



why.

WhyHunger

El Sueño Americano — The American Dream

By:

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– The Farmworker Support Committee
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CATA - The Farmworker Support Committee is a membership-based migrant and agricultural worker advocacy organization. CATA has been working for almost 40 years to improve the conditions of workers, their families, and the communities they live in through organizing, capacity-building, and self-empowerment. Projects and campaigns are undertaken with the goal of achieving meaningful and lasting improvements rather than mere reforms to a legal and economic system that is structurally biased against migrant workers and farmworkers. CATA has offices in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Maryland.

"I do not want my children to suffer like I did but how will I do that? If I stay over there, I will not be able to better myself because I noticed that in my country, the situation is harsh. You can't succeed. You can't. And so I made a decision. I said 'It's better if I go, and I only ask God to help me make it, and I will make it no matter how hard the journey is. No matter how the route is, all I think of is getting there. And once I arrive there, I know that I will work and I will start sending money so my children can go to school...' and thank God for helping me. It took so long, I suffered. They kidnapped us and everything that happened on the way here but I never gave up; for my kids. And I arrived here, and all my check, all of what I earned, I would send it and I told my wife to buy them clothes, take them to school so they can study and thanks to God my children, not all, but two have graduated..." — Gaspar, CATA Member

In my role since 2014 as an organizer for CATA - The Farmworker Support Committee, I have heard first-hand the stories from parents who have left their home country and their families to be able to give their children a better future. The majority of those who migrate to this country, do so with the hope of finding and living the so-called "American Dream" that they hear about from those who have returned from being in the United States. The American Dream means different things for different people, but most come with the hope of rising out of poverty and providing future generations with opportunities that they themselves never had. My parents also migrated to the United States in search of a better life. Both my parents are from Oaxaca, one of the southern states in Mexico. Although they are from nearby indigenous rural communities, they each left their home at an early age back in the 80's on their own separate paths. My mother was 18 and worked as a domestic worker in San Diego and, at the age of 19, my father began his journey at a plastic factory in East Los Angeles.

When migrants go back to their country of origin, they tell their countrymen that life is lived to the fullest in the United States. They tell them the potential that they have seen. They see that some people in the U.S. make a lot of money, have a car, go on vacations, even though this is not their own personal reality. They bring back stories of possibilities. That is why people continue to migrate. They have ►

this image in their heads, an intense hope for these possibilities, that pushes them to take the risks to come to this country without much thought on the consequences and obstacles, some potentially deadly, that they will encounter.

Regardless of the high risk factor, people cross the border with the hope to earn enough money to build houses back home and provide the best for their children, including an education. It is with this mindset that they embark on a journey to a foreign country. However, once in this country, they encounter a harsh reality that they have to live every day. Although many become discouraged with this reality, they stay. They stay because they are now in debt after borrowing the money needed to make the trip. They stay because they want to fulfill the promises they made to family and prove that leaving them behind was worth the trip. Many say they will come for a short period of time, just to make the money they need, but by the time they realize it, they have spent their entire lives here.

One summer, while I was working at a produce packing-house in southern New Jersey, I heard

a supervisor screamed at other workers... "You want the American Dream, but the only dreams you'll have will come from exhaustion." This is something that struck me because it's true, many people suffer through hunger and exhaustion in order to have enough money and be able to survive the month while supporting their family. They are willing to eat cheap food that harms their health and work long hours to make more money. We say that people should work to live and not live to work, but in most cases people have to work constantly just to be able to survive.

Los Invisibles — The Invisibles

Because of industrial countries like the United States, Latin American countries suffer due to bad trade policies and cheap labor practices. Deeply imbedded in the causes of our unjust food system are the vast and ever-growing effects from the hugely influential free trade agreements that the U.S. has established with other countries. The agreements with countries in Latin America, beginning with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, which flooded the Mexican market with cheap and subsidized American food ▶





staples, have caused a remarkable increase in immigration to the United States from Mexico beginning in the mid to late 90's. No longer able to make a living at home, formerly subsistence farmers were forced to leave their homes and look for work in neighboring towns and cities. With the job-seekers outnumbering jobs, the search continued north to the United States.

Therefore, to talk about food justice without talking about the greater picture and roots of U.S. capitalistic imperialism would be missing the point. In the U.S.' quest for cheap goods and labor, we have intentionally created a need for undocumented, low-wage workers. As we pump cheap food into the Latin American and domestic marketplaces, it is the workers, who we lure here to help us produce this food, that suffer the consequences, coming up against many barriers to securing their own daily meals. Farmworkers are the ones who make sure we have our food on our tables and yet they are the ones who have the least access to it.

"The biggest problem in our country when us peasants sow beans and corn is that we invest too much money and sometimes we borrow money to be able to purchase fertilizer and seeds. When the time to harvest comes, it does not even make up to the expenses that we had; it's so cheap. It is so cheap and people do not even buy it." — Gaspar, CATA Member

Because many of migrants sustain themselves through agriculture in their home country, they have that knowledge of working the land and so they seek jobs in agriculture when they come to the United States. In past generations, migrants who work in agriculture in their home country were referred to as *campesinos* or peasants because they worked their land. Here in the United States, they ►

do the same work with the difference being that now they are working for someone else and are therefore considered farmworkers.

