Cultivating International Solidarity through Popular Resistance: Rural family farmers and farmworkers unite with international social movements for land, water, food and energy

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Introduction

Rural family farmers and migrant farmworkers are at the front lines of the climate, fossil fuel, fracking, water and land struggles across the U.S. They have been increasingly unifying with urban and international social movements to build resistance and change the system that has consistently failed them.

My reflections on the evolution of international solidarity in the U.S. are based on conversations with social movement leaders. The contextual analysis, history and practical methodology for building international relationships to change the system from a local to international level were highlighted in the conversations. The topic of international solidarity is then explored in the context of two evolving and personal experiences that highlight the intersections of water, energy, land and food connecting international solidarity to concrete action in the U.S.

Transforming International Solidarity

For over 10 years, U.S. social movements have been strategically aggregating power working at regional, hemispheric and global levels to collectively change the system. These change-makers are redefining international solidarity and transforming it from one that is funded and shaped by NGOs and funders to one that is "of the people."

The international struggle that is evolving is wrestling historical power structures that perpetuate racial, gender and income inequities while addressing local to global movement building obstacles within our own non-profit and philanthropic relationships.

International Solidarity at its core is relationship and bridge building nourished by a common bond. Historically, non-profits and funders with designated international programs have supported communities and organizations that engaged in international solidarity focusing on international cooperation and aid. A community member or organization without an "established" international program, finds it difficult...

Those interviewed included: Cassia Bechara from the MST, the Landless Peasant Movement; Cindy Wiesner, from Grassroots Global Justice; Diana Lopez, from Southwest Workers Union; Jose Bravo from the Just Transition Alliance; Netfa Freeman, from the Institute for Policy Studies and activist in the internationalist and Pan-African liberation movements; and Rob Robinson from U.S. Friends of the Movement of People Affected by Dams.
to raise funds for international relationship-, resistance-, and movement building. This has been largely due to the fact that non-profits see international solidarity as one of their program strategies and not necessarily as fundamental to organizing and movement building outside of this institutional structure. The Friends of the Movement of People Affected by Dams (MAB), the U.S. Friends of the Landless Workers Movement (MST) and Grassroots Global Justice Alliance (GGJ) are a few initiatives that recognize the investment that international work and movement building can bring to the long-term process and strength of local struggles. With crowd funding, social media and conferencing technology, local communities can share directly with base communities internationally, creating new opportunities for social movements to unite.

Cindy Wiesner National Coordinator for Grassroots Global Justice, explains that we are engaging in what she describes as Grassroots Internationalism:

"The U.S. has had a very deep history of solidarity with global movements since forever. For example, with a lot of folks joining Abraham Lincoln brigades to fight fascism in Spain, to the solidarity with Cuba when they began the revolutionary process, to the Vietnam movement, and in the 80s really strong in Central America and South Africa against apartheid. What is interesting to me is U.S. [solidarity] was really central to those struggles because of the role that the U.S.-based transnational corporations and the military played [in supporting actions that perpetuated injustices]. The upgrade in the 21st century is that we have to look at it as a joint struggle model. Solidarity has meant either financial or political solidarity; it is important and necessary but it can not be one way anymore."

Common cause and alignment are not the only indicators in the transformation of solidarity between the U.S. and international social justice struggles. Inclusive spaces for encounters between the movements have also become an important contributor to how U.S. social movements are organizing with counterparts internationally. Some of those common spaces include the World Social Forum, the Left Forum, etc.
the World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth in Cochabamba, Bolivia; the popular community-led forums parallel to the COP (Conference of Parties) official meetings like Cancun, then moving to Brazil for Rio+20, South Africa, Venezuela, New York, Peru and Paris for COP21 where groups are able to engage in popular education, as well as develop declarations, statements and collective agreements to move work forward consistently and in unity.

Solidarity is an assertion that no people is alone, no people is isolated in the struggle for progress. Solidarity is the conscious alliance of the progressive and peace-loving revolutionary forces in the common struggle against colonialism, capitalism and imperialism. In short, against exploitation of man by man.

—Samora Machel, Revolutionary Leader and First President of Mozambique

### Political Formation

As I spoke to U.S. social movement leaders, one common thread resonated: we need to further deepen, institutionalize and make popular the political formation of social movements in the U.S. Much of the political dialogue happens along political party lines or at the state or national level through campaigns. This is clearly exemplified by the divide that exists between those political organizations in Washington, D.C. and community-based grassroots organizations in the towns and cities of the different regions of the nation. Otherwise, debates are had mostly in academic arenas without the input of or access to popular movements where communities can understand and share their perspectives, then create a plan of resistance or common strategy on how to change the system.

