

# Contextualizing Food Sovereignty: The politics of convergence among movements in the US

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As food sovereignty spreads to new realms that dramatically diverge from the agrarian context in which it was originally conceived, this raises new challenges, as well as opportunities, for already complex transnational agrarian movements. In the face of such challenges, calls for convergence have increasingly been put forward as a strategy for building political power. Looking at the US case, we argue that historically rooted resistance efforts for agrarian justice, food justice and immigrant labor justice across the food system are not only drawing inspiration from food sovereignty, but helping to shape what food sovereignty means in the US. By digging into the histories of these resistance efforts, we can better understand the divides that exist as well as the potential for and politics of convergence. The US case thus offers important insights, especially into the roles of race and immigration in the politics of convergence that might strengthen the global movement for food sovereignty as it expands to new contexts and seeks to engage with new constituencies.

**Keywords:** Food sovereignty; agrarian justice; food justice; immigrant labor justice; politics of convergence; US

## Introduction<sup>§</sup>

In fall 2008, as volatile food prices combined with financial recession rapidly drove up hunger rates, food movement leaders from across the US converged in New York for an event entitled “Step Up to the Plate: Ending the Food Crisis.” Standing on the stage together, were, among others, urban food justice activist LaDonna Redmond, farmer leaders Ben Burkett and John Kinsman, farmworker activist Gerardo Reyes, and food worker union leader Pat Purcell. While the event brought attention to the pressing challenges of the food crisis, what made it historic on a number of levels was the message of unity it conveyed in the context of a food system marred by deep historic divides. Tackling the food crisis, starting at home, would mean doing the hard work to overcome these divides, and this would require understanding how they had come to be. Redmond captured this sentiment, emphasizing that achieving a just food system was not about returning to some idyllic past. The US food system had been anything but just, as it had been built on the exploitation of Indigenous peoples, slaves, and others, and continued to function through exploitation and oppression. Achieving a just food

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system, she explained, would involve building something radically different from what had existed in the past and at present.

Little did the organizers and participants know at that time, this event was an initial step in a process of convergence that would lead to the founding of the US Food Sovereignty Alliance (USFSA) two years later. The founding of the USFSA was an attempt both to unify food and farm groups in the US in a more cohesive and powerful movement, and to situate this domestic movement within the broader global struggle for *food sovereignty*—defined as “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems”.<sup>1</sup> While originally popularized in the 1990s by the global peasant movement La Via Campesina, the concept of food sovereignty has increasingly become a rallying cry, strategy, and proposal by social movements across the globe, now spanning well beyond La Via Campesina and its farming base.

As resistance to the advance of a corporate dominated global agri-food system continues to grow, reaching into new geographic areas and new social groups, the increasing diversity of actors who have taken up the banner of food sovereignty poses additional challenges, as well as opportunities, for already complex transnational agrarian movements.<sup>2</sup> In the face of such challenges, calls for convergence have increasingly been put forward as a strategy for building political power (See, for instance, *Food Movements Unite!*<sup>3</sup>). Desmarais<sup>4</sup> emphasizes the importance of “unity in diversity” to understand this convergence, and Martínez-Torres and Rosset<sup>5</sup> explain the practice of “*diálogo de saberes*” (“dialogue among knowledges”) within La Vía Campesina as a means of navigating sensitive points of tension. Of course, attempts at convergence are not without their challenges, and Edelman et al. ask if such practices will “allow for a constructive interchange between the various social groups differentiated by their actually existing practices of food sovereignty? The answers to these questions are not obvious and will require careful empirical research and conceptual soul-searching”.<sup>6</sup> This is particularly the case as food sovereignty expands into new settings that dramatically diverge from the agrarian context in which it was originally conceived.<sup>7</sup>

Below, we will explore the case of the US, where despite its small farming population, there is a diverse array of movements comprised of many different actors across the food system. These include movements for *agrarian justice*, *food justice*, and *immigrant labor justice*, among others. As each increasingly engages with food sovereignty, this opens up new possibilities for dialogue and convergence, while also raising challenging questions. The US case thus provides the chance to explore how food sovereignty is both shaping and being shaped by other food and agrarian movements. With this analysis, we offer preliminary insights into some of the ways that convergence among movements is already taking place, and some of the barriers that exist.

## Convergence in the US Context

In examining the spread of food sovereignty in the US, we emphasize that it is not arriving to a blank slate, but rather to a highly complex landscape of historically entrenched power structures and diverse forms of resistance, with particular histories and dynamics within and between them. First, the workings of the US brand of agrarian capitalism and corporate power are dominating features of the US food system, as has been well covered elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> Second, resistance takes on many forms. While there is a tendency among both activists and scholars to refer to a “US food *movement*,” what exists in reality is a patchwork of different, contrasting, even competing efforts. Occupying the dominant mainstream are the largely white and middle- to upper-class consumers promoting “voting with your fork”<sup>9</sup> and other forms of conscious consumerism that stress both individual choice and change through the marketplace.<sup>10</sup> Some have critiqued these efforts as missing critical pieces of analysis, including issues of race and class, and thus serving to deepen the divides in an already divided food system.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the focus on so-called “foodie” consumers as key protagonists invisibilizes a host of other actors—those most marginalized within the food system, who are also on the frontlines of resistance. These largely invisibilized movements are the focus of this piece, particularly the divisions and politics of convergence within and between them, as they shape and are shaped by the growing movement for food sovereignty.

