



CULTIVATING *COMIDA*: PUSHING THE BORDERS
 OF FOOD, CULTURE, AND POLITICS
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A new day for dairy?

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In the previous *Cultivating Comida* column, the economic challenges confronting Vermont's dairy industry were discussed alongside the new possibility of justice for workers in the industry. Following years of farmworker organizing led by the grassroots group Migrant Justice, more than a year has now passed since Vermont's iconic ice cream company Ben & Jerry's entered into a legally binding agreement committing the company to the groundbreaking Milk with Dignity (MD) program. The dairy farms in Ben & Jerry's supply chain are now beginning their second year in the MD program. During this same period, Vermont has

seen its share of highs and lows in its dairy industry, a sector that seems to have grown only more unpredictable and unsustainable over time (Mares, 2018). The MD program extends the model of worker-driven social responsibility (WSR) pioneered by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) to Vermont's dairy farms. According to Migrant Justice, the goal of the MD program is to "bring together farmworkers, farmers, buyers and consumers to secure dignified working conditions in dairy supply chains" (Migrant Justice, n.d., "How it works," para. 1). The program centers upon a code of conduct developed by farmworkers and

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ensures a price premium to farm owners, which workers felt was essential in the volatile and challenging context of the dairy industry, in order to help offset some of the potential costs of compliance. Unlike past farmworker campaigns that have sought change through a union model, both the CIW and Migrant Justice have demanded change by shifting corporate purchasing practices and putting legally binding supply chain agreements into place. These policies require corporations to source through worker-driven programs that ensure improvements in workers' rights and are continually monitored and evaluated. This model flies in the face of the corporate social responsibility (CSR) models that are predominant in large-scale food production; these models rarely (if ever) stem from worker-defined needs and priorities, but instead from corporate concern for branding and marketability.

Over many years of farmworker-to-farmworker education and dialogue, Migrant Justice leaders adapted the essential elements of the CIW's Fair Food Program to Vermont's dairy industry, extending the WSR model to a new sector of agriculture for the first time. Both the logic and design of the WSR model draw upon the production, sharing, and institutionalization of worker knowledge to secure worker's rights in complex supply chains that often obscure the human costs of commodity production. In this model, farmworker expertise is not only acknowledged but engaged as the foundation for building workplaces that are truly fair and responsive to farmworker needs and priorities. The WSR model is itself the product of decades of CIW organizing, drawing upon workers' experiences, reflections, theorizations, and actions.

The values and priorities underlying the WSR Model—and the work of the CIW and Migrant Justice to implement this model—seek to confront directly the complex problems and unequal structures that are pervasive in the food system and in global supply chains. Fortunately, in adapting and

extending the work of the CIW and the Fair Food Program, Migrant Justice organizers did not have to completely reinvent the wheel. Instead, they were able to tap into and build upon 30 years of worker knowledge to design and adapt the lessons learned while designing the MD program. Combined with their own eight years of extensive organizing, research, and analysis, Migrant Justice engages a praxis with significant and deep history and roots—one that has seen significant success in the campaigning for and the implementation of the Fair Food Program. The CIW found, after years of direct and sometimes violent confrontations with field bosses, that the big brands at the top of the supply chain were driving exploitation in the fields. They also found that corporations have significant power to impose certain specifications on their

suppliers. Whether that buyer is Taco Bell, Wal-Mart, or McDonald's (in the case of tomatoes), or Ben & Jerry's (in the case of milk), the WSR model is unique as it places worker organizations in a position to govern over and run labor rights programs in supply chains.

During a July 2018 press conference in Burlington, Vermont, representatives from Ben & Jerry's and Migrant Justice provided an update about the progress made under

the MD program. They shared that following the formal signing of the agreement between Ben & Jerry's and Migrant Justice in October 2017, 72 dairy farms had enrolled in the program. These farms—the majority in Vermont and a handful in northeastern New York—provide 100% of the equivalent volume of milk that Ben & Jerry's sources from the Northeast dairy industry; this represents the vast majority of milk the company sources globally. More than 300 farmworkers and farm owners from these farms have attended education sessions where they learn about the rights and responsibilities of the MD program. This progress is impressive given the infancy of the program; it is also striking considering the small

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staff of both Migrant Justice and the Milk with Dignity Standards Council (MDSC), the independent nonprofit responsible for implanting, monitoring, and evaluating the MD program. Despite the initial success of this program, it is important to note that Ben & Jerry's is just one buyer among many. The Vermont farms in Ben & Jerry's supply chain make up just under a tenth of the approximately 750 dairy farms that remain in a state where more than 11,000 farms operated in the mid-1900s but likely represent a more significant volume of the state's total milk production.

In October 2018, the MDSC, the newly formed designated third-party monitor of the MD program, held an event to mark the one-year anniversary of the MD Agreement. Tom Fritzsche, executive director of the MDSC, presented evidence suggesting that the MD program is making steady progress to guarantee and secure fundamental rights and protections for the nearly 300 workers covered by the program. He shared, "more than anything, the MDP is creating a space for new dialogue and the voice of farmworkers to be heard." The MDSC then pointed out that dairy workers routinely handle copper sulfate or formaldehyde on farms for foot baths for cows, which can be dangerous to workers' health. It also highlighted that, though many farms provide and train workers in the use of protective facemasks and goggles, there are many others that do not. Now, the MD program is changing this: all farms must comply with this critical health and safety issue. Further, as of October 2018, just nine months after the first farms began enrolling in the MD program, the MDSC received nearly 70 inquiries on its new 24-hour worker's support line. This resulted in the investigation and resolution of 39 complaints of violations of the MD Code of Conduct, delivering on the promise that this model is much more than standards—it is about compliance and the enforcement of rights.

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Nonetheless, at the very time the MD program is set to grow and expand, Migrant Justice and its allies will be facing a dairy industry that consistently fails to provide farmers with a price for milk that covers the costs of production. For the MD program to flourish in the long run, it may take big brands paying more down the supply chain, or even workers and farmers building nontraditional alliances to push for major dairy policy reforms in order to stop the downward pressure of low prices on farm income and farmworker conditions. Some Vermont farmers are looking north to Canada's

supply management and price floor policies for inspiration (Dillon, 2018). In the meantime, the MD program, and the WSR model more broadly, positions workers to envision and develop entirely new systems and forms of governance that sustain, nourish, and democratize healthy and resilient workplaces and communities. The MD program provides workers with the space to define, govern over, and enforce rights in the short term. In the long term, it also may provide meaningful

insights and channels for fostering increasingly fair, dignified, and participatory communities that actually work for workers at broader scales.

Both authors of this column have been closely involved with Migrant Justice as the MD program has been designed and implemented. O'Neill was a founder of Migrant Justice and was involved in the development of the Milk with Dignity program. Mares has served on the board of Migrant Justice since January of 2017 and previously volunteered for the organization beginning in 2011. As food systems researchers and food justice activists, we are optimistic that Migrant Justice is now well positioned to expand essential fundamental human rights to thousands of dairy workers through the expansion of the MD program to other supply chains. The expansion of the MD program, like the expansion of the Fair Food Program, will require public campaigns that offer unlimited opportu-

nities for workers to engage allies in meaningful organizing work to win rights for workers. As we have seen in the successes of the CIW and the Fair Food Program, and now with the Milk with

Dignity program, when workers are positioned to govern over and manage labor rights programs in supply chains, a fundamental shift in power becomes possible.



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