In order to find work for most of the year, immigrant farmworkers migrate from state to state depending on what is in season. On the East Coast, they start from the state of Florida harvesting oranges and move North. They move up to North Carolina to work in the production of tobacco, to New Jersey for blueberry and peach season, to Pennsylvania and New York for apples, and then Maine for more blueberries. It is said that agriculture is an industry that does not require any skill, but many of these workers are wealthy in knowledge but, because they are working for someone else, they do not have the chance to apply this knowledge.

Farmworkers not only work from sun up to sun down harvesting our fruits and vegetables, but they are also the ones who package our food. You may ask, why do they work such long hours? The assumption could be that they want to work long hours to make overtime, but farmworkers are generally not paid overtime and in many cases are not even paid an hourly rate. The reason why many of them try to work

as much as possible is because the longer and faster they work, the more they will earn. Many farmworkers work on contracts where they get paid for what they pick but working under this piece-rate system forces them to overwork. They spend long hours at work being exploited to yield a great amount of work for which they are not compensated enough.

For example, the city of Hammonton in New Jersey is known as the world capital of blueberries, and is surrounded by blueberry fields. From late June to early July, the town fills with workers who come in just to pick the blueberries. You know it's blueberry season because the supermarkets, the laundromats, and local parks are filled with people. One farm can employ up to 700+ workers for those few weeks of blueberry season and, as of 2016, the average pay was \$4.25 for 12 pints of blueberries picked. Twelve pints of blueberries is equivalent to what workers call a *cario*. To fill a *cario*, they have to fill a bucket, which they carry attached around their waist, one and a half times. Depending on the speed they are working at or the experience they have, a worker can pick on average between 30 and 45 *carios* during the 10 to 12 hour work day. You can imagine what it's like for workers who ►



have to sustain themselves and their families back home while finding the stamina it requires to earn enough each day during the short period that blueberries are in season.

As time passes we see more and more youth migrants coming due to their ability to produce more. Sometimes they get yelled at for picking fruits and vegetables that are not yet ripe or that are already rotten. Workers are not thinking about what to pick and what not to pick because the only thing that is on their mind is to pick as much as they can as fast as possible. In some instances, workers end up earning less than the minimum wage if they don't pick enough. Workers concentrate on working longer hours, to pick more produce and earn more money, despite the exertion that takes a toll on their bodies and can later lead to long term illnesses. The greatest health risks to farmworkers are work-related musculoskeletal disorders and exposure to pesticides. Work-related musculoskeletal disorders include backaches and pain in the shoulders, arms and hands caused by repetitive motions over long periods of times that can lead to permanent joint pain and arthritis. Long-term pesticide exposure causes farmworkers to suffer more chemical-related injuries and illnesses than any other workforce in the nation. Diseases that are most linked to pesticide exposure are asthma, autism and learning disabilities, birth defects and reproductive dysfunction, diabetes, Parkinson's and Alzheimer's diseases, and several types of cancer.

Justicia Alimentaria — Food Justice

CATA's Food Justice Program provides the resources and space for members and their communities to build sovereignty over their food and work towards a more fair and just food system. The areas where CATA works in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Maryland, are rural communities where many of the members ►



come from Puerto Rico, México, Guatemala and Honduras. Many think that the skills needed to work in agriculture are few, but making sure we have good food that is produced with care for the land in mind, takes special knowledge. Many of the migrants who work in agriculture are people who grew up with these skills. The Food Justice Program provides the space for members to use those skills through initiatives such as community gardens and herbal medicine programs, as well as helping them to better understand our unjust food system.

Here in the United States, food is produced more as quantity over quality. It is not about whether it is nutritious but rather if it looks "good" on the outside even though it might be tasteless or have been forced to grow in a short period of time. Our food system is dependent on pesticides and paying workers a low wage in order to meet the demand for cheap food. This creates a vicious cycle because farmworkers are only able to afford cheap, processed food with little access to healthy, organic produce.

"Since the time that I entered the "North," during the 9 years that I have been here, all the time that I have been in the fields - all the fields use chemicals to grow... to grow fruits, so that fruits won't get damaged, so that the flower doesn't get damaged, and all that, they use a type of chemical for each stage of the fruit's lifespan - to have color, so that they don't get attacked by pests, so that the "quality" improves, and each chemical has its way to grow the field. And so the bosses apply it, that's how they do the work."

— Antelmo, CATA Member

Part of CATA's Food Justice Program is establishing organic community gardens. The purpose of the community gardens is to create a space for people to grow their own chemical-free and culturally-appropriate food. Many migrant workers do not have permission to grow their own vegetables at home due to them not owning the property or they simply cannot access the seeds they need. The gardens are also a learning space where others can learn of different techniques and ways to grow food with no chemicals.

