing their capacity to continue to earn modest livings while providing food for their communities and protection against climate change through sustainable farming practices.

In addition, U.S. farmers who have suffered land theft and government discrimination have won lawsuits. The National Black Farmers Association won a \$1.25 billion settlement<sup>8</sup> and Native American Farmers and Ranchers won a \$680 million settlement plus \$80 million in loan forgiveness against the U.S. Department of Agriculture for race discrimination. Latino farmers' lawsuits have had similar results. The Federation of Southern Cooperatives and the Mississippi Association of Cooperatives are examples of activist grassroots Black farmer organizations that see themselves as food sovereignty organizations similar to organized peasants from the Global South such as La Via Campesina (LVC), the world's largest peasant/farmer/fisher organization. This cross-fertilization of ideas and strategies advancing food sovereignty and justice across the globe represents movement building at its best.

When people in cities insist that government-subsidized food, including school lunches, be purchased from local farmers, it expands the local food economy, builds decent jobs in the food system, improves the sustainable practices of the local food system (fewer food miles and earth-healthier practices), and produces healthier, fresher food for children. It also builds crucial alliances between family farmers and local consumers and advocates.

Of course, there are conflicts. Small family farmers have trouble staying in business and worry about paying their migrant farm workers better; migrant farm workers live such marginal lives that they need to fight for their pay and rights. Working out contracts between these groups will test the FJM, but these conflicts must be resolved to push back against corporate control of the food system that pushes everyone but the bosses to the bottom of the barrel.<sup>9</sup> Organizations such as the Agricultural Justice Project, the Domestic Fair Trade Coalition, and the Coalition of Immokolee Workers pursue responsible practices, taking both the small-scale farmer and farm worker into account.

**Farmers Across the Globe.** The broadest based and most effective movement of farmers is in the Global South, where peasant cultivators make up over 50% of the total population (about 2.5 billion people); the Global South has 85% of the total world's population. In contrast, in the U.S., small- and medium-scale farmers make up between 1 and 2 % of the total population. Several UN reports and studies of agro-ecological practices indicate that these small scale farmers can feed the projected 10 billion people expected in 2100 and can do it with good distribution networks and planet cooling practices.<sup>10</sup> Clearly the importance of Global South farmers, their organizations

and movements, are essential to our understanding of the FJM. We cannot develop separate strategies; we must work together to achieve results with which we can thrive.

Sitting in a small meeting room in a church basement in Manhattan, I recently had the privilege of hearing a passionate conversation among seven winners of the 2013 Food Sovereignty Prize<sup>11</sup> discuss the farmer movements in their respective nations: Haiti, Brazil, Mali, India, and the Basque Country in the Iberian Peninsula of Europe. The four women and three men talked about land grabs, and the collusion of the multinational seed, chemical, and agribusiness corporations and their national governments in controlling agriculture and making it difficult for farmers to feed their people. They discussed their respective organizations' strategies and tactics to take back agriculture and put it under local control and talked about their use of agro-ecological practices that work with land, soil, water, and people to produce culturally appropriate, resilient food for their local populations. Sheelu Francis, leader of the 100,000+ member Tamil Nadu Women's Collective in India, talked about the struggles of poor women farmers in Tamil Nadu planting native millet that will grow resiliently even with drought and resisting the



FARMWORKER  
FROM A  
DEMONSTRATION  
PROJECT IN  
JAMKHED  
PHOTO BY NANCY  
ROMER

pressure from corporate seed companies to grow genetically engineered rice instead. Rosadit and Rosnel Jean-Baptiste of the Group of 4 in Haiti told us how, after the 2009 earthquake, Haitian farmers burned Monsanto's "gift" of genetically modified seeds so that Haitians could continue to control their own agriculture and keep it out of the hands of the multinational corporations.

