



Dismantling Racism in the Food System

Special multi-authored series on racism and liberation in the food system

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Unbroken Connection to the Land

This brief is based on an interview by David Bacon with farmworker activist Rosalinda Guillen. The transcript has been abridged and edited for clarity, and was prepared by Erik Hazard.



Rosalinda Guillen speaks at a press conference at the office of Sakuma Farms, a large berry grower where workers went on strike in 2013. They are demanding that the company bargain a contract with their union, Familias Unidas por la Justicia. Photo copyright © 2017 by David Bacon.

Large tracts of agricultural land offers farmers the opportunity for increased production and profit—but not without a cost. While soy, corn, and other grain farmers barely afford it by using expensive, labor-saving machinery, genetically tailored seeds, fertilizers, and chemical inputs, that is not the case for other types of farmers. Farmers of fruits, vegetables, herbs, and livestock rely on human labor and skill. Most often, farmers find such labor in migrant and immigrant farmworkers.

The same market economy that compels the intensification and consolidation of agricultural land in the United States has also pushed farmers off their land, depressed local economies, and driven mass migration across Latin America. For generations, displaced peasant farmers have come to the United States seeking work. They often find it on farms, where they bring extensive knowledge and appreciation for growing food. However, what they often find here are dangerous working conditions and appallingly low wages.

This interview with Rosalinda Guillen highlights the interlocking destinies of farmers and farmworkers and the ways in which the land and its people can resist the exploitation and discrimination of migrant farm work

while offering a deep, restorative land ethic. It reminds us that the knowledge and skills that farmworkers have gained over lifetimes and generations of farming is a precious resource essential for a new food system.

DB: Why did your father like being a farmworker?

RG: He loved being a farmworker. He could not have been an artist or a good father if he wasn't on the land. That's what kept him sane and complete. He loved growing food, growing plants. He talked to us about it and kept journals about it. In those journals he would write, "Today I sat out in the fields. I was getting ready to go out, and the smell of the soil was this way. The birds sounded this way... the clouds... the air. Touching the soil makes me feel happy. It makes me whole." He was a person of the earth.

DB: That's very romantic.

RG: It was very romantic. And he talked to us that way. He would say, "You are children of people of the earth. You are farmworkers. Don't let anybody make you ashamed for being that."

DB: After a lifetime spent organizing farmworkers, do you think that the way he felt is shared by a lot of other people? Or was he a unique individual in that way?

RG: When I talk to farmworkers, I think it's shared. Industrial agriculture has taken the farmworker's voice away, so we don't hear them identifying themselves as people of the earth. We have been identified as machines, as beasts of burden. It's convenient for people to identify us that way because then it's easy to exploit us. But if you're talking about a human being who can express herself or himself as a person of the earth, with this intellect and wisdom about the right way to grow food, then it's not as easy to exploit.

My father was very vocal, and he talked to other farmworkers about it. He made them feel proud of the good work they were doing. And he made us feel proud. He would say, "This is special. What you do is a work of grace, because what you do will make somebody else healthy and whole. You are feeding humans, and nobody else is doing that except for the person growing the food or the animal." In Spanish we say *don*. It's like a big gift that you have to give.

I have to say that when I was in the fields working, I liked it. Because my father would say when the soil was ploughed, "Just stand here, *mi hija*, and smell. Take a deep breath." And we would. And he would say, "This is the only time you can smell that smell." Then when you irrigate it's another different smell, but it's the same earth. It's nourishing itself. Every time is different. You know the smell of the plants when they grow and the different types of plants by touching, sitting in the fields. I've said this to many people who think of farmworkers as different, or beasts of burden, or machines. "Let me explain something to you and you tell me if you're different from me. When we drive up to the field, you hire us to work and we sit in the field. We watch the sun come up, and the mist comes out of the soil, and the smells change, and the breezes come up, and the earth comes alive. And you feel an energy. Nothing else can give you that energy. And you want to get to the hoeing or whatever it is you're doing. It makes you feel good—the beauty of the earth around you, with the birds flying and the bees buzzing. There is nothing like it in the world. You know it, and I want you to know that we know it and we feel it, too. And it's wrong that you will not recognize that we are the same as you."

DB: Farm work is also exhausting and dangerous, especially if you're doing it in 105-degree heat. There are a lot of aspects to the work that are not so great. How do you reconcile that with the vision that you just painted?