In the U.S., we often refer to power mapping as a method to arrive at our targeted goals for political power but it doesn’t address other components of political formation that distinguish social movements from political parties themselves. Those include: space for reflection, storytelling, fun, the sharing of cultural and traditional wisdom between and among the youth, elders, women and men. As Netfa Freeman from the Institute for Policy Studies put it simply,

"We have to be abreast of geopolitical events. Generations change but the knowledge must remain. We have to become accustomed to keep up with geopolitical news, make it a practice, a habit...debate needs to happen at the grassroots level where people may not have the ability to read and write but that does not mean that there isn’t intellectualism there, genius there! That is where popular education comes in."
Even with popular education, historic U.S. propaganda wars, the corporate media and the school-to-prison pipeline have further neutralized and deteriorated our political imagination. Nefta Freeman used Black History Month as an example of how the media stripped away the Pan-African origins of the holiday leaving an uprooted interpretation of Black History Month where the founding radical African-descendant and Black revolutionaries such as Carter Woodson, W.E.B. Dubois and Marcus Garvey, are buried under what the media portrays “selfishly” as American history. “They don’t even say that Black history is an extension of African history anymore... what does that do to our psyche?” asks Nefta.

Rob Robinson, Member of the U.S. Friends of the Movement of People Affected by Dams is an advocate for changing the U.S. narrative about land access and ownership and creating a collective story. Rob found himself homeless when he realized that he could never reach the idealized American dream of owning a home or even paying rent in New York because land in the U.S. is systematically commoditized. As co-founder of Take Back the Land, he has been invited around the world to talk about his communal approach to land and housing and recalls with a hopeful awe the differences between social organizing here and in Brazil.

"Each day that I spent at the MST school in Brazil you went to class, you had breakfast, studied, had dinner and had the mistica. You knew every night that there was space for debate and you make it a regular practice. You are not cognizant, it happens organically. It is not too much different in Argentina and Colombia. There was space for intense political conversations – people run from it here as if someone might say something against the government, very few people really want to challenge power."

The mistica, often practiced by international movements such as La Via Campesina, institutionalizes a visual, symbolic and spiritual component that nourishes the struggle and valorizes the contributions of the many that came before and continue the struggle for the future.

Connecting root causes, not false solutions

The commodification of Mother Earth, the systemic hierarchies of race and class, the war on our wellness and food have their roots in the current neoliberal and capitalist system that exploits workers and puts profits before people.

Jose Bravo, the Executive Director of Just Transition Alliance, is the son of migrant farmworkers. He has worked in the Environmental Justice movement since its inception, and started to identify models of exploitation in his community and the environment in general.
"Then I saw those models from the U.S. shipped to the Global South and tried there – false solutions like Cap and Trade and the Carbon Markets. It was very important to learn from movements throughout the world how to combat these false solutions and link struggles internationally in the United States. It is imperative that we find solutions that affect us all."

This becomes increasingly important when carbon pricing and market-based alternatives are being presented as climate solutions in the new U.S. Clean Power Plan (CPP) introduced by the Obama administration both in the U.S. and at the twenty-first session of the U.N. Conference of the Parties (COP 21) that took place in Paris where corporations continue to dictate negotiations and countries continue to use market mechanisms to carelessly emit carbon well above the 1-1.5 recommended limits of temperature rise.

Diana Lopez, the Executive Director of Southwest Workers Union, spends time every year with her family in Mexico:

"When it comes to workers’ rights, everything is connected. Twenty-five years ago the Free Trade Agreement was signed in San Antonio which led to cheaper wages and no regulations [in the Global South] and where did they move to – to Mexico with my aunts and uncles."

"Now, we are seeing a new wave of young people fighting for their vision, due to their working and traveling hand-in-hand with other compañeros working on the same thing. Working in Peru with Grassroots Global Justice Alliance, we went to the Cumbre de los Pueblos. Being able to see the work in Peru and Latin America lets me understand how you do certain things and implement them here. The ideas around Buen Vivir, Agroecologia, Food Sovereignty, we are seeing them emerge in the U.S. now and it sparks a new energy here locally. It lets you build those relationships and develop the alternative system."

Changing the System

Angela Adrar's Reflections on La Via Campesina, Farmworkers and Agroecology

I started working with international members of La Via Campesina (LVC) 6 years ago representing the Rural Coalition in the...
It transformed my life as an organizer. Although, I had worked successfully in the past with peasants on agriculture and climate projects in Africa, Asia and Latin America, La Via Campesina was different because it built a collective power and voice, one that challenged the UN-FAO, and state governments to listen and act. La Via Campesina exercises its voice in over 74 countries around the world with 200 million farmers and builds power rooted in peasant values and rural priorities. This concept of living as a peasant or a ‘commoner’ is gaining more interest in communities in the U.S. that are exploring cooperative or common land ownership as an alternative to private ownership.

