

Food First BACKGROUND

INSTITUTE FOR FOOD AND DEVELOPMENT POLICY

SUMMER 2012

VOLUME 18 • NUMBER 2



Panther, Jerry Dunigan talking with children at a free breakfast

Survival Pending Revolution: What the Black Panthers Can Teach the US Food Movement

By Raj Patel

Over the past decade, the US food movement has grown to become a potent force for social change. Precisely because of its success, the movement now is being called to shore up the status quo. Revisiting some radical roots suggests ways that the food movement can end hunger in America, rather than becoming just another band-aid alleviating poverty.

It's no accident that the food movement grew widely after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. With the criminalization of dissent, it became increasingly difficult to confront corporate capitalism through other politics. As Michael Pollan has noted,

Food is the place in daily life where corporatization can be most vividly felt... By the same token, food offers us one of the shortest, most appealing paths out of the corporate labyrinth.

Under the Bush regime, environmentalists, social justice campaigners, anti-capitalists, and organic foodies found a government, media, and general public far less responsive than a decade before. Membership of umbrella groups like the Community Food Security Coalition swelled, with a proliferation of food organizations, consultants, academics, and activist groups throughout the US.

Part of the success of the movement has been its largely nonsectarian, big-tent approach, committed to the idea that food should be available to all, and that, above all, food is a domain in which something can and ought swiftly to be *done*. Indeed, it's the very success of community farms,

gardens, feeding programs, kitchens, and food banks that has helped recruit a new generation of activists into a movement that seems to offer transcendence from the “old politics.”

Yet it's the movement's practical success that puts it in a precarious position today. At the time of this writing [fall 2011], 50.2 million Americans and one-third of female-headed households are food insecure. Food prices are rising, unemployment remains stubbornly high, and a Republican Congress has ambitions to amputate social programs from the body of government in the name of fighting inflation. In the resulting vacuum, community organizations have been pressed, with government's approval, into providing service to the poor. It is easy to see the appeal of this community development approach for the present administration: it smacks of the self-help ethos, involves vanishingly small resources and can be encouraged without at the same time having to admit the existence of poverty.

To inoculate ourselves against the dangers of being co-opted into the very food system we have spent a decade criticizing, we need *food politics*. I don't just mean *policies* mediating the interactions between the government and the private sector of the corporate food regime. I'm referring to politics as an ideology, as a positive system of beliefs, analytical principles, and values that informs practice.

The Black Panthers Feed the World

Since WW II, African American income has consistently stayed at around 60% of white household income. The government's persistent refusal to address poverty in African American communities was compounded in the 1960s by an ongoing criminalization of poor, urban African Americans by local

and state police, with attendant and systematic police violence against black men. It was the encounter with this “police logic” that spurred two students at Merritt College in Oakland, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, to launch the Black Panther Party for Self Defense in 1966—later shortened to the Black Panther Party (BPP).

The party soon expanded its ambit beyond police surveillance, dropping “for Self Defense” from its name and, through dialogue with community members, setting up a range of community service programs. By 1968, the most successful of these was the Breakfast for Children Program. David Hilliard, the Panther's chief of staff, recalls the first donation of food that kicked off the program, given by Emmett Grogan of the San Francisco “Diggers”:

Emmett left off some bags of food his group distributes to the runaways, draft resisters and freaks who have flocked to Berkeley... We told him to put the stuff outside the office: in a few minutes people were flocking by, stocking up on onions and potatoes. Now Emmett donates the food regularly. Like the newspaper, the food serves a double purpose, providing sustenance but also functioning as an organizing tool: people enter the office when they come by, take some leaflets, sit in on an elementary PE [political education] class, talk to cadre, and exchange ideas.

