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Youth and Food Justice: Lessons from the Civil Rights Movement

By Anim Steel*

The food justice movement is entering a new period of opportunity. Good, fresh, healthy food is on the agenda in underserved neighborhoods and even First Lady, Michelle Obama has planted an organic garden and taken on childhood obesity with her *Let's Move!* campaign. But fair and affordable fresh food at 4,000 farmers markets and hundreds of CSAs, with double digit annual growth in organic food over the last 20 years, represents under two percent of the trillion dollar food market.

Poor diet is condemning one in three African-American children to Type II diabetes by the age of 18 and one in four Latino kids to hypertension and heart disease. Indeed, all of our young people are at risk. The Centers for Disease Control now projects that the youngest generation of Americans will be the first to have a shorter lifespan than their parents—thanks to our toxic food system.

Improving the health of our youth will require a transformation of our food system. This will require strong social movements capable of creating the political will to truly transform how we grow, buy, prepare and eat food. Lessons from the civil rights era suggest how today's food justice movement can organize. In particular, a new, youth-led, multiracial coalition could unleash the voice and energy of those with the most to gain from transforming the food system—young people.

What does Fast Food have in common with Jim Crow?

The political disenfranchisement addressed by the Civil Rights movement, and the cheap, unhealthy food plaguing our underserved communities both reflect structural inequities that marginalize people of color. Poverty—the cause of hunger and poor diet—is built-in through “redlining” by banks and

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retail outlets and the outmigration of finance, business, jobs and services caused by zoning and suburban development schemes that favor higher earning, primarily white workers, over lower-income people of color. In this sense, the fight for good, fresh, affordable food is a social and economic continuation of the struggle to end discrimination. Turning the “invisible hand” of this skewed marketplace into a helping hand that creates and keeps wealth in underserved communities requires economic and political restructuring for equal opportunities.

Lesson #1: The imperative of social movements

How can we turn our food systems into healthy, equitable engines for local economic growth? We can't change the food system by simply changing the tastes and attitudes of regular people any more than the Civil Rights movement could end segregation without the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Beyond the personal, these transformations require political, economic, and cultural changes. Just as with the Civil Rights movement, transformation needs to be local, national, and international. Social movements will play a deciding role in creating the political will for change just as they did with Civil Rights. To quote Myles Horton of Highlander Institute, “It's only in a movement that an idea is often made simple enough and direct enough that it can spread rapidly... A large social movement forces people to take a stand.”¹

Lesson #2: It's time for youth

In February of 1960 four black college freshmen at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University sat down at a segregated Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina and asked to be served. They were refused—but their simple, bold action ignited a week-long protest and a wave of similar sit-ins across the South, breathing new life into the

civil rights movement. As Andrew Lewis wrote, “We forget how troubled the civil rights movement was in January 1960. Six years after *Brown v. the Board of Education* fewer than one in 100 black students in the South attended an integrated school. Many worried that the civil rights movement had ended. Then Greensboro changed everything. The sit-ins rewrote the rules of protest.”² Later that spring, 300 students met at a conference, to form the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Campaign (SNCC). Veteran civil rights activist Ella Baker counseled the students not to become just an arm of the more established Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). “Don't let anyone else, especially the older folks, tell you what to do,” she said. SNCC was sponsored by SCLC and worked closely over the decade with Martin Luther King's group and others. But the decision to remain independent allowed the students to find their own voice and develop their own leadership. Without that independence, we might not have had the voter registration drive in the deep South, the idea of black power, or a lifetime of leadership from people like now-Congressman John Lewis and NAACP head Julian Bond—not to mention the landmark civil rights actions such as the Freedom Rides and Freedom Summer. Young people changed the course of the Civil Rights movement.

Youth are prominent in the food justice movement today. This isn't just because they are “included” as afterthoughts into existing projects and programs. They lead and have their own, independent voice. Thousands of young people from Philadelphia to Honolulu are planting gardens, running farms, and pushing for healthy, fair food in their cafeterias. They are of every race, class, and sexual orientation. They are urban, suburban, and rural. They are in communities and on campuses. The farmworker-led boycott of Taco Bell is one example—but contact

with the earth and a respect for those who work it is a deep thread that runs through organizing efforts.

