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Peasant seed production at the International Conference of La Vía Campesina in Jakarta, Indonesia. Photo by Eric Holt-Giménez

After 20 Years, It's Time to Listen to Vía Campesina

By Eric Holt-Giménez

This June in Jakarta, Indonesia, over 400 farmers from 70 countries gathered at the 6th International Conference of La Vía Campesina to celebrate 20 years of struggle for food sovereignty. The representatives of this 200 million-strong international peasant movement hammered out a global call to action to bring an end to hunger, poverty, environmental destruction and social injustice.

The smallholders growing 70 percent of the world's food have a plan to save the world from hunger: it's called food sovereignty.

The 183 member organizations of Vía Campesina know that hunger is caused by injustice—not scarcity. (The world already produces enough food to feed 10 billion people.) Vía Campesina sees smallholder farmers, fishers, herders, people of color and women as the protagonists rather than the “clients” in solutions to hunger, poverty and climate change.

They support smallholder farming instead of plantation agriculture; they practice agroecology and reject the “New Green Revolution” and GMOs; they demand land reform and an end to land grabs; they reject the neoliberal free trade agenda that has destroyed rural economies over the last 20 years, driving millions to bankruptcy and migration; and they call for an end to all forms of violence against women, who, in fact, grow most of the world's food.

“We need an agricultural revolution. Farmers need to take back control over agriculture from agribusiness,” said Selene, a farmer from Africa. Edgardo, a farm labor leader from Nicaragua insisted that “We need a new world order based on social justice.”

These are strong words from people that mainstream development institutions are supposed to be helping.. One reason for this is the unprecedented levels of violence that extractive industries like palm oil, agrofuels and mining have unleashed upon the world's peasantry. It is not unusual in countries like Guatemala or Honduras for the army to enforce this “modernization” of the countryside at the barrel of a gun.

After eight years in Indonesia, Vía Campesina is moving its secretariat to Zimbabwe. Said Henry Saragih, global coordinator and head of Indonesia's farmer's union, “We will pass on the torch to Africa this year. Africa is a very important continent because the transnationals are grabbing land there and want to impose the green revolution model with GMOs. We in Asia already know that the green revolution has failed here. We extend solidarity and unite with the African peasant movements to choose a development path that will actually benefit the African people and peasants.”

If the world's leaders are interested in real solutions to hunger—and not just business as usual—they should listen to the voices of farmers and food producers calling for a different way forward: food sovereignty.

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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.

Immigration Reform: A path to servitude?

By Leah Scrivener and Eric Holt-Giménez

After a disappointing decision in late June that flew in the face of immigrant rights, the Senate successfully passed its immigration reform bill. While the Obama Administration refers to Senate Bill 744 as "common sense immigration reform," the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights calls it "punitive, flawed, and dangerous." If passed, S.744 would have disastrous consequences for working class immigrant communities.

The bill sets forth a program that would prevent four to five million currently undocumented immigrants from earning a path to citizenship; dramatically increase the militarization of the border; increase the flow of guest workers into the United States; and reduce the number of family visas distributed. These provisions would all serve to further punish and criminalize immigrants.

The Obama Administration claims this immigration reform will provide a path to citizenship for the 11 million undocumented immigrants currently living in the United States. However, upon closer examination, the "path" outlined in S.744 is highly inaccessible to millions of immigrants (especially from low-income communities) because of its stringent requirements. First, under the bill's provisions, it could take up to 20 years for an immigrant to obtain a green card. Second, the bill requires "continuous employment"—no less than 60 days of consecutive unemployment—as well as an average income no less than 125 percent of the Federal poverty level. With these harsh provisions, Peter Schey, President of the Center for Human Rights and Constitutional Law, estimates that 40 percent of all undocumented immigrants living in the US may be disqualified from the naturalization process.

These draconian regulations discriminate against low-income immigrant communities, sidestepping the fact that poverty is the major cause of migration. Employers—especially those who provide low-wage, dangerous jobs—benefit when

low-income, undocumented immigrants are unable to attain citizenship. This is because undocumented workers often fear deportation and are unable to access better jobs and labor protections due to their immigration status.

Another detrimental piece of the Senate's bill is the Corker-Hoeven "border surge" amendment, adopted a week before the Senate vote, which added \$46.3 billion in increased border spending. This sum would fund an additional 700 miles of fencing along the border; 20,000 new border patrol agents; and an increased use of drones and other surveillance technology. The National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights commented: "Military contractors, Silicon Valley and enforcement construction companies, who all lobbied heavily for more enforcement, must be cheering at the billions of dollars that could be headed their way."

Two other provisions of this bill include an expanded guest worker program and a reduction in family visas. These two provisions signal a shifting immigration policy that, notes author David Bacon, "benefits those industries dependent on cheap labor much more than it benefits immigrant communities themselves."

