

Food First NEWS & VIEWS

INSTITUTE FOR FOOD AND DEVELOPMENT POLICY

SUMMER 2012

VOLUME 34 • NUMBER 125



Eviction, Aguán Valley, Honduras, Photo: Tqí gt'J' ettku

Battling the Octopus: Food and Land Struggles in Honduras

By Tanya Kerssen

I decided to get organized and fight, because of how hard it is to feed our children. There are very few people who enjoy all of the country's wealth. So I joined the movement to fight for the land.
– Maribel García, Unified Campesino Movement of Aguán (MUCA), January 2012

Honduras is approaching the third anniversary of the military coup that overthrew its president on June 28, 2009. The event is a grim reminder, not only of the human rights atrocities that followed, but also of the rapid expansion of corporate control over land, resources and food. In the face of intense repression, Honduran peasant movements have built powerful movements for agrarian reform and food sovereignty.

Known as the quintessential “banana republic”, Honduras is no stranger to agribusiness. At the turn of the 20th century, U.S. companies took over massive swaths of fertile coastal land for fruit plantations. By 1917 a few foreign companies led by United Fruit (now Chiquita) owned almost a million acres of the best Honduran farmland. These companies exerted extraordinary power over domestic politics: United Fruit’s far-reaching political and economic influence in Central America earned it the nickname *el pulpo*, the octopus.

The expansion of export agriculture violently displaced peasant food production, deepening rural poverty and hunger. The fast rise of the corporate fruit empires also sparked strong social movements for the right to land. These struggles achieved important reforms, but the dominance of politically powerful landowners linked to foreign capital has persisted into the 21st century. The recent military coup, supported by the country’s landowning and business elite, ushered in yet a new phase of agro-industrial expansion and peasant repression.

The business-friendly administration of Porfirio “Pepe” Lobo seeks to position Honduras as “the most attractive investment destination in Latin America.” This includes providing tax breaks and other incentives to agribusiness, extractive industries (mining and logging), tourism, renewable energy (agrofuels and dams), and *máquila* zones (sweatshops) for textile manufacturing. In the fertile Aguán Valley near the Northern Coast, African oil palm is the hallmark crop, coveted by investors for its lucrative market as cooking oil, junk food and biodiesel.

**INSTITUTE FOR FOOD AND
DEVELOPMENT POLICY**

FOOD FIRST

398 60th Street, Oakland, CA 94618
Phone: (510) 654-4400
Fax: (510) 654-4551
E-mail: foodfirst@foodfirst.org
Web site: www.foodfirst.org

CO-FOUNDERS

Frances Moore Lappé
Joseph Collins

BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Joyce King, *President*
LaDonna Redmond, *Vice President*
Malia Everette, *Secretary*
Hank Herrera, *Treasurer*
Shyaam Shabaka, *President Emeritus*
Rosalinga Guillén, *Dyanne Ladine*,
Bobby Wilson, *Demalda Newsome*,
Nikki Henderson

STAFF & CONSULTANTS

Eric Holt-Giménez, *Executive Director*
Katie Brimm, *Food Sovereignty Tours*
Program Director
Esperanza Pallana, *Oakland Food Policy*
Council Coordinator
Marilyn Borchardt, *Development Director*
Rowena Garcia, *Administrative Assistant*
Martha Katigbak-Fernandez,
Operations Officer

FELLOWS & CONTRIBUTORS

Raj Patel, Jun Borrás,
Brahm Ahmadi, Rick Jonasse,
Leonor Hurtado, Annie Shattuck,
Tanya Kerssen, Zoe Brent, Anders Riel
Muller, William Wroblewski

INTERNS AND VOLUNTEERS

Lauren Anderson, Vishrut Arya,
Yvette Cabrera, Alejandra Cano,
Flora Chabane, Kate Cohen, Anisha
Hingorani, Stephanie Kennedy, Ji Won
Kim, Gabby Lee, Mariagiulia Mariani,
Danielle Nahal, Ilana Nevins, Michelle
Rostampour, Holly Shih, Agnes Bridge
Walton, Yi Wang

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.