As part of a recent surge in food sovereignty literature, scholars are increasingly examining what this concept means, or could mean, for the US. Anderson<sup>12</sup> has provided a helpful overview of the current landscape of food sovereignty efforts in the US, citing the need for food sovereignty to speak to consumers if it is to take off in a US context. Dickinson<sup>13</sup> and Anguelovski,<sup>14</sup> among others, emphasize that is particularly the case with regards to low-income consumers with limited options, who have been largely bypassed by the recent resurgence in local, sustainable foods (with some notable exceptions through the efforts of the food justice movement, described below). Clendenning and Dressler<sup>15</sup> look at the degree to which urban agriculture and other urban food initiatives might serve as building blocks toward food sovereignty in the US, while Roman-Alcalá<sup>16</sup> looks at a particular case in the Bay Area in which global food sovereignty framing is inspiring a local struggle over land. For Alkon,<sup>17</sup> worker-led initiatives are among the most promising bridges toward food sovereignty in the US, while Minkoff-Zern<sup>18</sup> and Mares et al.<sup>19</sup> note the unique challenges, as well as opportunities, facing farmworkers, vis-à-vis food sovereignty.

As movements evolve, studies are increasingly pointing to the dialectical nature of convergence, recognizing that food sovereignty is shaping food and agrarian movements in the US, *and vice versa*. In this regard, Figueroa, calls for a “relational, historically and culturally grounded, ‘people-centered’ approach.”<sup>20</sup> In examining the predominantly Black community of Chicago’s South Side, she argues that survival mechanisms passed down from the Jim Crow era, such as collective food purchasing, are sowing the seeds for food sovereignty in the aftermath of slavery, migration, and deindustrialization. She thus makes the case that such contextually-specific articulations of food sovereignty are relevant to the broader food sovereignty movement. We argue

that this is similarly the case with resistance efforts for agrarian justice, food justice and immigrant labor justice, which are not only drawing inspiration from food sovereignty, but helping to shape what food sovereignty actually means in a US context. By digging into the histories of these resistance efforts, we find that the US case offers important insights, especially into the roles of race and immigration in the politics of convergence, which might strengthen the broader movement for food sovereignty as it expands to new contexts and seeks to engage with new constituencies.

While US-based food sovereignty efforts are diverse, here we explore the USFSA as a key site of convergence.<sup>21</sup> This analysis is also inspired by Tarrow's work on social movements and contentious politics. Throughout, we draw on the concept of "frames of contention," the ideas that, "justify, dignify, and animate collective action".<sup>22</sup> We also use his notion of "repertoires of contention"—how demands are made, what types of activities are practiced, and how mobilization is sustained in different contexts.<sup>23</sup> Because this article cannot sufficiently engage with all of the diverse frames and repertoires of contention animating food and agrarian movements in the US today, we have opted to focus primarily on efforts around racial justice, rooted in struggles for Black Liberation, which are gathering momentum in the US as we write. Converging under the banner of #BlackLivesMatter, among others, such organizing has emerged in the wake of increased attention to state violence against people of color, perpetuated over generations. In the words of #BlackLivesMatter co-founder Alicia Garza, these mobilizations are "an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise".<sup>24</sup> We therefore consider it timely to examine the ways in which these efforts intersect with radical food movement work. However, space constraints do not allow us to explore many other important mobilizations, not least of which are the centuries of Native American struggles for sovereignty and their intersections with other food and agrarian movements. This is covered elsewhere,<sup>25</sup> but certainly merits further attention. The same is true for many other struggles shaping the landscape of resistance across the US.

## **Agrarian Justice**

Often absent from mainstream food movement narratives is the fact that many family farmers are living in a state of crisis, with 30% of US farms having disappeared over the past 50 years.<sup>26</sup> Also overlooked is the significant role that farmers' movements have had, and continue to have, in shaping US agrarian politics.<sup>27</sup> Here we will examine some of these efforts for "agrarian justice" in the US and their relationship to food sovereignty. We do not suggest that there exists a consolidated frame of contention, or social movement, for *agrarian justice* per se. Rather, building on Ribot's and Peluso's "theory of access",<sup>28</sup> we use this term as an umbrella concept to describe the constellation of claims and mobilizations connected to struggles over land, and the ability of producers to benefit from it. By historicizing these claims, it becomes apparent that the major divides along race and class lines fostered by US farm and land policies have permeated resistance efforts as well. The efforts of USFSA members to bridge some of these divides can be appreciated in this light.