The expanded guest worker program offsets the Senate Bill's proposals to crack down on employers who hire undocumented immigrants through the electronic verification ("e-verify") system. This structure frees employers from scrutiny regarding the nature of their employees' documentation status, while allowing them to continue benefiting from cheap foreign labor.

As such, the guest worker program is attractive to business because it is legal in name, but functions in practice just like the undocumented labor market: it keeps wages low and prevents workers from organizing.

Clearly, big business is the big winner from the Senate's immigration reform bill. Not only would the bill push immigration as a vehicle to maintain inexpensive labor in the United States, but it would also further criminalize

immigrants and encourage wasteful military spending at the US-Mexico border.

The proposed reform bill is certainly not “comprehensive,” as it does not acknowledge the root causes of immigration to the US—namely, the destruction of rural livelihoods in regions such as Latin America due to US grain “dumping” and free trade agreements like NAFTA and CAFTA. The only “path” the Immigration Reform Bill offers immigrant families struggling to survive after 30 years of failed neoliberal economic policies is a path to servitude.

See online version of this article for notes and references: <http://www.foodfirst.org/en/Immigration+Reform+A+path+to+servitude>

“Changing Contexts, Consistent Principles”: A Conversation with Former Food First Director Walden Bello

By Leah Scrivener

Walden Bello became an analyst at Food First in 1987 and served as Executive Director from 1990 to 1994. He then went on to found the Bangkok-based NGO Focus on the Global South and today is a Congressman in the Philippines’ House of Representatives. He spoke with us about his history at Food First and his groundbreaking work in the Asia-Pacific region.

Food First: How did you first get involved with Food First, and what was the focus of your work?

Walden Bello: I was first recruited by Frankie [Frances Moore] Lappé and Joe Collins in 1987. Before that, I had been mainly involved in the movement to overthrow the Marcos dictatorship [in the Philippines]. Once Marcos fell, I was asked to join Food First and focus on Asia-Pacific issues. The big study that I did was a critical analysis of the newly-industrializing countries in Asia,, which came out as *Dragons in Distress: Asia’s Miracle Economies in Crisis* [Food First Books, 1992].

FF: Where do you see Food First fitting into the global food movement?

WB: Food First offers a critique of

the way that food policies are designed not to help people, but corporations. I think from the critique of the global food system, it draws out an alternative paradigm that emphasizes decentralized and localized food production. Its research supports food production that respects traditional food technologies, because cons and cons of people’s wisdom have been embodied in it. And it also emphasizes healthy food and diversity, as opposed to monoculture.

I’ve seen that Food First has become a sort of embedded analytical arm of the localized food production movement by providing quality analysis, direction and support.

FF: Could you talk about how you started Focus on the Global South?

WB: Focus on the Global South got started because I was very interested in doing work in the Asia-Pacific region on issues of corporate control and security. I think my training and the analytical paradigm that I absorbed from Food First was very helpful in terms of structuring the program of Focus on the Global South. The initial work dealt with structural adjustment issues, focusing on South Asia and Southeast Asia. Then we also had an active security program, tracking the development of the military structure of the United States, and military conflicts in the region.

Focus on the Global South came into being in the heyday of neoliberalism and globalization. In 1995, the WTO was formed, and it became immediately one of the targets of our advocacy. We were active in terms of analyzing why neoliberalism and free trade were subverting peoples’ lives. We were also active politically in the whole push against the WTO in Seattle [in 1999].

FF: Could you speak a little more about your current research interests and goals?

WB: The centerpiece of my book *Food Wars* [Verso Books, 2009] that came out in 2009 was the role of structural adjustment in developing countries in weakening our agricultural economies so that we had become more dependent

on corporate-driven agriculture.

In the last four years, migrant workers’ rights was a key issue of mine, and I became head of the Committee on Overseas Workers’ Affairs. I also became one of the leaders in pushing the Reproductive Health Bill, which finally passed last year. In the midst of that, I kept on writing about global issues beyond the Philippines. My book *Capitalism’s Last Stand* [Zed Books, 2013] focuses on the continuing importance of transnational corporations, and demystifying their role in the global economy.

FF: It seems that you’ve had a strong diversity of experiences within activism, NGOs, academia and now in government. What has it been like for you to jump between so many different arenas?

WB: It’s very important to be able to traverse and draw energy from these different milieus (politics, civil society and academia) because they keep you grounded.

I think the important thing is “changing contexts, consistent principles”: you keep your principles and vision stable, but you learn to work in different kinds of contexts and situations. Even as you have these principles, I think you need a certain amount of pragmatism so that you don’t become ineffective or doctrinaire.

And you need to be able work with different people. Certainly, when it comes to politics, there are people you would not have coffee or a drink with [laughs], but you are forced to work with them because you’re trying to craft a law or pass through legislation. And if they support a certain measure that would promote the interest of your community, although you might hold very different values, then you suspend your judgment. You sort of plug your nose in order to get things through [laughs].

So the important thing is to be able to do that, but at the same time, not become a compromiser and lose sight of your goals.

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