

IN THIS ISSUE

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Labor in the food system, from farm to table



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Labor is at the heart of the food system—economically, politically, and ethically. This JAFSCD issue brings concerns about labor economics, politics, and ethics to contemporary food systems praxis. In so doing, we build upon the work of Cesar Chavez, Carey McWilliams, Deborah Fink, Dolores Huerta, Don Villarejo, Frank Bardacke, John Steinbeck, William Friedland, and countless others. Their activism and scholarship, set in an earlier context, has not always translated into the promise of the new sustainable or alternative agrifood movement, which, as **Biewener** states, has often focused more on “good food” than “good jobs.” As someone who has worked as a farm laborer, food factory worker, and food service worker and written about social justice, racism, labor, gender, and localism in sustainable and alternative food systems for more than 25 years, I am honored to introduce the work of scholar-activists in this journal issue.

The articles collectively address a wide range of labor issues, and in this introduction I highlight three themes that emerge: the need to see labor issues and solutions as social rather than individual problems; the reproduction of disenfranchisement; and the need to create new political economic systems. The articles in this issue demonstrate in a number of ways that labor problems are not so much the result of individual choices, but rather part of an entire system that extracts value from those who are the most vulnerable and allocates it to those who are the most powerful. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in the agrifood system, where jobs are low-wage, dangerous, and contingent. Workers are often treated as instrumental factors of production and are commodified (**Clayton, Ikerd**) rather than as people with feelings, intellect, and aspirations.

Labor conditions have been produced socially through public policy, public funds, and discursive practices of racism. They are the heritage of practices of slavery, indentured servitude, and entrepreneurial

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exploitation. They are compounded in farm fields, a result in part of an agricultural exceptionalism framework (**Weiler et al.**; **Rodman et al.**), through which regular labor laws and standards do not apply to farm labor. Vulnerability for workers has been produced by the lack of labor regulations and the use of programs that import workers while limiting their agency. **Rodman et al.** review the laws and programs that facilitated the supply and exploitation of cheap workers in the U.S. and discuss ways in which the state helps growers to secure laborers who are unlikely to demand better wages and working conditions. **Weiler et al.** discuss the Canadian Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) and Temporary Foreign Workers Program (TFWP) that manage foreign agricultural workers. The need for workers in agriculture is a permanent condition, yet the workers themselves are temporary, creating a condition of *permanent impermanence* for workers in which they are always vulnerable and uncertain.

We learn in this issue how the reproduction of power and privilege on the one hand and disenfranchisement on the other continues in research and public policy. **Calo and De Master** point to ways in which University of California researchers developed systems to eliminate workers. **Clayton** discusses how public research and regulations on food safety are framed. In both cases, who is considered an “expert” (often biophysical scientists and engineers) and whose priorities are valued determines how problems are defined and solutions recommended. Where workers are not consulted, knowledge and policy cannot take into account the circumstances, motivations, and aspirations of those at the point of production. In the case of food safety, this is dangerous for workers and consumers alike. These articles demonstrate the degree to which foundational ontological (what we see) and epistemological (ways of acquiring knowledge) orientations matter.

One way to diversify ontologies and epistemologies is through working more directly with the less powerful through participatory action research. While this is an important approach, it is also not a panacea. **Levkoe et al.** discuss the promises and pitfalls of academic/activist collaborations, including the tensions of collaboration and critique when working with organizations and groups who must function in the “real” world, while academics’ role is often to work in the world of ideas and possibilities. In the case of contentious issues in particular, working in partnership may tend to suppress knowledge advancement and criticism.

Further, the contingency and vulnerability that have been produced limit the ability of workers to have agency and voice in research. This results in a relative lack of data and knowledge about workers and their working conditions (**Rodman et al.**; **Weiler et al.**). This vulnerability affects the health of workers and food safety. **Courville et al.** illustrate how the piece-rate system drives workers to work as long and as hard as they can without regard to personal health so they can maximize income and be seen as “good workers.” **Clayton et al.** and **Rodman et al.** elaborate how structural conditions affect self-care in the circumstances in which farmworkers have few if any choices. This invisibility and lack of voice of farmworkers (**Erwin**) has created an underclass of people without ability to move freely and advocate for rights.

How can people organize or advocate when structural conditions make it so their main job is to not be seen? Throughout history, social movements are the vehicle through which disenfranchised people have created social progress. But for a social movement to build, problems must be collectively identified and understood. Online fora and social media have been demonstrated to bring together people who otherwise would not necessarily have the opportunity to come together. **Hunt** highlights the active resistance of tipped food workers who use an online forum to share their lived experiences being taken advantage of, harassed, and even physically abused in the workplace. In so doing they bring recognition to the conditions they face and encourage public discourse and remedies through public policy.

Ikerd entreats us to value both work and workers. The articles in this issue that discuss small organic farms and apprenticeships illustrate that in these newer agrifood institutions, work is certainly valued, but workers perhaps not so much. As much as we might like to think otherwise, we cannot assume that farmers and workers share motives and interests. **Ekers and Levkoe** show that, for example, farmers may prioritize ecology over labor justice; **Lo and Delwiche** discuss tensions between small farmers and workers rights; and **Rodman et al.** remind us that organic growers have opposed minimum wage and health and safety standards

for agricultural workers. Thus the privileging of some and disenfranchisement of others, such as workers, can be reproduced in new agrifood systems. **Erwin** reminds us that labor injustice persists not only on “industrial” farms, but on local, small, and organic farms as well, and that this reality needs to be addressed by those working in the alternative agrifood movement.