What distinguished the Black Panther Party's food distribution was its part in a far wider vision for social change. Part of the mechanisms of the Black Panther Party's self-defense were *programs for survival*, ranging from the provision of free shoes and education to land banking and the school breakfast program. In the

provision of these services, Newton understood the ambiguities and contradictions within the programs:

All these programs satisfy the deep needs of the community but they are not solutions to our problems. That is why we call them survival programs, meaning survival pending revolution. We say that the survival program of the Black Panther Party is like the survival kit of a sailor stranded on a raft. It helps him to sustain himself until he can get completely out of that situation. So the survival programs are not answers or solutions, but they will help us to organize the community around a true analysis and understanding of their situation.

The Panthers' breakfast program eventually served 45 branches nationwide. New York's chapters fed numbers in the hundreds, California's in the thousands. Nonetheless, the universal aspiration was for a balanced diet of fresh fruit twice a week, and always a starch of toast or grits, protein of sausage, bacon, or eggs, and a beverage of milk, juice, or hot chocolate. Done without a penny from the government or organized philanthropy, the meals were the only source of nutrition in many a child's day.

The breakfast program was part of a suite of survival programs with explicit goals of transforming relations around private property—the vision of a land bank, for instance, called for creation of trusts that would suspend the profit motive from land tenure, making other arrangements possible. Land reform was, in turn, part of a broader political strategy, enshrined in the Panthers' Ten Point Plan, which featured “power to determine the destiny of our black and oppressed communities,” “full employment,” “an end to . . . robbery



Bobby Seal checks food bags, 1972

by the capitalists,” “decent housing,” “decent education,” “completely free health care,” and an end to war, militarism, police brutality, and, in the final point, “land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, peace and people’s community control of modern technology.” It was the political vision, the possibility of a different tomorrow after surviving today, that transformed the Panthers’ feeding into radical social work, not band-aid social work.

Effect and Aftermath

Jesse Jackson called the breakfast program “creative and revolutionary.” People across the country copied it. Nationally, because the breakfast program actually fed children, it stoked grassroots pressure that eventually led to increased funding for kids’ food. In a Senate hearing George McGovern asked the school lunch program administrator, Rodney Leonard, if the Panthers fed more poor children than did the state of California. . . Leonard admitted that it was probably true.

The Panthers’ success in providing food also intensified the government’s efforts to crush them. Through its COINTELPRO program, the FBI was trying to destroy the Panthers, but found it much harder to summon popular support for its work when the Panthers were engaged in radical social work. As Ward Churchill observed, “[FBI director J. Edgar]

Hoover was quite aware that it would be impossible to cast the party as merely ‘a group of thugs’ so long as it was meeting the daily nutritional requirements of an estimated 50,000 grade-schoolers in forty-five inner cities across the country. Rather than arguing that the government itself should deliver such a program, however, he targeted the Panthers’ efforts for destruction.”

Though the FBI eventually did succeed in bringing down the Panthers—and the breakfast program—the program has an important legacy. Not only was it responsible for creating what today might be called a “temporary autonomous zone” for instigating real “school meal revolutions” (as opposed to the kind shown on today’s TV), and for embarrassing the federal government into taking child nutrition seriously, but—at least in some cases—it involved a transformation within the domain in which the Panthers have consistently been considered remiss: gender.

One female activist recalled the lengths to which the Panthers earnestly, but inconsequentially, paid lip service to questions of gender equality and then said:

You could have a thousand dialogues on gender issues and you would have never gotten that result faster than you did by saying look, if you love these children, if you love your people, you better get your ass up and start working in that breakfast program.

It was the active participation in the program that transformed gender relations, not merely the talking about it.

The food movement today might benefit from the Black Panthers’ vision for radical change. The Panthers understood that while the needs of the hungry deserved immediate attention, those needs

could only be banished permanently by a far more radical transformation than the government was ready to provide. The Panthers knew political education was vital to understanding the reasons behind their hunger.

The Black Panthers’ struggles for survival may not yet have brought the revolution, but at least they exposed the scale of change that will be needed to finally banish hunger in our communities. And in the US today, families most likely to be food insecure are headed by women. It’s possible to carry our survival work *and* help people understand why women are paid less than men, why hunger flourishes among the poor, and why capitalism will not willingly provide food to those unable to afford it.