### ***Divisive Policies, Divided Movements***

Despite Thomas Paine's calls for "agrarian justice", as early as 1797,<sup>29</sup> the results of US agrarian policies have been anything but just, from the violent dispossession of Native Americans to stark racial and class disparities in access to land, credit, and markets. The Homestead Act of 1862 laid the foundation for such inequalities that persist to this day. The Act proposed to allocate up to 160 acres of farmland to current or prospective US citizens, including women, former slaves, and new immigrants.<sup>30</sup> However, slavery would not be abolished until 1865, and even then, given racial and class inequalities, beneficiaries were mostly white and wealthy.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, President Andrew Johnson repealed the promise to make 40-acre parcels readily available for former slaves to farm, as had been included in The Freedmen's Bureau Act of 1865.<sup>32</sup> Instead, to sustain the plantation system in the South, former slaves were transitioned into exploitative sharecropping or tenant farming systems.<sup>33</sup>

Despite many barriers, between emancipation and 1910, African Americans came to represent 16.5% of southern agricultural landowners.<sup>34</sup> After reaching a high in 1920 of 925,708 Black farm owners, ongoing discriminatory practices by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) (see Pigford Class Action Lawsuit<sup>35</sup>) coupled with economic crises steadily reversed this trend. From 1920-2000, Black farmers declined by 98%.<sup>36</sup> In contrast, according to the 2012 US Census of Agriculture, some 96% of all primary farm operators are white and whites hold 98% of privately owned farmland.<sup>37</sup> Under these circumstances, resisting Black land loss has been a central point of agrarian struggle that is linked to the broader frame of Black Liberation throughout US history. Agrarian justice for Black farmers has thus meant dismantling the structural racism that permeates US institutions and policies.

The issue of land distribution was also taken up by white farmers at several points in US history, including by predominantly white agrarian populist movements, a lineage that continues to influence agrarian resistance today.<sup>38</sup> Organizations like the Farmers' Alliance at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century called for land reform,<sup>39</sup> and in the 1970s the issue again gained momentum.<sup>40</sup> However, a shift in policy discourse away from "land reform" towards "land-use planning" combined with the socialist associations of "land reform" during the Cold War contributed to decreased emphasis on land reform by agrarian populists.<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile, during the Great Depression, farms across the country were pushed into crisis. This triggered massive unrest demanding state support for farmers, resulting in the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933. Since then, federal policy has played a decisive role in influencing the extent to which farmers are able to receive fair prices.<sup>42</sup> In the face of growing corporate control, the issue of fair prices for family farmers has been central to radical agrarian organizations throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and into today.

However, the gradual loss of the redistributive land reform frame among predominantly white agrarian movements may also have helped obscure the inequality embedded in the land tenure system of US agriculture, which provided few opportunities for upward movement between landless and landowning classes.<sup>43</sup> Some have argued that "agrarian populists missed the opportunity to build alliances across race and class lines by ignoring the struggles of sharecroppers and farmworkers"<sup>44</sup>,

while others argue that the populists tried to build interracial and interclass coalitions, but ultimately failed.<sup>45</sup> The precarious nature of such alliances among producers can be seen in the makeup and structure of farmers' organizations through history. The Farmers Alliance mentioned above, for example, restricted its membership to whites. When a faction of the Alliance tried to allow Black farmers to join, leadership was divided and finally dealt with the split by allowing a separate but affiliated "Colored Farmers' National Alliance and Cooperative Union" (CFNACU) to form in 1886.<sup>46</sup>

The collapse of the populist platform paved the way for more class- and race-blind mobilizing structures. During the post-New Deal era, in a reflection of farm policy emphasizing the production of particular commodity crops, organizations like the National Cattlemen's Association and the National Corn Growers emerged, focusing on maximizing commodity production and creating an infrastructure for farmer organizing according to crop.<sup>47</sup> McConnell argues that this "commodityism" de-emphasized class-based organizing among farmers.<sup>48</sup>

### ***Convergence: Challenges and opportunities***

The threats from corporate agribusiness that the populists rallied against continue to this day, as farmers of all races get squeezed out of agriculture. Founded in 1986 in response to the farm crisis, the National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC) has worked to bridge many of the above-mentioned divides. This can be seen in the diversity of its membership, the framing of its work, and its approach to alliance-building. With grassroots members from 32 states, each with its own local membership base, NFFC estimates that they serve between 20-25,000 within their membership.<sup>49</sup> From its start, NFFC has framed its priorities as including both issues of pricing and corporate control *and* issues of land loss facing farmers of color. Further, it has sought to articulate the ways in which these issues impact not only farmers, but the broader population. In the mid-90s, NFFC became the first US-based member of La Via Campesina, and over time, has adopted food sovereignty as its guiding framework. This has involved articulating among its membership what food sovereignty means to them.<sup>50</sup>

As a founding member of the USFSA, NFFC's work to build a more cohesive movement for food sovereignty in the US has involved connecting historically embedded struggles in the US—such as struggles against Black land loss and against the corporate consolidation of the food industry—with broader trends, such as the current global rush on farmland. Key to NFFC's repertoire of contention have been policy analysis and proposals. In their proposed Food from Family Farms Act, for instance, citing the history of civil rights struggles, they advocate for "equitable access to farm and housing programs for all farmers and rural people".<sup>51</sup> They also address what have traditionally been divisive issues, for instance crop subsidies, highlighting the ways in which they are a symptom of broader failed policies that are in fact harming farmers, consumers, and food system workers alike. In this way, the NFFC offers a voice within the USFSA on the importance of policy reform as part of a strategy for change.