Many call this way of growing "agroecology", but these practices were in existence even before pesticides came to exist. It was not until recently that the word "agroecology" became trendy but the concept of agroecology has been in existence for many years. Now, we are trying to create an alternative to industrial agriculture to save our planet and protect its people. These practices are not new, but many of them have disappeared or are disappearing because our ancestors are taking this knowledge with them. For this reason, it needs to be passed on to those who remain. ▶





If we really think about it, many of those who came before us were able to live long lives because they ate healthy and were not exposed to all those hazardous chemicals that are used to keep our food ripe and fresh and that are now not only destroying our bodies but our land, climate and our future.

CATA is there to provide the necessary tools but the community has the knowledge. Some of that knowledge not only consists of growing food but also knowing ways to treat illnesses and use herbs as medicine. Due to the immigration status of many members of the community, they have no access or limited access to health care. Even if they can get access to get treatment, medicine is quite costly. As part of CATA's food justice work, in 2015 we initiated an exchange between an herbalist and members to get advice on how to treat illnesses using local herbs and plants. Members also have the chance to share some of their remedies using herbs that are

native to their home countries. So now, the garden is a way to access organic produce, give people control over what they grow and eat, and give them access to herbs that could be useful for medicinal purposes.

Having a community garden is a small change but we see this work as a model that could have an impact across the country. CATA has been in the movement for sustainable agriculture for many years, advocating for workers' rights and educating others on how workers' rights are a crucial component to achieving food justice. Over fifteen years ago, CATA, along other organizations, initiated a conversation among farmers and farmworkers and those who practice sustainable agriculture. This led us to co-create with several other organizations The Agricultural Justice Project (AJP) and develop the [Food Justice Certification standards](#). The Certification is a collaborative stakeholder-process that was created to be a viable model for fairness in the food system. The certification is based on a high set of criteria that verify and recognize agricultural and food businesses who subscribe to a strong set of standards that value the rights of workers and farmers in addition to environmental stewardship. The Food Justice Certification addresses workplace health and safety, fair wages for workers and fair prices for farmers, child labor, and other issues. These high-bar standards, when met, allow for a truly fair and safe workplace for workers and production for vendors and consumers. They guarantee organic growing practices, a living wage and collective bargaining for workers, and fair prices for farmers.

In the U.S. industrial model of agriculture, modern food policy and practice allow farmworkers to be treated as commodities and provide little health and safety protections. Essentially, in order to genuinely talk about a just food system we must first address labor inequalities. ►

We see our efforts as trying to improve conditions for workers from the individual and local level, with the community gardens, health and safety trainings, and herbal medicine initiatives, all the way up to the national and international level, by using the Food Justice Certification to create just and systemic changes in the food system.

The current agricultural system requires much labor, and workers should be treated in a way that fairly compensates them for their hard work. But, it doesn't work that way. Farmworkers are some of the most vulnerable workers and face many health risks. The Food Justice Program is just one way we are addressing those vulnerabilities and risks. All workers and all people have the right to dignified work and to be able to meet their most basic human needs. That is our goal. We support the migrant community to organize and stand up for what is right and what they deserve. The only way to create systemic change is to come together and work together

for what is right and just. That is what CATA's mission is all about and that is the goal we will always strive to meet.

At the societal level, this is a time of much uncertainty. The rhetoric against the immigrant community and other communities of color turns more hateful each day. We do not know what exactly awaits us with the new administration, but we know for sure that it will not be the full recognition of the contributions and human rights of the immigrant community and the working class of our society. CATA and its members believe in an inclusive country that stands for tolerance and respect for all people, regardless of race, religion, country of origin, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and immigrant status. We know that now is the moment to organize ourselves and lift up our voices, as many times as it takes, against any discriminatory policies that are and will be implemented. We need to be united in order to face what is coming in the future. ■■■

We cannot think just of ourselves and in our own interests, we must see how we are all connected in the struggle for the greater good. It is our responsibility to be in solidarity with our brothers and sisters, including the Latino community, refugees, Muslims, the LGBT community, African-Americans, and any other group that comes under attack.



Kathia Ramirez

Kathia is an organizer and the Food Justice Coordinator at CATA –The Farmworker Support Committee/Comité de Apoyo a los Trabajadores Agrícolas. Kathia is from Los Angeles, CA although her parents migrated from the State of Oaxaca, Mexico where they have a history of working the land. She has been working at CATA since 2014 and she has quickly become an integral member of CATA's team. In her position as Food Justice Coordinator, she serves as CATA's representative on the board of the Domestic Fair Trade Association and the U.S. Food Sovereignty Alliance. In her limited free time, she loves gardening, cooking and reading. Before working with CATA, she attended Mt. Holyoke College in Western Massachusetts where she graduated in 2013 with a B.A. in Latino Studies and Spanish. ■■■

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Food Justice Voices

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