Working alongside comrades within LVC over the years has given me the courage to value my grandmother’s ancestral peasant roots and link up with others that have also been uprooted from their traditional territories and customs to hold the United States accountable for their damaging neoliberal practices and policies. In the U.S. we are building collective wisdom and action on Food Sovereignty, Peasant rights, and most recently on a "People’s Agroecology" that incorporates the relationships and lessons of our international colleagues and the social movements that continue to build with us from both rural and urban areas. It is powerful to continue exploring what living as a peasant and collective models of ownership could do for climate justice. Peasants cool the planet!!

Members of La Via Campesina North America have been participating in regional and international encounters for peasant "Agroecology Trainers" for over 8 years. These would include those held in Nicaragua (2008), Thailand (2011), Mozambique (2011) and Mali (2015). These encounters have provided the space for farmers and peasants from various parts of the world to share farming practices based on traditional wisdom, introduce practices that are in harmony with Mother Earth, and develop a unified political position on "People’s Agroecology," as it was described in Mali for the International Agroecology Forum in 2015. The Peoples’ Agroecology is "claiming back" the peasant knowledge of doing agriculture and valuing the economic, social and political framework that shapes agriculture production for popular communities around the world.

Reports on agroecology have successfully debunked industrial agriculture’s arguments in favor of production of scale based on the need for Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs), fertilizers and pesticides. Furthermore, it has gained support from the UN-FAO, academics...
and the scientific community for its long-term benefits to sustainably feed the world while combating climate change, all the while providing a tangible and accessible alternative to market-based false solutions such as climate smart agriculture, REDDs, bio-fuels and others that have been promoted by the World Bank and other special interest groups during climate negotiations.

Agroecology Encuentro

This year the Farmworkers Association of Florida (FWAF) and the Rural Coalition, both members of La Via Campesina North American region, were joined by U.S. allies along with other Via Campesina representatives from Puerto Rico, Brazil and Canada to hold the 1st Campesino-a-Campesino Encuentro de Agroecologia in the Southeastern U.S. As part of the political coordination team planning this seminal event, we incorporated methodology and knowledge sharing from the LVC international encounters and held the Encuentro in Spanish with interpretation in English to accommodate local needs. It captured the rich farming wisdom native to the Southeast along with those brought to the area by Latino and Haitian immigrants that work as farmworkers in the citrus and fern industries of Florida, of which the majority are women. With political sessions on feminism, farmworker realities and fundamentals of People’s Agroecology mixed in with technical trainings, we worked on the principles of developing a “new woman and man in society” that rises from polluted environments and creates a new vision for a collective and healthy future. For someone who grew up in Miami in the 90’s, a decade after the Cuban Mariel boatlift, it was in a way, giving back and coming home. It was an inspiration to see that in a polluted environment, migrant peoples rose and resisted a toxic system through healthy food, cooperative models of ownership and traditional agri-cultural wisdom. See the Encuentro declaration for more details.

The Agroecology Encuentro in Florida rooted in the farmworker experience helped spark dialogue about the dynamics of Peoples’ Agroecology in the U.S. as an alternative system to the predominant industrial agriculture system of production and begin a longer formation process between and amongst farmworkers across the nation about agroecology and their role in it as farmworkers. It created a space to further develop LVC regional agroecology activities in the U.S. but also Canada. At the same time, after many years of Rural Coalition representatives’ exchanges to Brazil to build and learn with the MST, it served as an opportune moment for the MST participants from Brazil to concretely understand the U.S. farmworker struggle and see the connections of labor in the U.S. with the struggle for land. It furthered a long-standing dialogue on a collaborative campaign to pressure corporations that buy oranges from Florida and Brazil to offer dignified wages and working conditions for farmworkers in both countries. “Here we were holding the Agroecology Encuentro only miles from the Tropicana manufacturing factory in the United States. It blew my mind. At the MST we know that to fight corporations you need to unite with workers,” said Cassia Bechara International Coordinator for the MST. Two MST delegates who work on agroecology will be joining.
FWAF this year to help build the Campesino Gardens, and sharpen collaborative efforts on the intersection of labor, agroecology and land struggles.