RG: I reconcile it by organizing. There has been a shift in how food is grown, how the work is done, and the way we are treated. That exhaustion takes away our ability to be able to recognize Mother Earth as her own living soul that connects with us. So my personal reconciliation with it is organizing for change, to bring some balance.

When I was growing up and working in the fields, I remember the exhaustion at the end of the day. I remember being so exhausted that even at the age of 16 I couldn't get the energy up to go to a dance. The only thing I could do was read, so I would stay home and read. Not because I didn't want to go to the dance, but I was too tired. Your whole body is aching and your hands are swollen from picking berries. They're black. When I was 12 or 13 years old, my 12-year-old school friends from La Conner would irritate the hell out of me. They'd come on their bikes, in their shorts— little



Rosalinda Guillen and leaders of the farm workers' union, Familias Unidas por la Justicia, confront security guards in front of Whole Foods, demanding that the chain stop selling boycotted berries produced under sweatshop conditions at Sakuma Farms in Washington State. Photo copyright © 2017 by David Bacon.

blonde girls— and call me: “Rosalinda, Rosie, come on let’s go bike riding!” And I was exhausted. “I don’t want to go bike riding with you! How can you even think of going bike riding? I just worked 12 hours. I’m tired.” I could see that something is off here. Something’s not right.

Alienation, Dispossession, and Invisibility

Farmworkers in the United States are the largest landless workforce in the food system. We’re not just landless in that we don’t own the land we’re working. We don’t even own our own homes. For farmworkers, we’re nowhere. We’re not seen anywhere. We are invisible, except for the value we bring to some landowner.... Our contributions are invisible. As farmworkers, this happens over and over again, in every community where you go. That’s part of the capitalist culture in this country. We are like the dregs of slavery in this country.

Some landowner is receiving the value of your work. What you’re getting is the opportunity to give him value, and that’s it. That’s what I found out. And that’s wrong. I’m better than that. My father was better than

that. I think about the contributions he made to our community in spite of all of these obstacles; I think about what he could have done, given an equitable chance in a community.

If they keep us landless, if we do not have the ability to root ourselves into the communities in the way we want, then it’s easy to get more value out of us with less investment in us. It’s as blunt as that. We need to look at farmworkers in this country owning land, where we can produce. That is the dynamic change we need in the food system. We all know Cesar Chavez talked about owning the means of production. I think a lot of farmworkers talk about that.

I think we need to occupy land. Farmworkers need to take land. Because we’ve tried everything... We’ve tried doing the right thing and earning enough money to buy land. USDA has programs supposedly so that Latino farmers can own land. But you end up with maybe a few Latino farmers farming the traditional conventional way. Latino farmworkers become Latino farmers who hire Latino farmworkers and exploit them. That’s wrong. That’s not what we

want. We want to change the whole system. So what's it going to take?

DB: Over the past 30 years, you've been fighting over the actual conditions that people are working in, as well as the housing that people are living in and the wages they receive. How does that relate to this problem of being landless? On a day-to-day concrete level, you really are organizing people more in terms of their existence as wage workers.

RG: That's right, and I think that's the big recognition. I didn't start organizing until I was 40 years old. Now I'm 65, so that's 25 years. I don't think that's very long. I don't think I can say I'm an organizer, and then run a campaign, and then I'm done. That is just barely touching the surface. What's clear is if you don't own the means of production in some way, you're always under attack.

I think what I've learned is if you're an organizer, you have to evolve with the political moments that keep coming at you. If you continue organizing then you know that the longer you do it, the more you're digging into the fundamental causes of the oppression your people are under. If you don't address those fundamental causes, there is no way organizing is going to change anything. To me, this is the crux of the matter.

Our goal should be to be proud of a tradition that can grow but with dignity. That's the next step. As an organizer, I can't see continuing to do the type of organizing we're doing if we're not going to have fundamental change. And there can be no fundamental change if we are not taking the land to show what the possibilities are.

DB: You talk about farmworkers having to become the owners of the land or the owners of the means of production as workers. What does that mean?

RG: One of the things I've learned from the Landless People's Movement is the way they own their means of production by developing worker-owned cooperatives for everything that they need: services, materials, products. What they use they make themselves in worker-owned cooperatives. They become the consumer, but also sell these things outside of their solidarity economy circle. They're looking for ways to develop that solidarity economy. They've done a really good job developing a large model in Brazil through those efforts.