All these activists, including the U.S. National Family Farm Coalition, have created chapters of La Via Campesina. Perhaps the largest nonreligious organization on the planet, LVC has over 200 million members from 150 nations, mostly in the Global South. Founded in 1993, the hundreds of chapters work in a variety of ways toward Food Sovereignty or control of their local and national food systems. They are explicitly anti-corporate, work for land redistribution and against land grabs, are conscious stewards of the land and water, and tend to work collectively in small scale co-ops and land-seizure-based

communities, mostly in rural areas. Land-seizure-based communities are made up of farmers, often called squatters, who have seized land and are farming it. The land is either contested -- farmers believe that historically it is theirs -- or landlords have let the land be unproductive for years. They are peasant cultivators, who often face violence, as they stand up for their rights to work the land in service of their people. U.S. trade agreements (NAFTA, CAFTA, and the looming Trans-Pacific Partnership) have wreaked havoc with farmers across the globe. These agreements force national governments to elevate the power of corporations to extract profits from the farmers. The super rich are thus highly motivated to buy off governments through elections or overthrow governments so that their allies support these supranational agreements. Because capital is global, our movements to recharge the democratic power of the people must be global.<sup>12</sup>

**Food Workers.** Between two and three billion people in the world are food workers: agricultural, processing, distribution, retail, and restaurant. Workers along the food chain are paid low wages and have few rights. The Food Chain Workers Alliance is a U.S.-based organization that represents food workers in the food movement and interacts with the FJM. Food Chain Workers are organizing to bring the food justice and labor movements together to support each other and insure that class, race, and gender values are shared. As workers who are particularly oppressed, the food worker sector of the FJM looks to people of color, immigrants, and women for leadership.

Traditional U.S. labor unions, such as the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) and the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), have been organizing food workers for decades, mostly in large factories and in wholesale and retail workplaces. The United Farmworkers has a rich history of organizing farm worker contracts with assistance from consumer boycotts.<sup>13</sup> Farm Laborers Organizing Committee and Comite en Apoyo de Trabajadores Agriculos have organized farmworkers locally.

Food workers serve as an important sector for the U.S. labor movement to organize. With a declining percentage of workers in unions, the greatest increase in labor organizing in the last ten years has been in smaller shops and contingent workforces, often in the service sector. Recent organizing of fast food workers into the Fast Food Forward campaign, calling for a \$15 per hour wage for fast food workers, has been a creative arena of organizing for labor developing new tactics and drawing in community support. The FJM supports the fast food workers and sees them as important in fighting poverty and low wages. The mostly young, often female, people of color, and immigrant workforce are the people needed to lead the FJM into a cross-cutting issue movement.<sup>14</sup> Fast food restaurants are also the site of organizing against unhealthy, processed food foisted primarily on young and poor people.

Community support for food workers has also played an important role in their success. The Coalition of Immokolee Workers (CIW), tomato pickers in Florida, has created highly successful campaigns on college campuses and in communities to leverage support for their demands from the fast food giants and supermarkets. By applying pressure through boycotts, the CIW has wrested concessions for Fair Food Agreements from Taco Bell, McDonalds, Burger King, and Trader Joe; Wendy's and Publix supermarkets are its most recent targets. These agreements include increased pay per pound of tomatoes and a range of human rights guarantees against wage theft, sexual harassment, and enslavement. The Mexican-inspired music, chants, street theater, and vibrant visuals make CIW actions invigorating. Food justice advocates, including college students, have played a major role in advancing their cause and have provided popular education on the oppression of farm workers and how to work for change.

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Restaurant Opportunities Center (ROC), a national organization with branches in eight cities, has created another paradigm for organizing restaurant workers: popular education, direct actions, and a "High Road" campaign lifting up good restaurant employers and demonstrating against bad ones. ROC also provides professional training for restaurant workers, extensive research and public campaigns on its findings to highlight the problems of restaurant workers, many of whom are people of color and immigrants. Brandworkers International, another food worker organization, represents food processing and distribution workers, mostly immigrant workers in fancy food plants where the workers face dangerous working conditions. Their success has been due to effective on-the-job organizing, support from progressive lawyers filing suits on their behalf, and FJM support of their tactics. Their members have won millions of dollars from employers due to discrimination, exploitation, and wage theft. United Food and Commercial Workers, an international union that negotiates worker-employer contracts, uses community support to advance good contracts for their workers. UFCW workers at Murray's Chicken processing plant in upstate New York were struggling for a contract and dealing with the USDA-approved doubling of the speed of the processing line when the Brooklyn Food Coalition (BFC), a broad-based FJM group, publicized their struggle. They got hold of reports indicating major health and safety violations and coordinated with union organizers to apply pressure to company management. BFC was able to get the support of its sister organization, the 16,500 member Park Slope Food Coop and Murray's largest purchaser, and press for a good

