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Reclaiming our Food Culture, Rebuilding our Food System

By Tanya Kerksen

“The interests of rulers require that their subjects should be poor in spirit, and that there should be no strong bond of friendship or society among them” – Plato

I arrived at Oscar Grant Plaza around mid-day on November 2nd. It was the day of the General Strike, called by Occupy Oakland at the General Assembly the week before. The atmosphere was festive, and the plaza was packed with families, art installations, workshops and a non-stop schedule of political actions—from a march on the banks to a flash mob choreographed to the disco classic “I Will Survive (capitalism).” A number of Bay Area food justice activists had come together that week to organize food-related activities under the rallying cry “Occupy the Food System!”

The plan was to dish out some healthy, organic food and hold a series of educational talks on topics like the corporate control of agriculture; the impact of pesticides; the basics of permaculture and guerrilla gardening; and the global food sovereignty movement. Despite a few early hiccups—the salad dressing disappeared in the chaos, as did a set of expensive chefs’ knives—the food justice teach-in and eat-in was an unqualified success. Food justice ‘artist’ Jennifer Johns kicked us off with an interactive hip hop performance. Food First fellows Annie Shattuck and Raj Patel served up black bean, spinach and feta salad (prepared by local chef Jenny Huston) to the occupying masses. Author Christopher Cook and organizations like the California Food and Justice Coalition, Baylocalize, People’s Grocery, Planting Justice, SPROUT Seed Library, Food First and Pesticide Action Network led workshops.

Perhaps most importantly, the General Strike Food Justice Teach-In showed us the value of coming together face to face—as opposed to via email, facebook or conference calls—to break bread and build relationships.

After the teach-in, we marched with thousands of Bay Area residents to the West Oakland Port, in solidarity with port workers and West Oakland communities. As the food justice contingent joined the massive march, it was clear that our struggle to rebuild local food systems is part of a larger struggle to rebuild whole communities—with quality education, healthcare, jobs, land and good food for all. The Occupy movement reminds us that food justice is about rebuilding the entire social fabric. And the first step towards rebuilding our social fabric is occupying physical space together, enjoying food together, making art and music together... In short, reclaiming our collective food culture(s).



Occupy the food system teach-in, Oakland CA

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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.

More recently members of the growing Occupy the Food System collaborative met to discuss using this momentum to build a strong local movement to take back and rebuild the East Bay food system. Our first resolution? Making a commitment to come together on a regular basis, share food and get to know each other. Who knew a potluck could be so political?

To sign up for periodic updates on Occupy the Food System! events and actions, go to <http://groups.google.com/group/occupyfood>

Food Workers for the Food Movement: ROC United
By Katie Brimm

This article is based on Jose Oliva's chapter in *Food Movements Unite!* entitled "The Restaurant Opportunities Center (ROC)," which highlights the relationship between two topics that, to some, may not seem intrinsically linked: the food movement and labor rights.

Oliva argues that for a truly sustainable food movement to happen, we need to look beyond our plate and see those most vulnerable to the injustices of the food system: its workers, who are frequently underpaid and experience high levels of poverty, hunger and violence.

Today more than half of all restaurant workers are struggling in poverty, while the work they do preparing and serving out food is often forgotten by the public. This has led some voices, notably that of the [Restaurant Opportunities Center United \(ROC\)](#), to call for an alliance between labor rights and the food movement.

[ROC United](#) looks to improve

restaurant workers' rights, arguing that a food movement will never be just and sustainable as long as the very system of labor it relies on is exploitative. As Oliva says in *Food Movements Unite!*, "Food has become the epicenter of a new worldwide movement dedicated to creating a more just and sustainable food system. With our inherent ties to the food industry, restaurant workers are inextricably linked to it."

With over 10 million workers, the restaurant industry is one of the largest and fastest-growing sectors of the US economy, bringing over \$515 billion in revenue to the nation's GDP. The success of the industry is tarnished by the poverty experienced by the



*Restaurant Opportunities Centers United
Flash Mob Protest*

majority of its workers and the lack of benefits, pervasive employment law violations, occupational segregation and discrimination they face. ([ROC](#))

It is important to reform conditions to better the lives of the millions of workers responsible for bringing us the very food that the movement is based on. A delicious, local, organic meal is not markedly more sustainable if produced under deplorable working conditions. Addressing labor rights will strengthen the food movement and have a positive spill-over effect on the rest of society. Oliva reminds us that "what happens

in the restaurant industry affects not only workers, but everyone who eats." Continuing violations in health and safety laws, due to high turnover and lack of proper training, endangers patrons. The combination of low wages, hazardous conditions and no health benefits results in uncompensated health care costs and increased reliance on social-assistance programs. These externalized costs must be subsidized by the public. Improving conditions in the food industry would alleviate these costs and have a positive influence on fair labor practices in other sectors.