Articles in this issue that focus on the labor relations of apprenticeships show that both farmers and apprentices are overwhelmingly European American and, apprentices at least, must have a level of economic privilege to be able to afford to work for only a small stipend (**Biewener; MacAuley and Niewolny**). To be an intern or apprentice you already need to have resources that can mitigate the low or no wages or health benefits. **MacAuley and Niewolny** point out that practices in new agrifood systems can create an unreflective reproduction of existing power relations. They can also privilege and romanticize farm labor over other forms of agrifood labor, which account for the vast majority of jobs in the food system. One does not hear about internships for processing-plant workers or food-service workers, for example. Sociocultural factors are also at play in the ways they condition and determine opportunities in which very few farmworkers are able to become entrepreneurs while the vast majority do not (**Pisani and Guzman**).

So, what to do to change agrifood labor systems in the face of history, public policies, and sociocultural traditions? For **Erwin**, norms and social structures must be addressed and changed at levels ranging from the individual to the institutional. **Weiler et al.** discuss incremental reform and structural change and suggest steps toward amelioration while we simultaneously work toward a better system. An example of an incremental reform is the suggestion of **Berkey and Schusler** that organizations collectively provide benefits and support to workers because they can do so at lower costs than individual employers could.

As we work toward larger changes, for **Calo and De Master** it is clear that structural barriers cannot be addressed with individualist strategies. One market-individual-based approach, for example, suggests that if farmers earned more they would pay their workers more. However, **Yamashita and Robinson** point out that food retail sales have increased, but worker wages are down. Thus we cannot assume that increased income for farmers would translate into increased income for workers, particularly if farmer income is already low. And **Weiler et al.** point out that in a highly competitive market for agricultural goods, the need to compete on price creates a condition in which farmers try to minimize labor costs in order to maintain viable economic enterprises.

Accordingly, several articles in this issue highlight structural and policy approaches and steps that can be taken now to address the social justice in the food system of which labor is a major part. As we work toward the larger-scale changes necessary for fair labor conditions and compensation, there are promising incremental changes. For example, while the power of personal purchasing decisions to change the food system is weak (**Yamashita and Robinson**), public, large-scale purchasing can be more effective. An excellent example of this is the Good Food Purchasing program in the Los Angeles Unified School District described by **Lo and Delwiche**. Representing US\$150 million in value, this program combines market and policy approaches to set five standards for purchasing: local economies, environmental sustainability, valued workforce, humane treatment of animals, and health and nutrition. Through this program, public funding is being used to support workers as well as other values of the alternative food movement. **Freudenberg et al.** analyze efforts to create good food jobs that meet multiple goals of increasing employment, promoting access to healthy food, and improving job quality, and offer six strategies city governments and collaborators for developing, bringing to scale, and sustaining good food jobs. These are examples of **Ikerd's** call to restrain the economic system.

While these promising projects are calling attention to issues and making significant progress in labor conditions, they also demonstrate intersectoral tensions and illustrate why large-scale systemic changes are necessary. **Calo and De Master** as well as **Biewener** suggest cooperatives as a form of economic organization. Looking at the fundamental problem of inequitable land ownership, **Calo and De Master** point to land-tenure reform as a solution as well. These are not topics generally considered in the alternative agrifood movement. Being able to imagine and consider systemic change requires engaging the critical food

literacy that **Yamashita and Robinson** address. For them, this involves learning about and understanding the sociopolitical contexts and factors that shape the agrifood system and acting against injustice. Through critical food literacy we can think more deeply and clearly about the food system, dissolving some traditions and categories of thinking and opening up others in working toward a better system for food labor. For example, while small scale has been a central principle of the movement, as discussed above it means recognizing and accepting that small farms may facilitate better ecological practices but not necessarily better labor practices. **Lo and Delwiche**, for example, point out that there are often better wages, benefits, and rights for workers in large-scale enterprises than in small-scale operations.

In the same way, while we make changes as we can, it is also the case that the changes required go beyond the agrifood system itself. As a specific example of this, **Erwin and Rodman et al.** show the ways in which the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) affected agriculture in Mexico in such ways that some people could no longer earn a living at home and many migrated as workers to the U.S. And, beyond global food politics, we must also address and change the systems from the individual to global scale that reproduce privilege and oppression through discursive practices and policies of racism, sexism, classism, and xenophobia in everyday life.

The articles in this issue represent the scope of labor on labor—scholarship, action, reflection. This iterative and recursive process is essential to avoid reproducing the problems of the past as we address proximate as well as systemic problems and solutions in agrifood labor. **Lo and Delwiche** demonstrate the importance of collaboration in working through theory to action to reflection in creating and maintaining a shared vision for and implementing change.

We must look to the world that is possible, breaking out of constrained ways of thinking. That we need to think in terms of “what if” scenarios, as **Yamashita and Robinson** suggest in their article on critical food literacy. The authors also demonstrate that the agrifood system is not “broken” (a phrase we often hear). Indeed, it functions well for those with power and privilege, as it has been designed to do. It does not need to be “fixed,” but reconfigured in its entirety. Solutions need to critically engage political economic structures and cultural traditions while we work on ameliorative measures to improve labor conditions in present time. However, rather than “making do” with the systems, traditions, and practices we have inherited from the past, we must *remake* the world of work, valorizing and valuing agrifood labor. 