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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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 decisive 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.”

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.”

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.
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—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

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