contract that would yield healthier and safer conditions for the workers and chickens. Pressure helped to settle a stalled contract within two weeks.<sup>15</sup> Rural Migrant Ministries, a faith-based farmer-worker organizing project, has been valiantly fighting for a Farm Worker Bill of Rights in the New York State Legislature for several years. In 2013 they organized support from FJM groups across the state.

**Hunger and Poverty in the U.S.** Anti-hunger/antipoverty is perhaps the oldest and most institutionalized sector of the Food Justice Movement. With approximately 50 million Americans who are "food insecure" or unable to rely on adequate food on a regular basis, anti-hunger advocates created a web of organizations to address these issues. In the early 1960s, fueled by revelations made public by U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy and amplified by the civil rights movement, the presence of hunger, particularly in the South and in cities, became a national disgrace. Anti-hunger organizations formed to lobby for policy change. These activists brought us food stamps: monthly allotments for individuals and families experiencing hunger



JAMES BEARD FOUNDATION HOUSE KITCHEN STAFF PHOTO BY NANCY ROMER

or food insecurity. In a "grand bargain," the U.S. Farm Bill joined the omnibus legislation of farm subsidies with food stamps, now known as Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), which serves over 48 million Americans, 87 percent of whom live in households with children, seniors, or people with disabilities. By the early 1980s, with Reaganomic policies cutting food assistance programs, a second tier of anti-hunger organizations expanded and provided anti-hunger services directly to the poor such as food pantries and soup kitchens, mostly funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and administered by a wide range of charities, in particular, faith-based organizations. In *Sweet Charity? Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement*, Janet Poppendieck explains how these organizations and nonprofits help serve the poor but often do nothing to challenge the reality of the poverty of their clients. Poverty and hunger are structural issues of inequality in our society. There is enough food to feed everyone in the world, let alone in the U.S., but wide income inequality makes millions of people, and about 1/3 of all children in the U.S., food insecure. This is rarely addressed as structural oppression of poor people by a lopsided system of distribution of wealth.

Some of these food pantry workers, clients, and volunteers, however, have been creative and pro-active in changing this paradigm. More and more pantries like Mother Hubbard's Cupboard in Bloomington, IN, provide a multiservice approach, offering food, job training, and placement as well as political education and organizing to create policy change. The Stop in Toronto sees its work as political and community building, not only feeding hungry people but also giving them tools to transform their lives and the policies that affect them. Many locally run food pantries are challenging the food that government surplus and food corporations offer: yellow cheese, processed carbs, old veggies, food which makes people sick. Brooklyn Rescue Mission, Bed-Stuy Campaign Against Hunger, and Food for Thought in Forestville, CA, are beginning to grow their own food for pantry guests, who may also participate in the gardening. They see the power of these pantry gardens to build community and relationships, and to empower people to understand why they are poor and how they can change the system, going beyond receiving or even growing their own food.

While advocating for a sharply graduated tax system based on people's income, New York State Hunger Action Network identifies the structural causes of hunger and poverty and works with allies to increase the minimum wage, provide jobs, improve the safety net, and support community control of food pantries. Starting out as a legislative and fund-raising organization to fight poverty, Why Hunger has an anti-hunger hotline and a grassroots network of anti-hunger organizations that are participating in a campaign for living wages.

**Health, Anti-Obesity and the School Food Movements.** Both anti-obesity efforts and school food activism are increasing. Close to half of the U.S. adult population and 1/3 of our school age population is overweight or obese; this is highest in low-income communities and among people of color who have little access to affordable, healthy, fresh food. The Live Right, Live Light Program serving obese and morbidly obese children from 2-19 years of age in Brooklyn, NY, works with one third grader who weighs over 250 pounds and cannot fit into her desk at school. Obesity is a preventable epidemic that is caused primarily by government food policies and corporate greed.

