

2G - Towards food sovereignty that works – presentations and discussion on a strategy for the food movement

Theme: Fair agriculture and trade policies
Moderator: Rob Bleijerveld (Supermacht.nl)
Speakers: Giulio Iocco (food activist and independent researcher), Karin Astrid Siegmann (International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam).

Report

Introduction Rob:

Nyeleni movements' food sovereignty definition and primary focus is on farmers, overlooking issues of wage workers. Agricultural workers are marginalized (wages, working conditions, societal status). In this workshop two farm workers' projects and their positioning are presented. How do farm (and other food) workers politically and conceptually fit within food sovereignty movement's agenda for food system change?

Karin presented the struggles and achievements of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW). This organization of Florida's tomato pickers campaigns for better incomes and living conditions. They demand respect and organize from below.

US agribusiness profits well from Florida tomato harvests by paying low prices to growers that keep farm workers in poor working conditions (low pay, employment insecurity, exposure to harmful chemicals). Farm workers pay a high price for the food sector's skyrocketing productivity and profits. Despite hard work on the fields most are unable to adequately feed themselves or their families.

Tomato pickers in Florida experience indecent labor conditions such as poverty wages, sexual harassment & violence, forced labor, hazardous work, exclusion from labor rights and (irregular) immigration status. Since 1993 CIW organized strikes and work stoppages to pressurize growers to increase piece rates. There was a strategy change in 2001 jointly with student, environmental, religious, sustainable food & agriculture organizations and community, human and labor rights activists. CIW now targets tomato buyers (fast food and supermarket chains). Through consumer boycotts, concerts, cross-country speaking tours to food corporations' headquarters and hunger strikes, they demand better wages & working conditions to be passed down to workers through growers.

In 2010, persistent and creative campaigning resulted in Fair Food Program connecting partnering food chain multinationals and growers with workers. This means retail food companies only purchase tomatoes from participating growers with on-going monitoring by independent Fair Food Standards Council. Now, 14 major fast food chains and food retailers have joined, including Walmart and Ahold US, directly affecting about 135,000 farm workers.

CIW: FFP's Fair Food Program is a Worker-driven Social Responsibility model halting conventional farm labor exploitation, contractually granting decisive voice to workers and empowering the marginalized. Former food chain 'nobodies' realize their right to define their own food & agriculture systems. FFP bases on market mechanism and doesn't challenge social, ecological and economic injustice of current food system. A step towards food sovereignty?

Giulio's presentation was about the rise of two emerging experiences from below in Southern Italy. Of agriculture workers in Southern Italy 40% is migrant, enduring extreme precarious working and living conditions. Precarious work, like class divisions and contrasting interests between farm workers and small farmers are underdeveloped topics within the Nyeleni Movement. 'Re-peasantization' without addressing workers' problems is no solution.

Giulio gave examples from below trying to overcome these problems: the cooperative SOSRosarno in Rosarno (Calabria) and the cooperative Sfrutta Zero in Nardò (Apulia). He described their origins:

- Intensive industrial agricultural production and monoculture of oranges (Rosarno) and tomatoes (Apulia).
- Fast productivity increase, harsh conditions and price pressure by food corporations lead to rising production costs, income squeeze and bankruptcy of many small farmers.
- Seasonal migration routes of African migrant workers to find labor (Campania/Sicily (greenhouses) → Rosarno (oranges) → Nardò (tomatoes) → elsewhere (grapes, olives) → back).
- Big revolt by African farm workers (2010, Rosarno) led to racist riots against them. Some migrants hid away at small farms; police deported most. First self-organized farm workers strike (2011, Nardò) for better conditions and wages. Important issues in public debate, but situation in fields even changed for worse.
- Riots induced vision change amongst Rosarno small farmers (“Both farmers and workers are victims within food chain; we need to overcome our divergences and go together”) and startup of cooperative SOSRosarno. Strike in Nardò and experiences of SOSRosarno led to startup of Sfrutta Zero (Nardò, Bari, Venosa).
- SOSRosarno: Moved from mainstream food chain into alternative organic chains (critical producers, solidary purchasing groups/CSA, Fuori Mercato (Outside of Market)) to get fair price for oranges and fair remuneration for farmers and workers. Decent work in 2011; Diversified production/markets and revenue increase in 2013. Cooperative in 2015: farmers and workers have same contract, conditions and voice in decision making process, overcoming differences of class and race issues. SOSRosarno experience of dealing with divergences and solving problems can be used elsewhere going towards food sovereignty. (More on Nardò/Sfrutta Zero at Supermacht.nl)

It was discussed that indeed we should include other food workers in struggle for food sovereignty. Example: a workers’ cooperative in an occupied factory Milano (limoncello). It was also pointed out that Rosarno/Nardò cooperatives are small, cannot reach mass of workers and consumers, but build on strengthening their niches, political alliances and counterpower. Question: how to get state support (which now reflects divergence employers-employed and supports big business)?

Lastly, cooperatives wouldn’t participate in Dutch SER-model (risk of getting trapped into corporate mechanism). SOSRosarno runs public campaign against exploitative chain (gangmasters) and state’s role (no labor intermediation), and public campaign for price transparency vs COOP (showing their own price dynamic: fair remuneration of farmers and workers, ecological production, transport, solidary quota).

Outcomes

1. Gender aspect is missing: Recent trend of farmers replacing migrant workers by Italian and Romanian women (“easier to exploit, less risk of rioting”).
2. How to define and develop ‘short chain’ to far away urban areas? Focus on developing local markets while creating own brand/marketing introducing other fruit varieties and pre-sales processing, or (also) on ideological and political closeness of buyers even in faraway locations.
3. Need to raise consumer awareness on making choice for buying from the cooperative (more public price transparency needed). SOSRosarno’s public campaign vs COOP is doing so, showing their own price dynamic and its effects (fair remuneration of farmers and workers, ecological production, transport, solidary quota). Giulio: as consumers we should realize that it is not normal to pay so little for food.

More information

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