Geoforum 57 (2014) 91–98

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Geoforum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/geoforum

Subsidizing farmworker hunger: Food assistance programs and the social reproduction of California farm labor

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 6 July 2013
Received in revised form 18 August 2014
Available online 20 September 2014

Keywords:
Theory of social reproduction
Farm labor
Food insecurity
Food injustice

ABSTRACT

Following Marx's theory of social reproduction, I argue that agribusiness benefits from food assistance programs that are available to farmworkers, as they assist workers minimally enough to keep laborers working in the fields, while distracting food assistance providers from the root causes of farmworker food insecurity. These programs simultaneously redistribute excess food that workers have labored over and cannot afford. Based on ethnographic fieldwork on California's Northern Central Coast, I outline how these programs act to reinforce structural food insecurity by ensuring that workers are provided with their most basic food needs. Although such approaches show evidence of providing crucial food for farmworkers in times of need, these programs ultimately allow agribusiness to feed their workers via charity, while maintaining low wages.

Introduction

California's farmworkers labor some of the most plentiful agricultural regions in the world, yet the average worker makes less than the federal minimum wage, and typically does not receive benefits, overtime, or job security season to season.[1] Although most are immigrants, with a wealth of experience of how to grow and prepare healthy food, they are food insecure. As they struggle to survive on low wages with limited means to protest, the majority of farmworkers and their families are left with little ability to purchase or produce sufficient food to live comfortable and healthy lives (Brown and Getz, 2011; Minkoff-Zern, 2012).[2]

Farmworker food access is entrenched in struggles over land, labor, and capital. The story of farmworker food insecurity commonly begins with the dispossession of workers from their livelihoods as farmers in Mexico and other parts of Latin America. The causes of dispossession vary from US food commodity dumping as a result of international trade agreements, to violent struggles for power and land based in historical ethnic hierarchies. These causes have led to the creation of a disenfranchised and transnational agricultural working class in the United States (Fernández-Kelly and Massey, 2007). Escalated border militarization means that more would-be migrants are not returning home to Mexico in the off-season as they once did.[3] They are more likely to bring families with them, as they do not know when they will return to Mexico again. It is much harder to find consistent work in the winter months, and families who remain find it more difficult to make ends meet throughout the year, increasing instances of farmworker food insecurity.

The Northern Central Coast, where research for this article took place, is located about 100 miles south of the San Francisco Bay Area, on the edge of Silicon Valley. The proximity of the Northern Central Coast to the San Francisco Bay Area brings wealth to the region, but this is not dispersed to farm laborers. Although agricultural wages tend to be greater in the Central Coast than in the Central Valley, the cost of living is higher as well. With more of their income spent on elevated rents, farmworkers have less money for food. Additionally, expensive rents mean that farmworkers often live in dense housing conditions, with multiple

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[1] California agriculture generated $44.7 billion in sales between 2011 and 2012 (USDA, 2012).

[2] I use the standard USDA definition of food security: access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life. This includes at a minimum: an assured ability to acquire nutritionally adequate and safe food foods without resorting to emergency food supplies, scavenging, stealing, or other coping strategies (Nord and Coleman-Jensen, 2011). A report concerning farmworkers in Salinas, California showed that 66% of respondents were food insecure (Kresge and Eastman, 2010). In another study of farmworkers in Fresno County, California, 45% were food insecure (Wirth et al., 2007). Similar numbers were found in studies conducted throughout the United States (Borre et al., 2010; Moos, 2008; Weigel et al., 2007; Quandt et al., 2004).

[3] Militarization at the US-Mexico border has been increasing since the 1986, when the US passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), simultaneously criminalized the hiring of undocumented workers by US employers and massively increasing funding for the US Border Patrol (Nevins, 2002).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2014.08.017
0016-7185/

nuclear families living in one to two bedroom apartments, all sharing a single kitchen. With less space to cook, it is more difficult for families to prepare the food they can afford.

Food banks and other emergency food programs are largely responsible for making up the sustenance gap caused by this income inequality.[4] These programs essentially function based on the whims of corporate managers and wealthy individuals. In this article, I review three food assistance programs that target California's farmworkers. These programs include food banks, an on-farm lunch truck program, and the Latino Champions for Change Program. The food banks are non-for-profit organizations, receiving funds from private and government grants. The latter two are completely funded by the state, although all the program staff works directly with agribusiness.