Still, organizing these interactions remains an under-funded priority. Although there are many U.S. organizations that support agroecology in other countries, few if any fund agroecology in the U.S., which is the center of industrial agriculture worldwide. The U.S. Food Sovereignty Alliance has consistently awarded both national and international organizations the Food Sovereignty Prize as a statement against the more conventional food prize awarded to industrial agricultural producers every year in October. This year in honor of Black Lives Matter the prize was awarded to the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund and the Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras marking not only their contributions to black lives but to black land ownership.

**Internationalism vs. Isolationism: Uniting on Energy, Water and Land**

The U.S. Friends of the MAB, is an initiative that incorporates organizations and individuals coming together to share in fundraising, political education built from both sides of the globe, and collective action on issues of energy, water and land.

In 2013, representatives from MAB (Movement of People Affected by Dams) were welcomed by the Rural Coalition to D.C. to meet with Environmental Justice groups and other allies in the "belly of the beast" and create a long-term vision of what a sustained international exchange on energy could lead to. It was a great opportunity for those in the MAB to see first hand the situation that farmers and workers in the U.S. experience. And while MAB focuses primarily on hydro-dams, while what is affecting most farmers here in the U.S. is fracking, the struggle was the same. Last year, MAB returned and spoke on a panel at the Left Forum about ending extreme energy and met with Environmental Justice allies in New York. They traveled across the Northeast and Southwest and shared stories and learning from community resistance on fracking but also approaches to generations-long community water and land management, as is the case in New Mexico and Indigenous lands.

Two years later, in 2015, U.S. social movement delegates went to Brazil for a month furthering relationships and connections on the issue of energy and water. MAB is one of the founders of La Via Campesina with a history of 30+ years that has been successful in creating large social resistance against exploitative water and energy practices in Brazil, building movement examples that can benefit groups in Detroit and other cities and towns that are fighting for their water, land and energy rights.

This social movement exchange comes at a time when both the U.S. and Brazil are experiencing severe drought conditions that are affecting food sovereignty and farming livelihoods. But also at a time when American energy companies are encroaching on Brazil to tap into its vast shale gas reserves after pressure by U.S. social movements against the long-term environmental and community contamination of hydro-fracking has narrowed their markets.

If Brazil decides to exploit its reserves, it could be the world’s second largest natural gas producer.
gas producer. The U.S. is the expert in fracking technology at a global level. Thirty-one fracking companies have set up in Brazil, many of which are from the U.S. Ecohermanas, a DC-based women’s organization I co-founded, sent Joelle Robinson, a DC native and environmental justice activist from the River Terrace community of Washington DC, to Brazil to learn and exchange as part of the U.S. Friends of MAB exchanges. River Terrace is a DC neighborhood that fought long and hard to get an energy plant out of their neighborhood and won. Energy and water issues such as these and others related to afro-descendent, peasant, indigenous, rural and urban communities will be explored to develop grassroots organizing strategies of mutual benefit and lead to a second MAB delegation visit in 2016 for further strategy development and stronger ties to resist a dirty war on our land, water and energy that has no frontiers.

At the time of this writing, one of Brazil’s most devastating social and environmental crimes occurred in Mariana, Minas Gerais, (where Joelle visited earlier this year) caused by the mining company Samarco Mineração SA, a company owned by VALE and BHP Billiton. Reports indicate 55 to 65 million cubic meters of waste that caused a flood of toxic sludge that killed people, destroyed homes, schools, crops, infrastructure, contaminating all the water of the Doce River, leading to death of animals and all the fish, devastating all existing life throughout the river. The US Friends of MAB have been communicating closely with the MAB, to share breaking news, put pressure on the Brazilian government to hold corporations accountable and share messages of solidarity from social movement groups in the US. The lines of communication and common resistance have provided communities most devastated with hope.

At the same time, hundreds of thousands of organizers from all over the world are on the streets of Paris for COP21, demanding real solutions to climate change that are equitable, just, and incorporate rights for Mother Earth, Indigenous peoples and community power. Farmworkers that engaged in the Campesino-to-Campesino Agroecology Encuentro are in Cuba exchanging with the National Association of Farmers (ANAP), Peter Rosset, from La Via Campesina, and other comrades on the collective future of People’s Agroecology, sharing real experiences for a world that values hope, land, energy, and water at a crucial time in Cuban and US international relations. It is as if the conditions for a new system are finally ripening cultivated by the struggle and resistance of the many before us. As we move into this season of harvest may the international solidarity that we reap be less of charity and more of social justice, equity, and integrity in partnership and struggle. The new system is so close and yet, the struggle continues. La Lucha Sigue!
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Sources:

Energy in Brazil:
FrackingWatch: Brazil figures out what CA hasn’t

Via Campesina and Agroecology:
Publications

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