From its founding, NFFC's members have included geographically, racially and sectorally diverse farm groups united on the basis of shared (albeit differentiated) class

interests.\*\* Efforts to further expand its membership continue with the inclusion of fishing and Indigenous groups in recent years. Further, while farmworker groups are not among its members, NFFC has frequently aligned itself with farmworker causes, including actively supporting the campaigns of the Florida-based Coalition of Immokalee Workers (who, in turn, have been advising NFFC members in their respective campaigns). While this broadening has helped diversify perspectives and frames of contention within the organization, NFFC and other producer groups have been limited in their mobilization capacity. The population working in the agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting sector has dwindled to a mere 1.5% of the total workforce today.<sup>52</sup> The types of resistance strategies based on mass mobilization, which have historically been important drivers of change, are increasingly weakened unless producers continue to build cross-sector alliances. For this reason, NFFC's convergence with food justice and immigrant food and farm labor justice organizations through the USFSA represents a strategic opportunity.

## **Food Justice**

The food justice movement gained traction, especially in urban areas in the 1990s, drawing inspiration from the racial justice frame of the civil rights and environmental justice movements in the US, along with concern over the disproportionate impacts of diet-related disease on low-income communities of color.<sup>53</sup> Many food justice initiatives focus on creating alternative forms of food provision that include urban agriculture, collective purchasing programs, and community-based markets serving traditionally marginalized areas. The New York-based organization Just Food describes food justice as, “communities exercising their right to grow, sell, and eat [food that is] fresh, nutritious, affordable, culturally appropriate, and grown locally with care for the well-being of the land, workers and animals”.<sup>54</sup> However within this frame we find an array of perspectives that highlight the tensions identified by Holt-Giménez and Shattuck,<sup>55</sup> between *progressive* approaches, where the priority is increasing food access without necessarily dismantling structures causing inequality, and *radical* approaches that indeed seek to dismantle such structures and see food access as an entry point.

### ***Divisions: Depoliticization vs. radicalization***

The divides confronting the food justice movement can best be understood in the context of neoliberal policies that have shaped the mobilizing structures and tactics used by US social movements. As neoliberalism has meant a rolling back of the state, the NGO sector has swelled to fill the void. Because food-oriented NGOs span so many different funding categories (e.g., health, education, human services), data specific to food justice nonprofits is unavailable. However, it is clear that the sector continues to grow in the US. There were roughly 1.58 million nonprofits in the US in 2011, up 21.5% from 2001, and private giving to NGOs surpassed \$300 billion in 2012.<sup>56</sup> A total of 11.4 million people are employed in the nonprofit sector in the US.<sup>57</sup>

As Borras<sup>58</sup> has noted, the role of NGOs in the international food sovereignty movement is a complex and ongoing debate, and the same is true regarding US

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\*\* See full membership list here: <http://.net/index.php/who-we-are/nffc-member-groups/>

movements. Guthman warns that flows of capital from foundations into food movements ultimately depoliticize the movements, claiming, “for activist projects, neoliberalisation limits the conceivable because it limits the arguable, the fundable, the organisable [...]”.<sup>59</sup> On one hand, some NGOs serve as important mobilizing structures for resistance, but they also need external funds to sustain staff salaries. Thus NGOs of all political orientations tend to frame their work in the desired language of funders. The political agenda of funders and the autonomy given to grantees are therefore key questions in understanding the extent to which channeling resistance through nonprofits can depoliticize food movements in the US. This critique is not new, especially in regard to mobilizing for racial justice. Allen describes the motive behind the first Ford Foundation grant to a militant group, the Cleveland chapter of the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) and its impact on the civil rights movement there in 1967. “CORE [fit] the bill because its talk about black revolution was believed to appeal to discontented blacks, while its program of achieving black power through massive injections of governmental, business, and Foundation aid seemingly opened the way for continued corporate domination of black communities by means of a new black elite”.<sup>60</sup>

Today, the dynamics within one of the largest nationwide food justice networks, the Growing Food and Justice Initiative (GFJI), can be seen as an indication of the divisiveness of the funding climate. The main debate is over the degree to which funders influence and benefit from grantee organizations. A member of the USFSA, GFJI “is an initiative aimed at dismantling racism and empowering low-income communities of color through sustainable and local agriculture”.<sup>61</sup> While this mission implies a radical perspective, GFJI’s host organization, Growing Power, has come under fire for accepting a \$1 million grant from the Walmart Foundation. As the largest food retailer in the US, Walmart has been criticized for being “at the center of the nation’s cheap food structure” and for using “philanthropic donations to push its expansion in urban areas”.<sup>62</sup> However, Growing Power’s founder, Will Allen, asserts, “We can no longer be so idealistic that we hurt the very people we’re trying to help”.<sup>63</sup>