Though the term "food desert" has been used to describe the lack of healthy food in low-income communities, a more accurate term might be "food swamps" because food is easily available, but it is often filled with fat, sugar, and salt and sold at cheap prices by corner stores and fast food restaurants. The availability of this cheap, disease-causing food is due to the over-production of corn, soy, and rice, subsidized by tax dollars via the U.S. Farm Bill that is used to produce cheap, processed food that causes obesity and diet-related diseases including diabetes, and heart and joint diseases. The food is deliberately developed by food corporations to hook their customers and push this addiction through advertising to kids.<sup>16</sup> While obesity rates among privileged children are slowly decreasing, this is not true for low-income children. Health advocates ask people to make better choices and to become active exercisers: Michelle

Obama's "Let's Move" campaign signals that perspective. To change the cycle of obesity we must challenge the corporate food system. Michelle Simon's excellent blog and Nick Freudenberg's Tale of Two ObesCities push for government action that outlaws sales of certain products, for example, NYC Mayor Bloomberg's proposed ban on supersized soda or his ban on trans fats, and a required listing of calories of foods served in large chain and fast food restaurants. The San Francisco City Council passed a ban on prizes in "Happy Meals" so that children would be less manipulated to request them.

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In 2013, 134 million children ate school breakfast and 30.6 million ate school lunch at a cost of \$15,672,900,000. Most of the students received food free of charge because their families' incomes were at or below the poverty line. Since its inception in 1938, school food has become less nutritious as a result of decreasing school budgets. Due to public pressure, school lunches have improved slightly. Although the USDA spends billions of dollars annually on school food, much of it is in the form of surpluses from agribusiness. Little of it is fresh, unprocessed, or local food that improves health. Most of it replicates fast food products.<sup>17</sup>

Parents, teachers, administrators, community residents, and students have played a major role in changing school food. This part of the FJM has combined grassroots activism with professional advocates as well as improved food consciousness to make significant, but nowhere good enough, changes in school food. The class and race of these activists is diverse but their demands are consistent: salad bars, water jets, more fresh fruits and veggies, more whole wheat products, more locally sourced food, more "from scratch" cooking, and more choices that are culturally appropriate. Our experience in the Brooklyn Food Coalition has been that low-income parents are very concerned with what their children eat in school and see school food activism as an effective way to make their voices heard. It is also an important place from which to develop local leadership, especially among women and people of color, central to the future effectiveness of the FJM.

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food sourcing for schools to help change the market, for example, pushing for chicken that is free of antibiotics and hormones. The hope is that creating specifications for particular food items to be purchased by schools will change the market, and more farmers and processors will provide the food that schools want. But even when school systems set a goal of the percentage of foods to be locally grown, it may be hard to find the products they desire: the market has to catch up to the demand.

Sometimes hunger and health advocates disagree. While all parents, health, and anti-hunger advocates agree that we want healthier, fresh food for our children, anti-hunger advocates worry about reducing the total amount of food available if standards become too high. At present, much of our school food comes from tax-subsidized products that cause obesity and illness and use climate-warming methods. Cheap food, however, is not the answer to health or hunger issues; it empowers the transnational and national corporations that dominate the food system and will continue to dominate our lives unless we change it. We need to empower the local family farmer to produce more healthy food and reduce the control of agribusiness.

### **Community Gardens and Urban Agriculture.**

Community and backyard gardens are found everywhere in the world. Millions of urban dwellers are experiencing some independence from the food system or the joy of growing food in community gardens. Participation in community gardens is thriving in low-income communities and communities of color in urban areas, especially those with blighted housing. D-town Community Farm, a two-acre farm in Detroit, is part of this phenomenon. Detroit's Black Food Security Network, led by educator and urban farmer Malik Yakini, grew out of the large number of community gardens that were cultivated in the hundreds of vacant lots left after housing became inhabitable or was demolished. Detroit has become a city of urban farmers who are building communities who can feed themselves and their neighbors. In addition, they have developed farmers' markets, a community food coop, and policy around food issues. Proclaiming Black and Green as their mantra, they promote people of African descent as leaders in the movement and relate closely to the FJM in the U.S.