Taking Back the Land

The first thing we have to do is to take away the fear that exists in the farmworker community. People fear something other than working in the fields as hired workers for farmers. That's where the organizing comes in, and the fundamental education, or *formación*, as we call it—the consciousness of looking at other options. What I'm finding in talking to farmworkers is they actually have alternatives in their heads. They know ways to create those alternatives, but they're just afraid to try. They have not been given the opportunity and the resources.

If a group of bold workers say we want to farm this land, can they just take it, occupy it, and farm it? See what happens? That's what we're learning from the Landless Workers Movement—that's how they started in Brazil. They started that process during a dictatorship. But when I look at the conditions they were in, and the conditions we're in in the United States, they're really not much different. We need bold tactics.

Hasta el Fin

DB: But what about large, private land-owners retaliating against farmworker occupations?

RG: I've seen it in Familias Unidas por la Justicia. They say "*hasta el fin*." They know that where they are now is bad. They will fight to fix it until the end. And what is the end? To them, winning is fighting with dignity. So as long as they're fighting with dignity they don't see a loss. They've told me that. *Hasta el fin*. That means you're standing up with your dignity and you keep looking for another option, because in their minds there's always something else out there. If we stand true and we have our dignity, we will find that way. The only other *fin* is death. If they're killed, that's ok too because they tried. You can't over-analyze, over-predict, or be fearful that if we do this, people are going to get hurt. No matter what we do, if it's not part of the status quo, people are going to get hurt.

DB: Do you think that private ownership of land in big chunks by big corporations is part of the problem?

RG: Yes, it is totally part of the problem. This country no longer has a family farming system because of that. Family farmers did not fight hard enough to stop the monopolization of land ownership in this coun-



Rosalinda Guillen talks with children during a demonstration by farm workers and their supporters in front of Whole Foods in Los Angeles during the boycott of Sakuma Farms berries. Photo copyright © 2017 by David Bacon.

try. There are groups, like the Family Farm Coalition and the Family Farm Defenders which are very militant. They're fighting to keep the land they have, and trying to protect land taken away from other farmers. Farmworkers are not the only ones who understand this problem. Many family farmers could be our partners in this fight to break up the ownership of land. People have broken up banks and stopped the monopolization of other businesses in this country. They should do the same thing with land. Land should be broken up. African Americans are talking about reparations. Land should be given back to the Native Americans, and restored to their traditional growing areas.

We've got to restore our food system to what it needs to be. People are dying because the food we're eating is shit. There's got to be a big change. So who's going to lead that change?

DB: What do you think the connection is between the movement for food justice and immigrant rights?

RG: In our minds it's the same movement. You can't separate the two.

In the United States the immigration system is fed by the displacement of landowner-workers. They were landowners in Mexico and South America, and because of the trade agreements that started in 1994 with NAFTA, workers in South America and Mexico were displaced and moved to the North. Now many are sitting in detention centers. A lot of these workers are professional farmers. They know how to grow food without chemicals, how to conserve water, and how to take care

of the land. We desperately have to find a way to change this system now, and to organize these family farmers from South America before they lose that knowledge.

DB: When you say changing the system, are you talking about capitalism?

RG: Yes. You cannot look at producing food simply for the profit that it's going to make. That's where we are right now. The production of food is based on how much money a farmer or a corporation can make from the food they're growing. Farmworkers are a liability in their financial statements.

In the capitalist system, we are disposable and easily replaceable, and have been especially because of the trade agreements. We're human beings and we're part of the community. We eat too, like everybody else. Cesar [Chavez] said it: "We can't afford the very food we grow."

Farmworkers are the first ones to feel this unhealthy situation. We have to be the first ones to speak out because we're the first ones to die. The average lifespan of a farmworker is 49 years. That's only two years up from what it was in the year 2000. Then it was 47.

I'm running out of time. I'm 65. Do I have enough organizers ready to take on the tough work that I know I can't do because of my age? Yeah, it's tough. Some people think I'm crazy because of what I think. That's alright! I accept that because it's the right way to think, I'm a farmworker!



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About this special series:

This issue brief is the eighth in a multi-authored series on “Dismantling Racism in the Food System.” In this series, we seek to uncover the structural foundations of racism in the food system and highlight the ways people, communities, organizations and social movements are dismantling the attitudes, institutions, and structures that hold racism in place. Food First is convinced that to end hunger and malnutrition we must end injustices in the food system. Dismantling the injustices of racism in the food system, in the food movement, in our organizations and among ourselves is fundamental to transforming the food system and our society.