Programs and projects that address farmworker health inequalities often receive support and encouragement from agribusiness in the form of relatively small monetary donations and permission to conduct worksite health programs on their property. These agribusiness firms are the same companies that forcefully battle unionizing attempts or wage increases. Corporate support for such programs and projects are, as I highlight, evidence that food assistance programs are far from challenging the structural food insecurity caused by the industrial agro-food system, and in some cases are actually working to supplement such exploitation.[5]

Additionally, I contend that the donations and efforts made by agribusiness to support food security programs discourage those that work in food assistance from questioning the low agribusiness wages of their clients. They are willing to partner with agribusiness to improve farmworker health, without challenging the system that causes food insecurity itself. The government and nonprofit sectors that employ food assistance providers are directly subsidizing workers' low wages by taking part in employee health days and on-farm health projects, free of charge to agribusiness companies.

In this case, social reproduction of the worker occurs both directly, as growers and others in the agribusiness industry fund and benefit from farmworker food security programs, and indirectly, as participation in these programs allows farmworkers to supplement their insufficient diets without improved wages. I argue that these programs exemplify the neoliberalization of the food system, as they function to nourish workers throughout the year, resulting in the maintenance of structurally impoverished and food insecure farmworkers.

This article makes a unique intervention in critical food geography literature, making explicit the connections between farm labor inequities, food insecurity, and our emergency food system. Further, by focusing on food assistance providers' perspectives as an intermediary between workers and growers, this article provides insight into shifting the political landscape in the struggle to address the real causes of farmworker food insecurity.

Methodology

I conducted 18 months (January 2010 to May 2011) of ethnographic research with Mexican immigrant farmworkers and food assistance providers in the Northern Central Coast region, including Monterrey, San Benito, and Santa Cruz Counties. My research focused on the coping strategies of farmworkers struggling with food insecurity. I studied three types of programs: food assistance, community gardening, and market gardening and farming. This article focuses on my research on food assistance programs in particular.

In addition to participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and food security surveys with farmworkers, I also conducted participant observation and semi-structured interviews with food assistance providers. Food assistance providers included individuals who work in county public health departments, food banks, and other emergency food or food assistance programs. I observed the daily operations of food assistance programs that were targeted at farmworkers in the region, including food banks and pantries, a nutrition outreach program, and a Latino-centered food program, all of which served farmworker populations. I also interviewed staff and program directors about their goals, management styles, funding, and outreach to farmworkers. Additionally, I asked them about their perceived causes of food insecurity and how their projects or programs addressed these causes.

I conducted participant observation at quarterly meetings of a regional health collaborative, the Nutrition and Fitness Collaborative of the Central Coast (NFCCC). NFCCC is a group of state and nongovernmental actors that works on issues related to health and fitness in the region. Many of the group participants engage in outreach and provide services to the farmworker community. I interviewed many of the group's members individually. Through these meetings and interviews I was able to get a sense of the broader priorities and activities of food and health assistance providers in the region.

Social reproduction and the neoliberalization of food

Marx ([1867] 2008) argues that in order for the worker to be reproduced, he must be able to afford, or be provided with, a basic level of subsistence. Following the dispossession of the worker from the land (where he or she was able to subsist independently from the capitalist system), capitalism must produce the dispossessed peasant as the worker. In order to maintain this system, the capitalist must also maintain the worker's own reproduction:

> ... in short, the capitalist produces the worker as the wage-labourer. This incessant reproduction, this perpetuation of the worker, is the absolutely necessary condition for capitalist production... He profits not only from what he receives from the worker, but also by what he gives him. The capital given in return for labor power is converted into means of subsistence which have to be consumed to reproduce the muscles, nerves, bones, and brains of existing workers, and to bring new workers into existence (Marx [1867], 2008, 716–7).

In the case of the California farmworker, the ability to purchase sufficient food directly benefits their employer, the grower. Furthermore, programs that allow farmworkers to access food from the market at reduced prices or through charity programs not only act to reproduce the worker, but also encourage farmworkers to consume more product from the growers themselves, contributing to agribusiness profits.[6] This follows Marx's explanation that that the worker circulates his or her wages back into the capitalist system to purchase food and shelter, as a means to survive, reproducing him or herself at the same time as reproducing the system ([1867] 2008, 711).

[4] In comparison to the enormous profits of agribusiness, the Monterey County Food Bank's most recent available expense report (fiscal year 2010–2011) equaled $8,586,054. The Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Cruz and San Benito Counties most recent available expense report (fiscal year 2012–2013) equaled only $16,893,537.

[5] Corporate siphoning of public funds to support their low wage structure is not unique to food production. This has been documented throughout the food system, in the case of Walmart and fast food workers' widespread use of Medicaid and food stamps (Good Jobs First, 2013).

[6] In many cases the grower may actually be paid for the product, via USDA commodity purchases or direct purchases by food banks, or benefit from tax breaks and averting dumping costs.