Growing Power, led by MacArthur Genius Award winner Will Allen, is another example of urban agriculture that has expanded to many acres of farmland in Milwaukee and recently in Chicago. Dedicated to engaging community to produce healthy, affordable food and to provide training to low-income communities, Growing Power has existed for 20 years. D-town Community Farm, Growing Power, Black Farmers, and the Black leadership of NYC Community Garden Coalition (NYC CGC) have organized Black Farmers

and Urban Growers that hold annual conferences on "Growing Food and Justice."

Farmers' Markets, Community Supported Agriculture, Food Coops, and Local Food Initiatives: Building a Healthy, Sustainable, Local Food Economy. Farmers' Markets, Community-Supported Agriculture (CSAs),<sup>18</sup> and Food Coops are ways to increase the local food economy on a small scale. They are lifeblood for the small and medium-sized family farmers who grow food specifically for the needs and preferences of local consumers. It is as close to food sovereignty as we can achieve in the present economic and political system. Direct relationships between farmers and consumers develop as each learns about and supports the concerns of the other. Small and medium-scale farmers do not have to share profits with wholesalers or processors and thus can maintain farm practices that will protect their land and the food they sell to others. Local processors serve a direct link for farmers and often sell at farmers' markets. For many farmers and processors, the farmers' market provides a social and political space to create community and relationships. Many organizations supporting farmers' markets have cooking demonstrations to teach people how to eat healthfully. CSA farmers appreciate their customers who pay upfront each season for produce, thus allowing farmers to avoid loans. Food co-



BROOKLYN COOP GARDEN PHOTO BY NANCY ROMER

ops, especially ones that require member labor, often build preferential relationships with local farmers and create an economic base that small and medium-scale farmers can count upon.<sup>19</sup> While these relationships are essential in creating the basis of a new food system, they are often devoid of political content because farmers that may belong to farmer organizations pushing

for change may not feel it appropriate to talk politics to their customers.

But that's exactly what we need to happen in our farmers' markets, CSAs, and food co-ops. We need to have discussions and educational opportunities for people to understand the food system and why their action, participation, and support are necessary for us to continue to have healthy food available in the future.

City and State initiatives that give preference to local food for government contracts can help to advance the local food economy and build relationships independent of major food corporations. The cities of Toronto and Los Angeles use federal, state, and local government money allocated for school and institutional food to procure food locally when possible. Governments can also require that food vendors who do business with the city or state have good records of labor and environmental practices. Creating contracts between local and state governments and local food producers can insure healthier food, increase tax revenues, and expand good jobs. The 860,000 school meals produced each school day by the NYC Department of Education's Office of School Food could transform the local

food economy if it used local food. The NYC Food Policy Center at Hunter College has a series of excellent proposals for the mayor of NYC to do this. The niche of local and organic food represents the largest growth sector in the U.S. food economy. It prefigures what might be possible if people were in control of the food system.

Building the market for healthy food will go only so far. Breaking the stranglehold of the corporate-dominated food system will take concerted political action, not just shifting purchasing patterns. The multi-billion dollar advertising and public relations budgets of the food industry will not go quietly.

**Food, Climate Change, and the Environment.** The agricultural sector that includes growing, distributing, processing, selling, serving, and managing food waste accounts for about 1/3 of all greenhouse gases emitted each year.<sup>20</sup> Monocrop farms that use synthetic fertilizer, pesticides, and heavy farm equipment, as well as methane-producing animal factory farms and gasoline used in extensive transportation distribution routes create greenhouse gases that are warming our planet. Agro-ecological methods that replenish carbon into the soil and local networks of food production and distribution minimize global warming.

Whether using organic certification schemes or ecologically sound growing methods, family farmers may be the best stewards of the land. They are often embattled with agricultural giants that control the markets and methods of farmers with which they have contracts. An example of this is chicken processing, in which Tyson and Purdue compel small-scale farmers to function as serfs whose work and lives are under their regulation.