For all food justice advocates, the problem of food insecurity is a main point of departure, but among the key contributions of the *radical* food justice movement is an analysis of how “[f]rom field to fork, the production and consumption of food is racialized”.<sup>64</sup> Disparities in food access provide a window into a much larger system of race and class relations. Therefore, as Holt-Giménez and Wang argue, “Engaging with the structural aspects of food justice requires addressing race and class in relation to dispossession and control over land, labor, and capital in the food system”.<sup>65</sup>

The history of Black land loss is one starting point for such engagement. During “The Great Migration,” from 1915-1960, around 5 million African Americans migrated from the rural South to urban centers, primarily in the North.<sup>66</sup> This influx of African Americans to the North, claiming voting and other rights of citizenship, ushered in the civil rights movement. Despite some hard-fought gains, however, African American incomes have consistently averaged about 60% of white incomes since WWII.<sup>67</sup> Governance of deeply segregated and marginalized urban Black communities has relied on police brutality, criminalization, and mass incarceration, characterized as “The New



Jim Crow”.<sup>68</sup> Segregation of urban areas has been underwritten by rampant redlining in mortgage lending, with many of the marks of discrimination visible on maps of major cities today.<sup>69</sup> In neighborhoods like the east and west Oakland flatlands, incomes tend to be lower and food options largely limited to cheap, highly processed foods.<sup>70</sup> Decreased healthy food access is increasingly linked to the rise in obesity and diet-related diseases in the US,<sup>71</sup> with the health costs disproportionately born by communities of color.<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, the intersections of race and class and their connection to food access are not straightforward and merit further research. In St. Louis, MO, for instance, predominantly Black communities, regardless of income, are less likely than higher-income white neighborhoods to have access to healthy foods.<sup>73</sup>

### ***Converging to dismantle racism***

Recognizing the ways institutional racism is shaping food access, some food justice groups are drawing on the tactics and frames developed during the civil rights movement. Doing so does two things. First, it frames food justice as an extension of the radical anti-racist, anti-capitalist project of Black Liberation, thus rejecting a depoliticized reformist approach. As a member of Soul Fire Farm explains, “we were attempting to meet a challenge presented to us by Curtis Hayes Muhammad, the veteran civil rights activist: ‘Recognize that land and food have been used as a weapon to keep black people oppressed [...] Recognize also that land and food are essential to liberation for black people’”.<sup>74</sup> In the eyes of youth food justice leader, Anim Steel, “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”.<sup>75</sup>

Second, it opens up food justice activism to alliances with rapidly growing movements against structural racism and state violence such as #BlackLivesMatter. These groups in particular are reviving some of the types of disruptive strategies of resistance of the civil rights movement, like sit-ins, die-ins, transit stoppages and mass marches. Some groups like Soul Fire Farm have already begun bridging the food justice, civil rights and #BlackLivesMatter discourse—an indication that more widespread convergence may further strengthen the radical tendency in the food justice movement. Penniman writes, “[S]tate violence is only one among many dangers. The biggest killers of black Americans today are not guns or violence, but diet-related diseases, including heart disease, cancer, stroke, and diabetes [...] Black youth are well aware that the system does not value their lives”.<sup>76</sup>

The presence of groups such as Soul Fire, Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, GFJI, and others in the USFSA is helping to keep antiracist organizing on the forefront of the agenda. Indeed, while explicit mentions of race and racism do not figure very centrally in global food sovereignty discourse, the groups involved in founding the USFSA have found that one cannot talk about food sovereignty in the US without talking about race. This message was strongly emphasized by people of color-led organizations in the discussions leading to the founding of the USFSA, sparking a series of challenging and frank dialogues on issues of privilege, leadership, and representation that continue on to this day. The founding documents of the USFSA

reflect this, including that core members must “[c]ommit to take part in racial justice/anti-racism trainings and to actively work to apply anti-racist principles to the work of the Alliance (internally and externally)”.<sup>77</sup> To fulfill these commitments, the USFSA has been following the lead of its food justice members.

## **Immigrant Labor Justice**

Immigrant workers represent an important and growing part of the US food system. Their struggles intersect with the agrarian justice framework and are also at times discussed as part of the food justice movement.<sup>78</sup> Here, however, we address these mobilizations separately to reflect the fact that historic divisions have kept these workers separate from other food and agrarian movements and the central frame of contention has been one focused on immigrant labor justice.