To become a strong, national force, the food justice movement needs an organization that unifies and amplifies these disparate efforts—a modern-day food justice version of SNCC. Such an organization should celebrate and encourage the diversity of local work; the best local solutions come from local communities. But it should do what local organizations often have a harder time doing: focus the national spotlight, spread innovation, involve masses of people, and harness our collective political and economic power.

Such an organization should prioritize the voices of those *most* hurt by the system, even as it welcomes the contributions of all who care. And it should be open to the contributions and wisdom of all generations as it emphasizes the leadership of young people. Even as we celebrate the unique strengths of youth, it's helpful to remember that Martin Luther King, Jr. was recruited into the movement by older pastors. A youth-focused organization should be infused with a deep respect for the movement pioneers who paved the roads we walk on.

The seeds of such an organization have been planted. Beginning in the 1990's, youth and adults in urban communities nationwide began to reclaim vacant lots and grow food. The Food Project in Boston and Growing Power in Milwaukee were among the first, but they were soon followed by People's Grocery in Oakland, Added Value in Brooklyn, and hundreds of others around the country. In 1990 these projects held a conference and the Rooted in Community network was born. By 2003 the movement had spread to college campuses with the founding of United Students for Fair Trade. Students all over the country either revitalized or started new gardens.



Photo by Real Food Challenge

The Student Farmworker Alliance (SFA) mobilized a new generation allied with fellow youth working in the tomato fields of Florida (the Coalition of Immokalee Workers was formed in 1993). In 2007, several of these groups came together to create the Real Food Challenge, a campaign to redirect \$1 billion in college food purchases away from industrial agriculture, toward local, fair, and sustainable sources. These and hundreds of other projects are a powerful platform to build upon.

Lesson #3: Drawing the Line with Real Food

The iconic 1963 Civil Rights March on Washington drew over 100,000 people to the Lincoln Memorial where Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. stated, “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” In that one sentence King contrasted what was and what should be—expressing a principle planted firmly in our minds (so strongly, in fact, that it has been claimed by both conservatives and liberals in subsequent generations).

The youth call for “Real Food” states such a truth. *Webster’s Dictionary* defines “real,” as “true, actual,” and “food” as “something that nourishes.” So a “real food” system is one which *truly* nourishes communities, the earth, and people—both those who eat and those who produce. The fact is that what we have now does

not nourish. This contrast challenges our acceptance of the unhealthy corporate food system. A world without slavery would have been unthinkable to most Americans 200 years ago. In 1960, segregation was normal in the South with many black people accepting it, as people often do when they have few options. The parents of many of the sit-in

protestors were opposed to their actions, as were large segments of the black establishment.

“Real food” highlights the absurdity of our current situation, of how it deviates from truth. Food should make us healthy—not sick. That’s what real food does—and always has. The dominant industrial food system is the mutant deviation from real food.

The more we draw a distinction—and follow it with action—the closer we will get to our goal of healthy food for all.

Lesson #4: Think national; act local Police dogs biting black kids. Hoses turned on children. Bull Connor. These are among the most searing images of the 10-year period that marked the height of the civil rights movement. That all of them came from Birmingham is no accident. Birmingham was chosen by the Southern Christian Leadership Congress as a local test of conscience and national law. Birmingham in 1962 was one of the most segregated cities in America, making it a strategic choice to provoke a national reaction.

The food justice movement could take a page from Birmingham by mounting local actions designed for national impact. We need both local and large-scale social actions aimed at changing national policies. Former SNCC member and recent Obama

organizer Marshall Ganz talked about this tension in a lecture he gave at MIT in 2009: “The local effort acquires meaning and significance from being part of a greater whole, but unless it’s actually rooted locally and has real commitment locally, it doesn’t go anywhere. How that dynamic [the combination of local action with national purpose] is handled is one of the most critical elements in building an effective movement.”

