

Food First NEWS & VIEWS

INSTITUTE FOR FOOD AND DEVELOPMENT POLICY

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Greening the Food Deserts

By Luis Lei and Annie Shattuck

Recently First Lady Michelle Obama [announced](#) that SUPERVALU, Walgreens and Walmart committed to open or expand 1500 supermarkets across America's food deserts—low-income areas without easy access to a supermarket. While improving food access is a noble goal, the announcement merits a closer look.

Critics of the program note that health disparities are more strongly related to poverty than location of grocery stores. In fact, a [recently published study](#) in a top medical journal found that “greater supermarket availability was generally unrelated to diet quality...” Responding to the announcement, Joe Hansen, of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW), [pointed out](#) that “Walmart is more responsible than any other private employer in our country for creating poverty-level jobs that leave workers unable to purchase healthy food.”

For Walmart, urban expansion has nothing to do with food deserts. Walmart desperately needs a fix to its sagging bottom line. The company is under pressure to expand after eight quarters of [falling sales](#). Walmart has historically been kept out of major urban areas by a combination of high real estate prices and resistance from organized labor. Now, with real estate prices low, Walmart and other retail chains are swiftly moving in to capture urban markets. Success could boost Walmart's profits by some [\\$80 billion](#) a year.

The corporate ‘greening’ of America's food deserts was not the first option put forth by the Obama administration. In February of 2010 the administration announced a national [Healthy Food Financing Initiative](#) (HFFI) modeled on a successful program in Pennsylvania. The [Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative](#) (FFFI) used \$194 million to offer loans and grants to 93 fresh food retailers in the state. As a result, FFFI increased access to healthy food for more than 400,000 residents, created more than 5,000 local jobs, and boosted local tax revenues. Furthermore, all the funded projects were independent businesses. The FFFI had a special [emphasis on job quality](#). Though not expressly part of the eligibility criteria, the program prioritized community development and turned down applicants due to low-wage, dead-end and unstable job prospects.

Like the FFFI in Pennsylvania, the federal HFFI is poised to attract and benefit independent retailers. However, the \$400 million program failed to secure funding during the [FY2011 budget negotiations](#). While the departments in charge of HFFI (Treasury, USDA and Health and Human Services) are implementing [some programs](#) with existing resources, the combined \$20 million is a drop in the bucket compared to corporate cash flows. As the FY2012 budget negotiations unfold, HFFI's ambitious programs may never come to fruition.



Mandela Market Coop, photo by NeEddra James

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The Institute for Food and Development Policy - known as Food First - is a member-supported, nonprofit "peoples' think tank" and education-for-action center. Our work highlights the root causes and value-based solutions to hunger and poverty around the world, with a commitment to fighting racism and establishing food as a fundamental human right.

However, Walmart has no need to access federal funds, and certainly no desire to commit to job quality provisions. In October 2010, Walmart issued [a \\$5 billion bond](#) offering the lowest interest rates on record—starting close to the rates on the bonds issued by the U.S. Treasury. By December the company was sitting on \$10 billion in liquidity. On the same day that Michelle Obama announced the corporate commitments, she also unveiled the [California Fresh Works Fund](#), a \$200-million program modeled after the Pennsylvania FFFI. Whether this new fund will be able to replicate Pennsylvania's success in boosting local businesses in California is yet to be seen, but activists are hopeful.

Whether or not retailers like Walmart can make a meaningful contribution to greening urban food deserts may depend on the quality of the jobs they offer. Responding to the entry of corporate retailers, long time Oakland food justice advocate Brahm Ahmadi said:

We all know the model under which these large corporations operate, and there is no reason why they won't replicate the same essential business model in neighborhoods that need not just any jobs, but need good living-wage jobs that pay meaningful earnings and teach meaningful skill sets.

Campaigns across the country are underway to pressure the promised 1500 Walmarts, SUPERVALUs and Walgreens to hire full-time employees from the neighborhoods they serve, sign labor agreements, and pay living wages. Those who care about health disparities in low-income neighborhoods should join them. It is clear that if greening the food deserts is a policy priority, then we need more than just new supermarkets. We need programs that reduce [record high income inequality](#) and create jobs with decent living wages.