According to Food Chain Workers Alliance (FCWA), nearly 20 million “food chain workers” are currently employed in the US, as farmworkers, slaughterhouse and other processing facilities workers, warehouse workers, grocery store workers, or restaurant and food service workers.<sup>79</sup> Together, these sectors account for over 13% of US GDP.<sup>80</sup> Although specific data is difficult to obtain because of their “illegal” status, undocumented workers comprise an important part of the labor in the food system and consistently endure lower wages, higher rates of wage theft and food insecurity.<sup>81</sup>

### ***Division by threat of deportation***

US labor and immigration policy has served to keep food and especially farm workers isolated and vulnerable in ways that support a low-wage model of food production. First, racial discrimination caused farmworkers to be exempted from basic labor protections in the US that were instituted from Roosevelt’s New Deal onward.<sup>82</sup> Meanwhile, after WWII, programs like the Mexican Farm Labor Program Agreement of 1942, later called the Bracero Program (until 1964), recruited some 2 million workers from the Mexican countryside into US fields as temporary guestworkers.<sup>83</sup> US trade policies in the 1990s, namely the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and later the Dominican Republic-Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR), led to the displacement of thousands of peasant farmers in Mexico and Central America, significantly increasing new migration flows to the US.<sup>84</sup> Still to this day, farmworkers in the US remain excluded from the National Labor Relations Act, which protects the right to organize, and from overtime pay under federal law.<sup>85</sup> Additionally, border policy based on the criminalization of immigrants has created a flow of workers vulnerable to deportation, for whom the risks of speaking out about workplace violations are even greater than for documented workers. Because of this, many unions in the US labor movement have traditionally perceived immigrant workers as “unorganizable” and largely excluded them.<sup>86</sup> Some exceptions to this were efforts in the 1930s to organize eastern European immigrants, who were “welcomed into the house of labor.”<sup>87</sup> In this process eastern Europeans became “‘white,’ shedding their previously racialized status”<sup>88</sup> This was not so for African Americans, Asians and Latinos, who continued to endure systemic discrimination and economic disadvantages.<sup>89</sup> Such racial disparities persist today. For example, research by FCWA reveals that Black workers deal with wage

theft more than any other racial category and tend to be concentrated in the warehouse sector (76% of the workforce), where the issue is most common. And in grocery, Latinos suffer the most wage theft (78.6%).<sup>90</sup>

Beyond the divisions within the labor movement, workers sometimes find themselves overlooked by other food and agrarian mobilizations. When Sinclair published *The Jungle*, revealing the working conditions among Chicago's immigrant workers in meat packing plants at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he complained that the public focused more on the unsanitary conditions of their food than on poor labor standards. He lamented, "I aimed at the public's heart and by accident hit its stomach".<sup>91</sup> FCWA has similarly stated, "the food movement of the last several decades has not focused on sustainable labor practices within the food system, with some notable exceptions...particularly with regard to farmworkers"<sup>92</sup> Indeed, drawing on the proven tactics of the United Farm Workers of America (UFW), the above-mentioned Coalition of Immokalee Workers has organized tomato pickers in Florida and, allied with consumers, is pressuring corporate buyers to sign "fair food agreements" aimed at improving both workers' pay and working conditions. These agreements generated \$10 million in the first three seasons to be passed on to workers as increased wages.<sup>93</sup>

Despite their respective links with consumers, farmworkers and small farmers occupy class positions that have historically been in tension. In their survey of 175 organic farmers in California, Shreck et al. found that 47.5% of those who hire labor strongly feel that organic certification should not include criteria about working conditions.<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, "even if they *believe* that organic agriculture should ensure fair and healthy working conditions for farmworkers, they explain that it is simply not economically viable given the realities of the market".<sup>95</sup> In response to this deeply entrenched tension, Dolores Huerta of UFW has argued that that, "although many small farmers are presently opposed to the farmworker's union, it is in the long run interest of family farmers and farmworkers to join together against big growers and corporations".<sup>96</sup>

### ***Convergence throughout the food chain***

In many ways, food sovereignty offers a frame for alliance-building between US-based agrarian and immigrant labor movements. At the same time, the US case offers some important challenges that the food sovereignty movement may also learn from. Indeed, the question of how farmworkers fit into the vision of food sovereignty remains unresolved<sup>97</sup> and the role of food workers, even less well articulated.

The FCWA is working to address these challenges by actively building bridges between urban and rural workers across the food chain organized via unions, workers centers and NGOs. While their work is in large part animated by a frame of immigrant labor justice, their participation in the USFSA has helped give food and farm workers a voice in the US food sovereignty movement. The intersection of these movements has helped reveal what a huge (and increasingly mobilized) part of the food system food chain workers represent. Furthermore, the presence of FCWA in the USFSA opens the conversation about what role food and farm workers play in food sovereignty and the unique challenges that immigrant workers deal with, which may present barriers to

mobilization. For instance, Mares et. al describe how Latino farmworkers in Vermont have limited mobility for fear of being deported.<sup>98</sup> What does a path towards food sovereignty look like starting from this reality? And how can the movement provide support in those daily struggles? The USFSA has formed an immigration and trade team to begin articulating this piece of food sovereignty, for instance through their “Immigration Policy Principles for Food Sovereignty.”<sup>99</sup>