Between 1980 and 2009, the global area planted to oil palm increased eightfold, from about 3.8 million acres to 30 million acres. In Honduras, oil palm increased from 98,000 acres in 1990 to 197,000 acres in 2005 to 308,000 acres in 2009.

Three investors are the primary beneficiaries of the oil palm expansion: René Morales, Reynaldo Canales and Miguel Facussé. They are now accused of having illegally acquired their lands and brutally repressed peasant communities. Between June 2009 and March 2012, approximately 60 peasant murders in the Aguán region alone are attributed to guards and mercenaries hired by large oil palm growers, often acting in concert with state police and military forces. Activists also point to the complicity of U.S. aid, which has been building up Honduran security forces in the name of the War on Drugs.

Now the richest man in Honduras, Miguel Facussé has become one of a handful of recognizable surnames in Honduras—the "ten families" as they are popularly known—with control over the country's wealth and political system. His companies in diverse sectors, from food to energy to tourism, have become a veritable "octopus" rivaling the historic power of United Fruit.

The expansion of oil palm and other export-oriented activities over the last 20 years have come at the expense of food crops such as corn, beans, rice and sorghum. As a result, peasant food producers have been pushed onto tiny parcels with poor soil, moved into the cities, or left the country in search of work. Remittances from migrant workers abroad—87 percent of whom live in the U.S.—have become the largest single source of foreign

exchange for Honduras, amounting to 20 percent of GDP.

This declining food production, urbanization and out-migration has been accompanied by increased imported and processed foods. Honduras now has the largest number of fast food franchises in Central America and a rapidly expanding supermarket and shopping mall sector. Along with the landowning elite, the few influential families that control supermarket and fast food chains are widely known to have supported the 2009 coup.

In the Aguán Valley, in the heart of Honduras' Northern agribusiness zone, a strong movement has emerged against corporate control of agriculture. Groups of organized peasant families are peacefully occupying oil palm plantations, that are designated for the collective use of the peasantry under the country's land reform laws. With over 3,000 member families, the Unified Campesino Movement of Aguán (MUCA) for instance, won a landmark victory in April 2010, signing an agreement to recover 27,000 acres of land.

While the large landowners have yet to relinquish the full 27,000 acres, and continue to repress peasant communities, MUCA now occupies approximately 7,400 acres on which its peasant members grow food and harvests palm fruit to support its families. In addition, the movement is developing a number of "food sovereignty projects" producing basic grains (corn and beans), fruits and vegetables, livestock and fish. The movement is also working to establish a network of small farmers' markets (consumos) to distribute local produce at low cost. MUCA is one of dozens of Aguán movements fighting for land and food sovereignty.

In the wake of a military coup supported by agro-food corporations, Honduran movements offer a striking example of how the struggle to democratize the food system is inextricably bound to the struggle to democratize the political and economic system.

Stay tuned for an in-depth Food First report on resistance to the corporate food regime in Honduras, forthcoming— summer 2012.

Message from Eric Holt-Giménez

It has been a busy Spring. Food First has been on tour with our latest book *“Food Movements Unite! Strategies to Transform our Food System”* which kicked off at a student-initiated event at Wesleyan University followed by presentations at Harvard, the College of the Atlantic in Maine, the Bertolt Brecht Center in New York, American University in Washington, DC, and presentations in Olympia, Washington at the Evergreen State College and at Washington State University in Bellingham.

Our partners—who did all the time-consuming organizing and outreach—included irrepressible organizations like Grassroots International, WHY Hunger, National Family Farmer’s Coalition, Community to Community, Food & Sustainable Agriculture Systems of College of the Atlantic, The Occupy Spring Symposium of Evergreen and Slow Food.