To promote its agenda, ROC United conducts research and campaigns, using public pressure to push food businesses to follow a "shared prosperity" model and have "High Road Practices" that ensure basic rights including paid sick days and minimum wage.

"We can create a new middle class," says Oliva, "one that is engaged, conscious, and aware of the food they eat. The only way to do this is by bringing workers wholly into the food justice movement and ensuring it remains class conscious, allowing for a critique that goes beyond our food to include the workers who make it."

Read Jose Oliva's article in Food First's newest book, *Food Movements Unite! Strategies to transform our food systems*. At <https://www.foodfirst.org/en/Food+Movements+Unite>

Corporate Tyranny and the Fate of a Nation

By Michelle Rostampour

The Occupy movement has generated support from a diverse body of stakeholders including

members of the food movement and labor. The struggle to promote respect for workers in a climate of corporate greed and unresponsive government shares many parallels with the 1930's labor struggles that saw masses of workers sacrificing their safety to stand up for justice. Their struggle included an end to child labor, just compensation for work (including overtime), and the right to collective bargaining. Today the struggle of workers to earn living wages—despite the vast wealth of the industries that employ them—remains the shame of our nation, and labor unions, along with those they represent, face an uncertain future. As corporate responsibility has failed to materialize in the absence of relevant policy, a key challenge facing the 99% is how to band together to demand a more equitable division of benefits amongst every member involved in each enterprise.

For the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) the violence brought upon Occupy demonstrators has come as no surprise. International President Bob McEllrath released a statement of solidarity with the movement in October, both thanking Occupy and drawing parallels between the struggles of the ILWU and the average American. McEllrath, promoted the slogan, *An Injury to One is an Injury to All!*, stating: "We know that justice won't be won by asking greedy employers for permission or waiting for politicians to pass laws."

This past September the ILWU made headlines for protests



A grain exporter's attempt to operate a new facility without longshore labor has met stiff resistance in the Pacific Northwest. Police responded by breaking up protests and arresting about 135 unionists since July, prompting the union to sue to stop "ongoing police brutality."

Photo: Dawn Des Brisay

launched against the multinational conglomerate EGT Development, which culminated in the dumping of thousands of tons of grain on railway tracks in Longview, Washington. While some media outlets painted the incident as a gathering of hooligans, the background story of the conflict reveals a plot typical of corporate monopolies. Three years ago, EGT, co-owned by Bunge Ltd. (USA), STX Pan Ocean (South Korea) and Itochu (Japan), was granted the rights to a parcel of the Longview Port with the support of the ILWU. EGT agreed to exclusively employ ILWU, Local 21, thus ensuring the endorsement of the port's board of commissioners to construct a \$200 million dollar grain export terminal. Upon completion of the construction, EGT announced a lawsuit against the port to allow non-unionized labor for longshore work on the terminal. The justification for failing to hold up their end of the deal was that the company (of which Bunge alone reported earnings of almost \$2.5 billion in 2010) would save \$1 million annually by hiring non-unionized workers and members of the International Union of Operating Engineers.

The announcement outraged members of the ILWU, who have worked the docks of Longview for its entire 70-year history. Critics of EGT's decision argue that the \$1 million EGT claims to be a significant sum is little more than pocket change for the joint venture. The true motivation more likely lies with their desire to weaken unionized dock work by positing unions against one another, taking advantage of the opportunity to introduce increasing numbers of non-unionized workers into their operations.

The decision of ILWU to direct its outrage toward grain shipments holds symbolic value in the larger context of social justice and the food movement in particular. Bunge is one of three agricultural exporting giants controlling 90% of the world's supply of grain as a result of the consolidation of the agriculture industry in past decades; a process that has been devastating for local agriculture, worldwide. Meanwhile, the dumped grain in this incident was destined for China, where the increasing demand for grain-fed meat has meant big business for corporate agriculture

at the expense of local production and the environment. EGT, like so other corporate oligopolies, has shown little humanity in its pursuit of profit.

The Occupy movement presents an opportunity for those exploited by tyrannical labor systems to unite in demanding legally-binding policies of corporate responsibility. The question is whether or not these diverse stakeholders will find the means to unite in a joint political project to revive America's history of rights-based movements.

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