## Conclusion

The US food system has historically depended on severely exploited labor. From slaves, to share croppers, to immigrant food and farm workers, structural racism has served to dehumanize and criminalize those who are most marginalized in the food system. Particularly telling is that today there are more people in the US behind bars than tending fields.<sup>100</sup> Food sovereignty emerged as a rallying cry for food system transformation from farmers around the world, but they cannot do it alone, especially in the US. Agrarian justice organizations like the NFFC have important proposals and insights and are working tirelessly, but, among other challenges, demographics are not working in their favor. Transformative political impact therefore requires broader mobilization of more people than there are family farmers. The food justice movement has shown that dismantling racism is a fundamental piece to food system change, something that has not been a prominent focus of global food sovereignty organizations, for the most part. However, grappling with racism *within* US movements also remains a key challenge, and the continued radicalization of the food justice movement (i.e. through integration with #blacklivesmatter mobilizations) is indeed “pivotal”<sup>101</sup> in the construction of a *transformative* platform of convergence for food sovereignty in the US. The prominence of the NGO sector in the US further challenges food sovereignty activists and scholars to articulate a vision for the role of NGOs and donor organizations in the movement. Finally, immigrant food and farm workers are actively creating cross-sector bridges and drawing on their numbers to build political power. However, the unique challenges posed by the threat of deportation urge food sovereignty activists to confront the issue of immigration in their visions of the future. The USFSA represents one platform where these struggles are converging and a space for figuring out, through practice, what alliance means.

Admittedly, in trying to explore food sovereignty in the US context we perhaps ended up not speaking very much about food sovereignty per se. But we suggest that it is in delving into unique histories of resistance that may ultimately enable the growth of a more rooted vision of food sovereignty in the US. Despite the divisions within and between the trajectories of resistance we have highlighted here, lessons for navigating the politics of convergence are also embedded in those fault lines. We would wager that the same is true for movements in other parts of the world, as they shape and are shaped by food sovereignty, and encourage further research in other contexts.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Nyéleni, *Declaration of Nyéleni*.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Borrás, Edelman, and Kay, “Transnational Agrarian Movements”

<sup>3</sup> Holt-Giménez, *Food Movements Unite!*

<sup>4</sup> Desmarais, *La Vía Campesina*.

<sup>5</sup> Martínez-Torres and Rosset, “Diálogo de Saberes.”

<sup>6</sup> Edelman et al., “Introduction,” 922.

<sup>7</sup> This is not to imply that attempts toward food sovereignty are not complex and fraught with challenges in any setting, including agrarian ones, as described by Bernstein, “Food Sovereignty via the ‘peasant Way’” and Agarwal, “Food Sovereignty, Food Security and Democratic Choice”, among others.

<sup>8</sup> Holmes, “Farmer’s Market”; Holt-Giménez and Patel, *Food Rebellions!*; Heffernan, Hendrickson, and Gronski, *Consolidation in the Food and Agriculture System*; Walker, *The Conquest of Bread*.

<sup>9</sup> Pollan, “Voting With Your Fork.”

<sup>10</sup> Trauger, “Toward a Political Geography of Food Sovereignty.”

<sup>11</sup> Alkon and Agyeman, “Introduction”; Holt-Giménez and Shattuck, “Food Crises, Food Regimes and Food Movements”; Billings and Cabbil, “Food Justice”; Figueroa, “Food Sovereignty in Everyday Life.”

<sup>12</sup> Anderson, “The Role of US Consumers and Producers in Food Sovereignty.”

<sup>13</sup> Dickinson, “Beyond the Minimally Adequate Diet”

<sup>14</sup> Anguelovski, “Conflicts around Alternative Urban Food Provision”

<sup>15</sup> Clendenning and Dressler, “Between Empty Lots and Open Pots”

<sup>16</sup> Roman-Alcalá, “Occupy the Farm”

<sup>17</sup> Alkon, “Food Justice, Food Sovereignty and the Challenge of Neoliberalism.”

<sup>18</sup> Minkoff-Zern, “Food Sovereignty.”

<sup>19</sup> Mares, Wolcott-MacCausland, and Mazar, “Cultivating Food Sovereignty”

<sup>20</sup> Figueroa, “Food Sovereignty in Everyday Life,” 3.

<sup>21</sup> For background on the US Food Sovereignty Alliance and its origins, see Shawki, “The 2008 Food Crisis.”

<sup>22</sup> Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, 21.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Garza, “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement”

<sup>25</sup> Kamal and Thompson, “Recipe for Decolonization and Resurgence”; Gupta, “Return to Freedom”; Grey and Patel, “Food Sovereignty as Decolonialization”

<sup>26</sup> GRAIN, *Hungry for Land*, 8.

<sup>27</sup> Wilson, “Missing Food Movement History”

<sup>28</sup> Ribot and Peluso, “A Theory of Access.”

<sup>29</sup> Paine, *Agrarian Justice*, iii.

<sup>30</sup> Geisler, “A History of Land Reform,” 13.

<sup>31</sup> Geisler, “A History of Land Reform,” 12; Barnes, *The People’s Land*, xi

<sup>32</sup> Mitchell, *From Reconstruction to Deconstruction*, 20–21.

<sup>33</sup> Coates, “The Case for Reparations.”

<sup>34</sup> Mitchell, *From Reconstruction to Deconstruction*, 21; Coates, “The Case for Reparations.”

<sup>35</sup> See: <https://www.blackfarmercase.com/>

<sup>36</sup> Wood and Gilbert, “Returning African American Farmers to the Land” 43.