The Violent Face of Land Grabs in Honduras: When Losing Hope is Not an Option

By Leonor Hurtado

"Despite the horrible things I discovered on the trip to Honduras, I returned feeling more stimulated than depressed." remarked Food First's Tanya Kerssen, who participated in a June human rights observer tour in Honduras.

In her report back, Tanya first presented the political context of the coup on June 28, 2009 which deposed democratically elected President Manuel Zelaya. He was not charismatic, nor a strong nationalist, but he blocked the privatization of the national telephone and electric services, joined ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of the Americas—a Venezuelan led initiative to support Latin America), gave land rights in the Aguán Valley to campesinos as a way to meet rural demand, and attempted to introduce a referendum for a new national constitution.

This constitutional reform proposal was seen by sectors of the right as a move to ensure Zelaya's reelection as president—something that the Honduran constitution didn't allow. This referendum was used as justification for the coup that exiled Zelaya to Costa Rica. Illegal elections were held in November 2009, with large sectors of the public refusing to vote. In January 2010, Porfirio Lobo was installed as president of Honduras, and was immediately recognized by the U.S. government.

Honduran government officials claim that things are now normal. However constitutional rights and freedoms of expression, assembly,

and habeas corpus are still denied. The government has militarized electrical and telephone services, as well as the Ministry of Agriculture. The army and police routinely kill, torture, and imprison citizens including youth, teachers, peasants and workers.

Tanya's group of human rights observers visited the Palmerola U.S. military base which has supported operations that defend U.S. strategic interests in Latin America since 1980. The guards outside Palmerola didn't know how to respond to the observers, claiming that Palmerola was simply a Honduran base with a U.S. program. The U.S. observers were able to speak to U.S. military representatives, but obtained no useful information.

The observers also visited a farming community in the Aguán Valley, an area in which rural communities and organizations have fought to defend their lands since the coup of 2009. Since the coup, 46 campesinos have been killed. This is part of a relentless effort by the current government to acquire land and expand production of palm oil for biofuels.

In 1974 a Honduran land reform law was passed to modernize, increase production and prevent peasant uprisings. In 1992 Honduras, with the help of USAID and heavy investments from the World Bank and the IMF, passed a new law under the guise of "agricultural modernization." Under this new law, large landowners, including Miguel Facussé, were able to appropriate almost all peasant lands in the Aguán Valley. Farmers have been fighting to recover their land—through occupation and in the courts—since 2000.

This July 2011 U.S. human rights delegation accompanied tumultuous demonstrations, observed civil strikes, heard declarations and saw many posters, flyers and educational material critical of the current illegal government. Civil society has continued to organize and educate to fight against the unjust and undemocratic government.

Tanya noted that these people know that their resistance is justified, and that they have the capacity and the right to win. They are working toward constructing a new society. This was a moving experience that helped these U.S. human rights observers recognize that losing hope is not an option.

News from the Oakland Food Policy Council, a project of Food First

The Oakland Food Policy Council and the Oakland City Planning Department are holding meetings this summer to get community input on how to update zoning regulations for urban agriculture. Interest has changed significantly since the city regulations were last adopted in 1965. The Planning Department has indicated that they are interested in encouraging food production in Oakland. After the City Planning Department staff drafts new zoning regulations, they will go to the City Planning Commission for more open meetings and then the Oakland City Council for yet more open meetings and finally adoption of proposed changes.

The Oakland Food Policy Council has bid farewell to their first coordinator, Alethea Harper, who has taken the Council through the process from idea to reality with the first of the Council's recommended policy changes aimed at improving access to healthy food for all residents winding their way through city processes. For current information on what's happening with Oakland's food policies, go to www.oaklandfood.org.

The Oakland Food Policy Council, in partnership with California Food and Justice Coalition (CFJC) and HOPE Collaborative, will hold two workshops in August on the Farm Bill and its upcoming reauthorization. The Farm Bill, which affects our food access, quality, and nutrition, includes SNAP funding and farm



Farming in Oakland meeting, photo by Oakland Local

subsidies, plus much more that affects the kind and price of food available.