On a 2008 trip to North Carolina for a Politics of Food Conference, I drove with a group of food justice activists by Smithfield Farms facilities. We were overwhelmed by the stench of CAFOs (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations) and their enormous elevated pools of urine and feces, overflowing onto the land when it rained, but Smithfield did not allow us to see the CAFOs of turkeys and hogs up close. Laws that have made recording of these farming operations illegal have been passed in a number of states by means of heavy lobbying by corporate owners of CAFOs. The few whistleblowers who have recorded the treatment of animals and the despoiling of the environment have received death threats, and some have been hauled into court and served jail time.<sup>21</sup> These poisonous methods of producing food are being addressed and monitored by organizations such as Food and Water Watch and the Humane Society. Our overreliance on products made from animals, often inhumanely and poisonously raised, must be challenged as well. Strengthening the local food economy can also make citizens more aware of the environmental conditions in which their food is grown. Local food advocates are teaming up with anti-fracking and anti-oil and gas pipeline forces in the environmental movement. If the land is poisoned, we cannot grow healthy food for our people.

**Youth: Education and Activism.** Youth are vital participants in the FJM. School-based and after-school

programs and community-based youth programs often include popular food-related programs such as farming and gardening, cooking, healthy food access, and food and fitness projects. Real Food Challenge on hundreds of campuses, though mostly private institutions, insists on local and real food in college cafeterias and is an example of how youth are challenging the corporate food system. They aim to transform the economy through purchasing power. Many high school youth from diverse communities see the potential of creating a food system that meets their needs. Cooking and gardening in schools K-12, food studies across the curriculum, and Wellness Partnerships in schools have brought attention to food issues in curricular and extracurricular activities. What is often missing from these experiences in schools is a food justice orientation but that is often included in after-school and community-based projects. High school and college students have been active in supporting the Coalition of Immokolee Workers in their efforts to get fast food corporations to agree to higher pay for tomato pickers. They have been the backbone for boycotts and created solidarity with farm workers while learning about their struggles.<sup>22</sup> The independence and creativity of these youth give great hope to their future leadership in defining and building the FJM.



SCHOOL FOOD PHOTO BY NANCY ROMER

Organizations representing young and/or immigrant farmers such as Greenhorns, National Young Farmers Coalition (representing more than 40,000 new farmers), and the New Farmers Project provide support and technical assistance for people who have never farmed before or who have only farmed in their home nations. These organizations provide help in finding land to lease or buy and loans to get their farms moving forward. During the last five years the most popular internship among college students has been World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF). Few of these students will become farmers but the knowledge they gain will help them become aware of the issues inherent in our present food system. And some of them have become farmers. We need farmers with food sovereignty or food justice orientations. The hope is that direct experiences struggling within the present food system will move them to join with other farmers and activists to change the system.

**Democracy in the Global Food System: Organizations and Action.** The U.S. equivalent to global



farmers struggling against multinational corporations in peasant cooperatives, can seem anemic.

In Toronto, Oakland, San Francisco, Baltimore, and New York State, Food Policy Councils have been created to enable people to participate in food decisions made by local governments. Of course, how useful they are depends on who is at the table, who is excluded, how much power the Food Policy Council has, and how that power is derived. How do ordinary people get to be heard by the Food Policy Council? What matters is that people are thinking about the importance of influencing public policy around food. What is worrisome is that once a Food Policy Council is in place, it may ignore people lower down on the political food chain. The only way to avoid this is to build local democratically-controlled organizations of strength and awareness that won't put up with being ignored.<sup>23</sup>

Too many decisions are made from the top of the decision-making pyramid, with scant input, let alone control, from the people. In the U.S. that has translated into a kind of hopelessness and turning away from political action and attention.

**Building the Food Justice Movement.** The FJM has great potential. The parts of the movement are in place, but it needs a coherent political vision and analysis to achieve a food system that serves the needs of the people. It must challenge the hegemony of what Latin Americans call "savage capitalism" or corporate profits at any cost. We need alliances of farmers, labor, environmentalists, anti-racists, feminists, LGBT activists, parents, the poor and working class, fast food workers, immigrants, and students. Community gardens can encourage members to come to educational events, participate in creating food policies, and press for needed change. Schools can provide a systemic critique of the food system and prepare their students with knowledge and critical thinking. Food worker organizations can place class politics at the center of the FJM, and environmentalists can make the connection between dependence on the inter-linked fossil fuel and food industries and how their plans exclude people's welfare. The broader and more varied the political education of FJM participants, the more prepared activists will be to decide for themselves the ways the movement should move forward.