<sup>37</sup> USDA, *2012 Census of Agriculture*, 13.

<sup>38</sup> Wilson, “Missing Food Movement History”

<sup>39</sup> Goodwyn, “The Populist Moment”; Geisler, “A History of Land Reform,” 19–20.

<sup>40</sup> Barnes, *The People’s Land*.

<sup>41</sup> Geisler, “A History of Land Reform,” 21.

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- 42 Naylor, “Strengthening the Spirit of America,” 8.
- 43 Kloppenburg and Geisler, “The Agricultural Ladder,” 63.
- 44 McCullen, “Why Are All the White Kids Sitting Together in the Farmers Market?,” 21.
- 45 Goodwyn, “The Populist Moment,” 512; Gerteis, *Class and the Color Line*.
- 46 Reynolds, *Black Farmers in America, 1865-2000*, 5.
- 47 Mooney and Majka, *Farmers’ and Farm Workers Movements*, 97.
- 48 McConnell, *The Decline of Agrarian Democracy*, 76–81.
- 49 Griffith, personal communication 2015.
- 50 NFFC, *NFFC Food Sovereignty Vision Statement*.
- 51 NFFC, *Food and Family Farms Act*, 4.
- 52 BLS, *Industry Employment and Output Projections to 2022*.
- 53 Patel, “Survival Pending Revolution”; Allen, *Together at the Table*; Herrera, Khanna, and Davis, “Food Systems and Public Health”; Bullard, *Unequal Protection*.
- 54 cited in Alkon and Agyeman, “Introduction,” 5.
- 55 Holt Giménez and Shattuck, “Food Crises, Food Regimes and Food Movements.”
- 56 Pettijohn, *The Nonprofit Sector in Brief, 2013*, 1.
- 57 BLS, *Nonprofits Account for 11.4 Million Jobs*.
- 58 Borrás, “solidarity: Re-examining the “agrarian movement-NGO”.”
- 59 Guthman, “Neoliberalism and the Making of Food Politics in California,” 1180.
- 60 Allen, “From Black Awakening in Capitalist America,” 56.
- 61 GFJI, “About Us.”
- 62 Fisher and Gottlieb, “Who Benefits When Walmart Funds the Food Movement?”
- 63 *Ibid.*
- 64 Billings and Cabbil, “Food Justice,” 103.
- 65 Holt-Giménez and Wang, “Reform or Transformation?” 98.
- 66 Harrison, *Black Exodus*, vii.
- 67 DeNavas-Walt, Proctor and Smith 2009, cited in Patel, “Survival Pending Revolution.”
- 68 Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*.
- 69 Madrigal, “The Racist Housing Policy.”
- 70 Herrera, Khanna, and Davis, “Food Systems and Public Health.”
- 71 Levine, “Poverty and Obesity in the U.S.”
- 72 Treuhaft and Karpyn, *The Grocery Gap*.
- 74 Penniman, “Radical Farmers Use Fresh Food to Fight Racial Injustice.”
- 75 Steel, “Youth and Food Justice,” 120.
- 77 The founding document of the USFSA is accessible at:  
<http://usfoodsovereigntyalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/USFSA-Founding-Document-with-date.pdf>
- 78 Alkon, “Food Justice, Food Sovereignty and the Challenge of Neoliberalism”; Gottlieb and Joshi, *Food Justice*.
- 79 FCWA, *The Hands the Feed Us*.
- 80 *Ibid.*, 1.
- 81 *Ibid.*
- 82 Linder, “Farm Workers and the Fair Labor Standards Act” 1336.
- 83 Mize and Swords, *Consuming Mexican Labor*, 2.
- 84 Bacon, *Illegal People*
- 85 Smith and Goldberg, *Unity For Dignity*, 16.
- 86 Milkman, *L.A. Story*, 9; Zolberg, “Rethinking the Last 200 Years of U.S. Immigration Policy.”
- 87 Milkman, *Organizing Immigrants*, 6.
- 88 *Ibid.*, 5.

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- <sup>89</sup> Ibid., 6.
- <sup>90</sup> FCWA, *The Hands the Feed Us*, 26.
- <sup>91</sup> Ibid., 13.
- <sup>92</sup> Ibid., 16.
- <sup>93</sup> CIW, “About CIW | Coalition of Immokalee Workers.”
- <sup>94</sup> Shreck, Getz, and Feenstra, “Social Sustainability, Farm Labor, and Organic Agriculture,” 444.
- <sup>95</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>96</sup> Paraphrased by Barnes, *The People’s Land*, 218.
- <sup>97</sup> Fairbairn, “Framing Transformation,” 226; Patel, “Food Sovereignty,” 667.
- <sup>98</sup> Mares, Wolcott-MacCausland, and Mazar, “Cultivating Food Sovereignty,” 10.
- <sup>99</sup> USFSA, *Immigration Policy Principles for Food Sovereignty*.
- <sup>100</sup> NAACP, “Criminal Justice Fact Sheet”; USDA, *2012 Census of Agriculture*.
- <sup>101</sup> Holt-Giménez and Wang, “Reform or Transformation?”

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