

Food First BACKGROUNDER

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Farmworker Strike in Everett, WA

Immigration and the Food System

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Immigration policy in imperialist nations has historically produced “waves of labor” of vulnerable workers who are systematically exploited by industrial enterprises in the respective host nation.¹ Academics and journalists alike have documented how these workers have become an integral part of a capitalist food system; many times, their well-intentioned interventions have come to be used to justify the legal perpetuation of this condition through immigration, labor and public health policy.

In the context of 20th century neoliberal globalization, multinational corporations had accumulated the capital necessary to move production around the globe at will. This is not a new phenomenon, as settler colonial nations have perpetually established colonies for similar purposes throughout history across vast territories. The new frontier has been multinational corporations setting up shop in the countries that they helped to destabilize.

As this diaspora of campesinas and campesinos enter a global labor force as immigrant workers and farmworkers, they are more than a faceless reserve army of labor.

International immigrant networks, through their resistance along the migrant network and strong social bonds, have also secured a role in the construction of this new global reality. Angela Mitropoulos has referred to migration as a “strategy of refusal” in the sense that Mario Tronti once used the term.² Around the world, campesinas and campesinos are consistently displaced from the environments where they have practiced traditional modes of farming for many generations. Often, the very agroecosystems they have ancestrally cultivated have been completely destroyed by war or depleted through extraction in the process of capitalist development. One well documented example is the impact of the “Green Revolution” upon rural areas across the globe beginning in the mid-twentieth century.³ As a result, many campesinas and campesinos have become a sector of a global working class as local migrants and international immigrants. What has not been well documented or contextualized is their “strategies of refusal” along the way.

The Possibility of Another Food System

As this diaspora of campesinas and campesinos enter a global labor force as immigrant workers and farmworkers, they are more than a faceless reserve army of labor. These communities often bring “traditional ecological knowledge” (TEK) with them.⁴ The maintenance of TEK within the diaspora through international place-making—despite the fiction of deskilling asserted by

the capitalist food system—suggests that another food system is possible, not in spite of, but precisely because of the massive emigration of indigenous, campesina and campesino communities from South to North and their settlement in locations along the way.⁵ Beyond the biodiversity that they bring with their seed, they also bring TEK for growing crops that do well in the changing climate.

Ethan Miller once wrote that, “a crucial element of a solidarity economy approach is to recognize the ways that conventional economics has described reality so as to *make invisible* a whole host of practices, initiatives, human relationships and motivations, and thus to limit our abilities to imagine economic alternatives,” he continues, “acknowledging this, and working to make these other forms of economic life *visible and valued*, opens up the terrain upon which solidarity economy organizing does its work.”⁶

The Immigration System’s Structure

Over the 20th century, immigration has been structurally reduced to an input and output of “free labor,” able-bodied laborers for whom the substantial investment burden in health, education, and welfare from—birth to working-age—are placed upon the workers themselves in their countries of origin through their exclusion from legitimate citizenship in the host nations.⁷ Immigration law has come to be used as a spigot to make new “waves of labor”

available when previous “waves” of workers rebelled against the exploitative conditions caused by their structural exclusion from citizenship.⁸ In this way capitalist interests have created a structure that allows them to externalize the cost of the reproduction of the labor markets. The result of externalizing the cost of reproduction to the unauthorized immigrant workers themselves has the effect of driving down wages across the entire food system.

The harvest labor market is made up of competing labor structures such as the H-2A program, the migrant labor contracting system, the company town system, the union labor system, and indentured labor (i.e. prison labor). Immigrant workers are embedded within all of these structures and along all points of the larger capitalist food chain in origin and host nations. On the shop floor, farmworkers see consistent efforts to wedge workers from one another along racial, ethnic, language, cultural and civic lines. None of the competing labor structures are immune to these type of wedge tactics. Entire industries have emerged to create a “Private Security Industrial Complex” where consultants offer their services to quell worker rebellions across a global geography as rebellion is inevitable.⁹

Ethnographer Claude Meillassoux described earlier versions of the above as functioning to maintain a “double labor market” of “[W]orkers who are integrated and who reproduce wholly within the capitalist sector; [and] that of migrants who only partly reproduce

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Workers Confronting Grower, WA

themselves within it... Racism, xenophobia and other ideologies of discrimination are indeed vital to the operation of the double labor market.”¹⁰ Meillassoux exposed the collaboration between political parties and newspapers, employers and the government. He demonstrated how capitalist governments mediate the relationship between hate groups and immigrants, “[S]ometimes being hard on, more often tolerating or leaving alone the groups which specialize in racist murders, but never taking measures which could crush the unacknowledged repression which is indispensable for the realization of surplus-profit.”¹¹ The second function of this discriminatory ideology is to “keep this over-exploited section of the proletariat, who would have every reason to rebel and turn to violence, in a state of fear.”¹² In the United States, vigilante violence has also served as a means of controlling labor in this manner. From the Ku Klux Klan to the modern-day street brawls of the Proud Boys, vigilante violence by hate groups in the United States serves the purpose of generating fear in an attempt to minimize rebellion and to wedge the international working class from the domestic working class.