These analyses and strategies need to become a range of campaigns in which grassroots groups participate, putting community, cultural, and local demands into effect. Campaigns with specific demands or ideas for change give us a framework with which to educate and agitate. For example, a campaign for labeling genetically engineered foods both educates people about these crops and seeds and organizes against state and federal government targets for such food. Campaigns advancing a national Farm Workers Bill of Rights place excluded farm workers into labor law.<sup>24</sup> Changes in U.S. Department of Agriculture rules and expenditures around school food could be another campaign linking many parts of the FJM. Campaigns to eliminate fast food and junk food commercials from children's TV programming could be another national campaign, much like the anti-tobacco and alcohol campaigns of the past.

Local campaigns can provide specific targets around which alliances and relationships may be built. Living Wage and Sick Days campaigns have been successful in uniting and mobilizing the labor and the food movements in many U.S. cities. FJM in Los Angeles mobilized to improve school food by requiring more locally sourced products. NYC Food Forum, an alliance of FJM groups, created a primer of food policy for Bill DiBlasio, the new mayor of NYC. While the efforts are far from revolutionary, a more activated food movement could take these policy recommendations and move them forward. Without demands there cannot be mobilization, and mobilization for these demands requires popular education. Since most people learn best and become most committed within the context of action, these campaigns can help people to become more familiar with the ideas and goals advanced by the FJM.

Finally, a national organization to unite the FJM with a clear analysis, strategy, and process for change is needed,<sup>25</sup> one that would respect the various sectors, including the grassroots projects and needs and participation of activists. It would have to lift up and support the leadership of those most affected. It would have to be non-sectarian and open to a range of views, approaches, and tactics. It would have to understand that different communities want to participate in different ways, but all communities want to be represented and have their voices heard. It would have to understand the importance of advancing the FJM in the U.S. but also need to see its place among the movements internationally and not try to replicate our nation's unfortunate history of attempting to dominate others. US Food Sovereignty Alliance and the Food Chain Workers Alliance are allied national organizations that may unite the Food Justice Movement.

**The FJM and Educators in the Academy and Outside.** Rich opportunities await educators, students, and activists within FJM, whether in schools, in the academy, or in communities, as organizers and popular educators. Because the present maladies and the possible solutions of the food system cross cut so many major issues, it offers opportunities for action and learning. Basic research, organizing, and leadership skills; critical and strategic thinking; building coalitions and movements are all needed. Importantly, small wins and improvements are possible in schools, communities, workplaces, families, and our lives. Small wins create hope and belief in our power and are critical ingredients for an empowered movement. Efforts that respect the individual but form caring and effective groups create personal, social, and political change. Those collective identities can produce effective organizations and movements for change.