What would *thinking nationally and acting locally* look like for the food justice movement? Several organizations have already started down this path. Rooted in Community and the Food Project have sponsored national “days of action,” where local groups are encouraged to do an action or host an awareness-raising event on the same day (“Eat-In, Act-Out”). In the summer of 2009, Slow Food USA got 20,000 people nationwide to participate in a Day of Action focused on school lunch; generating over 150,000 letters to members of Congress for the reauthorization of the Childhood Nutrition Act. Between 2001 and 2005, boycotts of Taco Bell by students nationwide organized by the Student Farmworker Alliance yielded the first wage increases for Florida tomato pickers in 30 years.

The best local-national events dramatize the problems we are working to solve and compel public attention. They make it personal, tell our stories, and carry a powerful, clear message. They draw a clear distinction. Youth Food Movements Unite!

NOTES

1. Horton, Myles (1998). *The Long Haul*. New York, Teachers College, Columbia University.
2. Lewis, Andrew B. (2009). *The Shadows of Youth: The Remarkable Journey of the Civil Rights Generation*. New York, Hill and Wang, A division of Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

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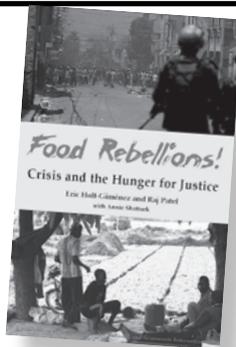
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Food Rebellions! Crisis and the Hunger for Justice

by Eric Holt-Giménez and Raj Patel, with Annie Shattuck. Today there are over a billion hungry people on the planet, more than ever before in history. Why, in a time of record harvests, are a record number of people going hungry? And why are a handful of corporations making record profits? *Food Rebellions!* tells the real story behind the global food crisis and documents the growing trend of grassroots solutions to hunger spreading around the world. Official plans to solve the world food crisis call for more free trade and technical fixes--solutions that have already failed. *Food Rebellions!* is a trail marker on the journey to end hunger and build food sovereignty. \$19.95

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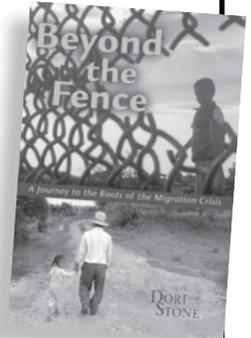


Beyond the Fence: A Journey to the Roots of the Migration Crisis

by Dori Stone, informs the immigration debate in the U.S., which is highly controversial, emotional, and often confusing. She explores migration issues that are largely unnoticed by the public in the U.S. and the mainstream media - the stories and surprising possibilities that get lost in the debate over fences and undocumented migrants exploited at below minimum wage. They are the tales of people's desperation and irretrievable loss, but also their growing visions of

hope. They are the stories of farmers, politicians and activists on both sides of the border.

"The book is ideally suited for students, but I can think of few people who would not benefit from reading it." - Angus Wright, author of *The Death of Ramon Gonzales: The Modern Agricultural Dilemma*. *Beyond the Fence*, \$16.95

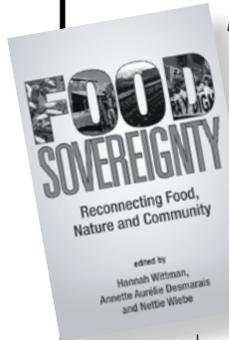


BOOKS FROM FOOD FIRST

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: Reconnecting Food, Nature and Community

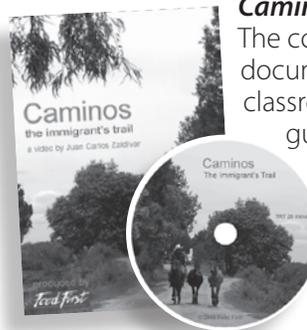
Edited by Hannah Wittman, Annette Aurélie Desmarais, and Nettie Wiebe. Food Sovereignty aims to provide for the food needs of all people while respecting the principles of environmental sustainability, local empowerment and agrarian citizenship. Bringing together internationally recognized experts in the field, this book critically engages contemporary debates on hunger and environment while exploring new social directions. Food Sovereignty examines the destructive rise of the industrial agrifoods system

and outlines and gives voice to the peasant movements that are planting the seeds of a revolution that could fundamentally alter our relationship with food — and with each other. \$24.95



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