Food First has published over 30 books and we frequently give “book talks.” But this time, it was different. Everywhere we went, community organizations from the local food movements shared the podium with us to address the questions asked in



Rigores community after eviction, Aguán, Honduras
Photo: Roger Harris

Food Movements Unite! : What is to be done? How do we converge in all of our diversity? How can we become powerful enough to transform our food system? The answers are not simple (if they were we would have united already) but came in the rich dialogue, stretching from coast to coast, building bridges to overcome divisions of race, class, gender, age and between rural and urban communities. The transformation of our food system is coming about through a shared process of social learning grounded in the straightforward method of “action—reflection—action.” What the book and the lively public response makes clear is that even in the face of tremendous obstacles, “convergence” is already well underway at the grassroots. At Food First, we are privileged to be a part of this hopeful new trend.

Our international work continued. In May, with an intensive course in Food Movements to the Ph.D. agroecology program in Medellín, Colombia at the University of Antioquia. Run by world recognized experts in agroecology, professors Clara Nichols and Miguel Altieri, the program is a project of SOCLA—the Latin American Scientific Society of Agroecology. Students came from

Mexico, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Colombia, Brazil, Argentina and Spain to take part in this interdisciplinary degree. And In June we traveled to the Slow Food University in Bra, Italy to give three intensive Master’s courses and to present the new Italian version of Food Movements Unite! in Turin. The Master’s programs

at the University of Gastronomic Sciences include a wide range of subjects around food culture, with plenty of “hands-on” tasting adventures and field visits to producers and processors across Italy and Europe. Food First specializes in teaching about the political economy of the food system and the rise of food movements, worldwide. Our textbooks are our own books: *“Campesino a Campesino,”* *“Food Rebellions,”* *“Food Sovereignty”* and *“Food Movements Unite.”* Students from diverse backgrounds come from around the world and are passionate not only about food, but about building equitable and sustainable food systems.

We were also invited to Detroit, Michigan this year to participate in a three-day meeting of the Food Dignity project. This project for food democracy brings together groups from underserved communities in New York, California and Wyoming. Food Dignity’s vision is “a society where each community exercises significant control over its food system through radically democratic negotiation, action and learning in ways that nurture all of our people and sustain our land for current and future generations, and where

universities and cooperative extension are supportive partners in this process.” The stories from the remarkable organizations and people in this group are an inspiring mix of action research, advocacy and hands-on farm and community work. Part of our meeting was a field trip to visit the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network. Malik Yakini showed us around their urban farm, then took us to the Grace Lee Boggs Center where we met Grace Lee Boggs. It is rare that one is privileged to be in the presence of a dynamic 97 year old activist—especially one who radiates such contagious optimism and fierce love for people,

community and justice. She has spent decades in Detroit working with the African-American community and has seen the rise and fall of the auto industry and the labor movement and has been on the ground floor of the black power movement, the breaking of the Detroit city government’s color line, and the extensive community organizing that has taken place in the city in the wake of its post-industrial depression. When Grace Lee Boggs looks out at the acres of empty lots and abandoned houses in Detroit, she doesn’t see destruction, she sees opportunity. Her continuing work with the Detroit Black Community Food

Security Network leaves no room for hopelessness. In her latest book, *The Next American Revolution: Sustainable activism for the twenty-first century*—a bold and refreshing account of Grace’s vast experience and revolutionary vision of social change—she reaches back to the wisdom of Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X to remind us that to be transformational, we must ourselves always be in a process of transformation. These are the times, she says, to grow our souls. After seven decades of activism, she states simply, with a twinkle in her eye, “We are the leaders we’ve been waiting for.”

JOIN US ON ONE
OF OUR UPCOMING
FOOD *Sovereignty*
TOURS

ITALY: Slow Food and
Food Sovereignty in Piedmont
Oct. 16 – 24, 2012



BASQUE COUNTRY:

Food Sovereignty and
Cooperative Production
Sept. 8 – 16, 2012



**For more information and
updates about future
travel opportunities,
check out our website:
www.foodsovereigntytours.org
or email us at:
info@foodsovereigntytours.org**