The hard reality is that our planet is changing and there is a growing number of hungry, sick, and unempowered people living on it. The world has never more emphatically needed a change in direction: we all know it and we need to make it happen.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Lester R. Brown, *World on the Edge: How to Prevent Environmental and Economic Collapse*, Earth Policy Institute, 2011; Bill McKibben, *EAARTH: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet*, Times Books, 2010; Frances Moore Lappe, *Eco-Mind: Changing the Way We Think to Create the World We Want*, Nation Books, 2011.
- <sup>2</sup> Mark Bittman, the “Flexitarian” columnist for the *New York Times*, defies this static concept. Bittman serves progressive food politics along with his recipes. See Mark Bittman, *Food Matters: A Guide to Conscious Eating*, Simon & Schuster, 2009.
- <sup>3</sup> Several other sources provide a much fuller account of the FJM: Eric Holt-Gimenez, ed., *Food Movements Unite! Strategies to Transform Our Food Systems*, Food First Books, 2011; Fred Magdoff and Brian Tokar, eds., *Agriculture and Food in Crisis: Conflict, Resistance, and Renewal*, Monthly Review Press, 2010.
- <sup>4</sup> Jules Pretty, “Can Ecological Agriculture Feed Nine Billion People?” in *Agriculture and Food in Crisis*. See Mark Bittman’s succinct “How to Feed the World,” *NY Times*, Oct 14, 2013; Rodale Institute’s Farming Systems Trial; IAASTD report, Nourish a Billion.org.
- <sup>5</sup> <http://whyhunger.org/>, <http://www.grassrootsonline.org/>, <http://www.foodfirst.org/>, <http://smallplanet.org/>
- <sup>6</sup> Samir Amin, “Food Sovereignty: A Struggle for Convergence in Diversity,” in *Food Movements Unite!*
- <sup>7</sup> Wenonah Hauter, *Foodopology: The Battle Over the Future of Food and Farming in America*, The New Press, 2012.
- <sup>8</sup> <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tag/pigford-settlement>, <http://www.indianfarmclass.com>, <http://www.farmerclaims.gov/>
- <sup>9</sup> Raj Patel, *Stuffed and Starved: The Hidden Battle for the World Food System*, Portobello Books, 2007.
- <sup>10</sup> Raj Patel, “Can the World Feed 10 Billion People?” *Foreign Policy*, May 4, 2011.
- <sup>11</sup> The Food Sovereignty Prize is awarded to farmer activists across the globe fighting to control their own food system. It is in contrast to the World Food Prize, which goes to scientists and managers from such corporations as Monsanto and Syngenta, <http://foodsovereigntyprize.org/>
- <sup>12</sup> John Perkins, *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man*, NY: Penguin, 2004.
- <sup>13</sup> Frank Bardacke, *Trampling Out the Vintage: Cesar Chavez and the Two Souls of the United Farm Workers*, Verso Press, 2012.
- <sup>14</sup> Ryan Hill, “Opportunities Present for ‘Labor Left’ in Walmart and Fast Food Fights,” *Solidarity*, October 9, 2013.
- <sup>15</sup> *Linewaiters’ Gazette*, Park Slope Food Coop newspaper.
- <sup>16</sup> Michael Moss, *Salt, Sugar, Fat: How the Food Giants Hooked Us*, Random House, 2013.
- <sup>17</sup> Janet Poppendieck, *Free for All: Fixing School Food in America*, University of California Press, 2011, includes insightful material on how fast food inspired school meals came to be and how food workers have become increasingly de-skilled and often are reduced to heating up foods that were produced in factories.
- <sup>18</sup> Community Supported Agriculture is a subscription agreement between a group of consumers who agree to pay a set price up front for a given season to a farmer who agrees to provide whatever is grown on a regular basis to the consumer. It gives farmers cash before the growing season to buy seeds and not rely on bank loans for capital.
- <sup>19</sup> The Park Slope Food Coop (PSFC), with 16,500 members, requires each member to work 2 hours and 45 minutes every four weeks, thus cutting down on labor costs and building community. The PSFC is the largest member/worker coop in the U.S., with prices about 30-35% cheaper than those of a regular supermarket. Monthly democratic governing meetings and a biweekly newspaper make political conversation and action common practice.
- <sup>20</sup> Anna Moore Lappe, *Diet for a Hot Planet: The Climate Crisis at the End of Your Fork and What You Can Do About It*, Bloomsbury, 2010.
- <sup>21</sup> [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-03-05/features/chicago-policy-cafo-protection-bill-gets-hearing-in-illinois-20120305\\_1\\_cafos-animal-welfare-animals](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-03-05/features/chicago-policy-cafo-protection-bill-gets-hearing-in-illinois-20120305_1_cafos-animal-welfare-animals)
- <sup>22</sup> <http://sfalliance.org/> Student-Farmworker Alliance.
- <sup>23</sup> Many FJM organizations are run democratically, controlled by their members. Unfortunately, many are nonprofits, often controlled by tightly controlled appointed boards. NGOs (non-governmental organizations) may function as brakes to movement building and democratic participation. Often these organizations invite participation in activities but not in decision making.
- <sup>24</sup> Groups such as Rural and Migrant Ministries are working on such legislation. <http://ruralmigrantministry.org/jfw.html>
- <sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, in 2011, Community Food Systems Coalition, an organization that attempted to unite the U.S. food movement, collapsed due to organizational, fiscal, and personnel problems. The hope is that a successor organization will emerge with stronger support and organizational strategies.



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