Shortly, the Council will be hiring a new coordinator. In the meantime, Food First interns, Jaime Hamre and Teleri Fielden are giving it their very best to keep the Council members organized and the public informed.

On November 3 and 4 Food First and the California Food and Justice Coalition are offering 13 **Food Justice Tours** in Oakland and around Northern California. These tours are open to anyone even if you are not attending the Community Food Security Coalition conference from November 6-8 in Oakland. For information about those tours go to: <http://www.foodsovereignty tours.org/u-s-tours/cfsc2011/>. To find out about the Community Food Security Coalition conference, go to: www.communityfoodconference.com.

Upcoming Food Sovereignty Tours include a trip to **Oaxaca** from December 20-27, 2011 and **Cuba** from January 12-23, 2012. For details and other tours go to <http://www.foodsovereignty tours.org/>.

Book Release Party marks the 35th Anniversary of Food First

Food First celebrates our 35th Anniversary with a book release party for the Food First book, *Food Movements Unite!*, on Saturday, November 5, 2011 at Pro Arts in Oakland, CA 94612. Come to this free event and meet the authors including Raj Patel, Brahm Ahmadi, Eric Holt-Giménez, and Rosalinda Guillén.

Get your book signed and mingle with others involved in bringing social movements together to transform our food system. This

event is being held a short walk from the annual Community Food Security Coalition Meeting at the Marriott in downtown Oakland on November 5-8, 2011.

If you can't come to the book release party you can order the book, *Food Movements Unite!* at www.foodfirst.org/en/catalog/101/book or call Rowena at 510-654-4400 ext 232. The book includes the latest thinking from activist scholars from around the world. We encourage you to consider hosting an event with one of the authors at your college, bookstore, other community venue or home.

Contact Marilyn at 510-654-4400 ext 234 to explore booking a speaker.

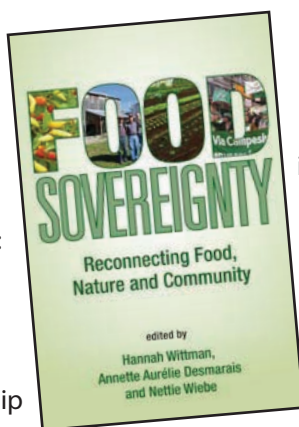
The release of this book is occasion to pull together communities within communities to work toward transforming how we grow, transport and sell food, and how and where we eat it. These are political questions we ask ourselves at a time of peak oil, climate change, and dramatic increases of toxic runoff into our diminishing fresh waterways.



FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: Reconnecting Food, Nature and Community

Edited by Hannah Wittman, Annette Aurélie Desmarais, and Nettie Wiebe

Global resistance to the social, environmental, and economic destruction perpetuated by the global food system has led to a new and radical response from peasant and farmer organizations: food sovereignty. Food Sovereignty gives voice to the peasant movements that are planting the seeds of a revolution that could fundamentally alter our relationship with food — and with each other.



October 2010 Paperback \$24.95 32 pages ISBN 978-0-935028-37-9

FOOD MOVEMENTS UNITE! Edited by Eric Holt-Giménez

Food Movements Unite! provides a sector by sector road map for bringing the tremendous transformative potential of the world's food movements together into a powerful transnational force capable of ending the injustices that cause hunger. In *Food Movements Unite!* food movement leaders from around the world seek to answer the perennial political question: What is to be done? The answers—from the multiple perspectives of community food security a, peasants and family farm leaders, labor activists, and leading food systems analysts—lays out convergent strategies for the fair, sustainable, and democratic transformation of our food systems. Authors address the corporate food regime head on, arguing persuasively not only for specific changes to the way our food is produced, processed, distributed and consumed, but specifying how these changes may come about, politically.

TO ORDER AND SEE MORE FOOD FIRST BOOKS: www.foodfirst.org/en/catalog or contact Perseus Distribution, at 800-351-5073



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