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Dignity and devastation
 in Vermont's dairy industry

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After years of challenging economic conditions, the first several months of 2018 spelled disaster for a number of Vermont's dairy farms. As reported in a local weekly newspaper article, "Selling the Herd: A Milk Price Crisis Is Devastating Vermont's Dairy Farms" (Heintz, 2018), the ongoing downturn in milk prices has led a number

of farms to close shop. This leaves just 749 dairy farms in a state where more than 11,000 existed seven decades prior. Alongside increased costs of production, this article also reveals that dairy farmers are receiving little more for their milk than they did in the late 1970s, despite the ever-increasing costs of production and environmental pressures. The economic downturn has had a

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Vermont," in Food Across Borders: Production, Consumption, and Boundary Crossing in North America.

Outside the classroom, Dr. Mares has led a number of community food projects. She is co-director of Huer-tas, a food security project for Latino/a dairy farmworkers connected to UVM Extension's Bridges to Health Program, and was previously co-director of the Food Justice Project for the Community Alliance for Global Justice in Seattle. She is devoted to experiential, transformative modes of teaching and has advised dozens of students who seek to make a difference in the contemporary food system. She can be reached at Teresa.Mares@uvm.edu.

pronounced effect on smaller family farms, particularly those with fewer than 200 cows, and has affected organic and conventional dairies alike. These economic realities have exacerbated the consolidation of the industry, leaving mega-farms as those most likely to survive. These same farms are often criticized for contributing to mounting concerns about the state's water quality and questionable labor conditions, particularly for the immigrant farmworkers who are in large part responsible for sustaining the dairy industry.

Amidst this deepening crisis, the farmworker-led organization Migrant Justice officially launched the Milk with Dignity program in early 2018. This groundbreaking program extends the model of Worker-Driven Social Responsibility pioneered by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) in the tomato fields of Florida, with the goal of improving the working conditions and well-being of Vermont's dairy farmworkers. After years of campaigning for a formal agreement with Ben & Jerry's, Migrant Justice signed the Milk with Dignity agreement with Ben & Jerry's on October 3, 2017, receiving a good deal of media attention (Scheiber, 2017) and local support from the dozens of individuals who turned out to witness the historic signing. This agreement requires that the farms in Ben & Jerry's supply chain abide by a code of conduct that was developed by farmworkers, with Ben & Jerry's paying a premium price to participating farmers. As farmworker leader Enrique "Kike" Balcazar stated at the signing ceremony, this agreement represents a "new day for dairy" (Migrant Justice, 2017, para. 3).

The Milk with Dignity Program is not the only campaign led by Migrant Justice; the organization has been active since 2009, calling for impartial and bias-free policing and fighting against wage theft, poor working and living conditions, and the targeting and detention of farmworker activists. Milk with Dignity, however, likely has the most potential to bring about seismic and sustained

changes in the Northeastern U.S. dairy supply chain, primarily to the benefit of immigrant farmworkers. For full disclosure, I have served on the board of Migrant Justice since January 2017, a position that has allowed me to better understand both the potential and challenges of the Worker-Driven Social Responsibility model. In this column I do not draw upon the confidential information that I am privy to as a board member, but rather my academic investigations into the information that has been made publicly available in the media and Migrant Justice's own organizational literature.

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Dignity program include a farmworker-authored code of conduct, farmworker education (focusing on educating about their rights under the code of conduct), the establishment of a third-party monitoring body for enforcement and auditing, economic relief (in the form of price premiums going to farmers following the code), and the guarantee of a legally binding agreement that defined the contract as legally enforceable (Migrant Justice, 2015). The Milk with Dignity program is

currently being monitored by a recently formed third party, the Milk with Dignity Standards Council, which will coordinate regular audits on participating farms where farmworkers and their employers will be interviewed regularly.

The Milk with Dignity Standards Council is not intended to be distant from the program, as is often the case in fair trade models, but rather will act as a permanent and locally based guiding force and resource for farmers and farmworkers alike. If, during an audit, it is seen that a farmer is not following the code of conduct, he or she will be issued a corrective action plan to bring them into greater alignment with the program. Migrant Justice does not see Milk with Dignity as a punitive program; rather, the model is designed with the more comprehensive goal of identifying problems so that the employers understand the standards and the codes, with the ultimate goal of ensuring that

they follow through and provide fair working conditions. At the same time (and similar to the CIW model), the program has a “zero tolerance” for grave abuses, such as sexual abuse. Migrant Justice is hopeful that the economic benefits that are funneled to the farmers through the Milk with Dignity agreement—specifically receiving a premium for their product from Ben & Jerry’s—will offset the costs of compliance.

The momentous signing of the Milk with Dignity Agreement with Ben & Jerry’s was only possible after many years of hard campaigning and struggle. The public campaign began in 2015, following a number of meetings between Migrant Justice and staff at Ben & Jerry’s. Through these meetings, Migrant Justice aimed to educate the company on the labor abuses and unfair working and living conditions that plague their supply chain. This education, as well as the direction for the campaign, were informed by the comprehensive farmworker survey (Migrant Justice, n.d.) carried out by Migrant Justice, which documented the poor working and living conditions that many farmworkers in the dairy industry encounter. Based on this data and inspiration from the CIW, the code of conduct was formulated. Adapting the CIW model to Vermont has required Migrant Justice to closely study the dairy supply chain to investigate the most promising leverage points for its campaign and which companies are likely to sign on to the program. Ben & Jerry’s, with its stated commitment to issues of social justice and its history of purchasing fair-trade ingredients, was the most promising company to pressure initially. Purchased by global behemoth Unilever in 2000 for US\$326 million, Ben & Jerry’s has maintained a hold on its social mission despite what many feared would be a total corporate takeover—not only of the brand but of its emphasis on progressive causes.

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The future development and scaling up of the Milk with Dignity program and its human rights framework, even beyond the corporate food system, looks very encouraging given the recent development of the Worker-Driven Social Responsibility (WSR) Network. Founded in 2015, this network aims to “afford protection for the most vulnerable and lowest-wage workers in global supply chains” (WSR Network, n.d., para. 1) and is critical of the failures of corporate social responsibility schemes and multistakeholder initiatives that seek to bring nongovernmental organizations and other institutions into the processes of setting and monitoring workplace standards (WSR Network, n.d.). As of late 2017, the WSR Network comprises a coordinating committee including the Business and Human Rights Resource Center, the Centro de Trabajadores Unidos en Lucha (Center for Workers United in Struggle), the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, Migrant Justice, the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative, T’ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, and United Students Against Sweatshops. While it is true that Bangladeshi sweatshop workers and Vermont farmworkers are worlds apart in how they live and

labor, the WSR model is powerful in that it recognizes the common forces that endanger and exploit workers in these disparate supply chains. The WSR proposes a radically different solution to the human rights abuses rampant within global supply chains compared to corporate social responsibility programs, which often fail to center the needs and priorities of workers.

While it is too soon to tell whether the Milk with Dignity program will help to turn the tide in Vermont’s dairy downturn, there is tremendous potential in the model it proposes, particularly for premium products like Ben & Jerry’s. It is clear that business as usual is not working for Vermont’s large-scale dairy farmers (or, indeed, for dairy

farmers in any state) and that alternatives are sorely needed. Further, if international trade and tariff conversations continue to be as volatile as they are currently (Calamur, 2018), dairy may very well emerge as a central point of contention between

the U.S. and our trade partners. In my next column I will continue these conversations and bring readers of *CULTIVATING COMIDA* up to speed on the progress of the Milk with Dignity rollout. 

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