In providing these explanations, and organizing effective actions to address inequity, we will make the food movement more threatening to the powerful. That sounds frightening, but every movement that has ever accomplished social change—whether the civil rights movement, the Indian independence movement, or indeed the global justice movement—has put the demands of justice ahead of the need to accommodate oppressive thinking. Instead, such movements have been armed with radical ideas for a better future, in which all people are possessed of dignity, and able to govern themselves.

The Black Panther Party’s vision of a world where all children are fed, where food, healthcare, education, access to land, and housing and clothes are rights and not privileges is a vision that can and should spark the food movement today. Inspired by their example, and learning the lessons from their experience, we can dream beyond the limitations imposed by capitalism, of a world in which hunger is, for the first time, a specter of the past.

MEMBER BENEFITS:

- 20% discount on Food First books
- Quarterly Food First News & Views and Backgrounders. Call or write for copies to share with friends
- Donate \$100-\$499 - one free Food First book or T-shirt.
- Donate \$500-\$999 - Two free Food First books or T-shirts.
- Donate \$1,000 or more - receive all Food First materials.

SAVE PAPER, POSTAGE, AND TIME BY JOINING OUR *SUSTAINERS' CIRCLE*

For as little as \$10 a month, you can be a vital part of . . .

sustaining FOOD FIRST

Support Food First with easy, automatic monthly donations through your credit card or checking account.

Call (510) 654-4400 or email info@foodfirst.org for details

JOIN FOOD FIRST AND TELL YOUR FRIENDS

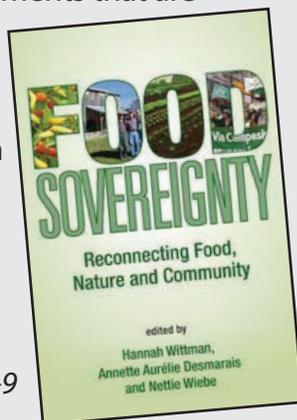
more info at www.foodfirst.org

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: *Reconnecting Food, Nature and Community*

Edited by Hannah Wittman, Annette Aurélie Desmarais, and Nettie Wiebe

Global resistance to the social, environmental, and economic destruction perpetuated by the global food system has led to a new and radical response from peasant and farmer organizations: food sovereignty. Food Sovereignty 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.

October 2010
Paperback \$24.95
32 pages
ISBN 978-0-935028-37-9



FOOD MOVEMENTS UNITE!

Edited by Eric Holt-Giménez

Food Movements Unite! provides a sector by sector road map for bringing the tremendous transformative potential of the world's food movements together into a powerful transnational force capable of ending the injustices that cause hunger. In *Food Movements Unite!* food movement leaders from around the world seek to answer the perennial political question: What is to be done? The answers—from the multiple perspectives of community food security, peasants and family farm leaders, labor activists, and leading food systems analysts—lays out convergent strategies for the fair, sustainable, and democratic transformation of our food systems. Authors address the corporate food regime head on, arguing persuasively not only for specific changes to the way our food is produced, processed, distributed and consumed, but specifying how these changes may come about, politically.

November 2011 Paperback \$24.99 ISBN 978-0-935028-38-6
and e-book: ISBN 978-0-935028-39-3

**NEW
RELEASE!**



**TO ORDER AND SEE MORE FOOD FIRST BOOKS: www.foodfirst.org/en/catalog
or contact Perseus Distribution, at 800-351-5073**

Food first

INSTITUTE FOR FOOD AND DEVELOPMENT POLICY

398 60TH STREET • OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA 94618 USA • TEL: (510) 654-4400 • EMAIL FOODFIRST@FOODFIRST.ORG

©2012 BY FOOD FIRST. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. PLEASE OBTAIN PERMISSION TO COPY