Economic Breakdown and Criminalization

Random vigilante violence in the receiving nation is the tip of the iceberg of the terror from which many immigrants have fled in their home countries. Over the last 30 years, their homelands have been plagued by wars, coups, foreign interventions,

the privatization of state services, the expansion of the “Green Revolution” and extractive industries in the name of development, the dumping of subsidized grain from the Global North, the lucrative trade in human beings and narcotics, and now climate change. This has led to a massive social and economic breakdown in Southern countries. The destruction of livelihoods and the return of paramilitaries and gangs have torn entire populations from their homes. Families are migrating by the hundreds of thousands to escape the economic destruction and physical terror resulting from three decades of neoliberal globalization. In an attempt to control the increasing flows of refugees, the United States and other capitalist nations have criminalized unauthorized immigration and militarized their borders. In the United States, this move took place within a historical context of an era of racialized, mass incarceration that Michelle Alexander calls, “The New Jim Crow.”

Alexander aptly describes the explosion of the privatized “prison industrial complex” in the United States as a shift from overt racial discrimination against black people to the discrimination against people of color who are labeled “criminals.”¹³ She asserts that “[T]oday it is perfectly legal to discriminate against criminals in nearly all the ways that it was once legal to discriminate against African Americans though Jim

Crow era laws.”¹⁴ People of color in the United States are disproportionately impacted by criminalization and mass incarceration. Since the late 1960s, the explosion of the prison population has been fed by brown and black bodies, an increasing number of which are immigrants.¹⁵ State of exception laws that were passed in the aftermath of the World Trade Center bombing in 2001 resulted in the Private Security Industrial Complex, where private security companies have been able to join the economy of the Prison Industrial Complex by housing newly criminalized immigrants.¹⁶ Though many scholars have described how immigration policy is used as a means to control labor, few have analyzed how the mass incarceration of immigrants in the 21st century is used as a means to generate surplus profit, regardless of the U.S. labor market in which they are embedded.

The criminalization of immigrants in the late 20th century and the subsequent explosion of private immigration detention centers in the early 21st century have expanded the Jim Crow structure of the Prison Industrial Complex. Due to the internal contradictions and competing interests of the different labor systems described above, immigrants of color have been used to fill the gaps when the system fails to produce a reserve pool of harvest labor that is willing to work for



Northwest Detention Center, WA

low wages and endure onerous working conditions. Guestworker programs, like H-2A and the *Bracero* program during WWII, have demonstrated that they are not immune to rebellion and thus have always been a temporary fix for capital with the intent of wedging the class unity of workers embedded in the harvest labor market.

Building New Pathways for a Just Food System

In a recent lecture that I presented at The Evergreen State College, I reminded the students I spoke to about the necessity of making the invisible visible. I reminded them that 80% of our work is generative, while only 20% is rebellion. Though it is the rebellions that make the news, strikes, boycotts, marches (migrant caravans), the majority of the activity that we spend our life energy on in the movements is generative, which is often omitted from the farmworker organizing tradition. One of those invisible

contributions is TEK as mentioned earlier, while another is cooperative development. Immigrant mutual aid societies flourished in the United States during the great depression, while farmworker coops were established during the farmworker campaigns of the UFW in the 1970s.¹⁷ Stemming from this tradition, *Cooperativa Tierra y Libertad* was formed simultaneously to the formation of the democratic and independent farmworker union, *Familias Unidas por la Justicia*. Ramon Torres spoke at an award ceremony in Bellingham, Washington on October 12, 2018 that recognized the success of the cooperative, stating that “we are making two paths for farmworkers to live in dignity, a union and a cooperative.” Ramon is both the current president of *Familias Unidas por la Justicia* and a founding member of *Cooperativa Tierra y Libertad*. The cooperative which was founded in 2013 sold their first blueberries under contract with the Bellingham Community Food Co-op earlier this year.



Familias Unidas President, Ramon Torres

Despite the structural obstacles they face, immigrants, farmworkers and their families are making a new path for the world through their willingness to rebel and to live free.¹⁸ Since immigrant labor permeates all the basic sectors of economic life in the United States of America, the events of the massive immigration marches and general strike “a day without an immigrant” in 2006 demonstrated the power that immigrants are able to wield collectively. If we are truly invested in the fight for the future of food around the globe, our role then is to nurture and defend immigrant rights in the food justice movement.

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