



Farmworkers in Washington strike in May over working conditions and wages. *Photo courtesy of Xolotl Edgar Franks/Familias Unidas por la Justicia.*

## Food First Supports Farmworker Organizing During COVID-19

Supporting farmworkers who are organizing for safer, healthier working conditions and wages is a critical step towards building a just food system. That is why, on April 23rd, Food First's Erik Hazard sat down with farmworker organizers and allies for a discussion on the COVID-19 pandemic and the challenges and opportunities it has created for farmworker communities. With over 500 people attending, the webinar served as a tool for political education on worker organizing and capitalism's relationship to immigrant farm labor in our food system.

Erik was joined by four panelists: Edgar Franks of Familias Unidas por la Justicia, an independent farmworker union of indigenous families located in Burlington, WA, representing over 500 Triqui, Mixteco, and Spanish-speaking workers at Sakuma Brothers Farm; Lucy Lopez and Australia Hernandez, who are organizers with Community to Community, a Bellingham, WA-based, women-led grassroots organization dedicated to food sovereignty and immigrant rights; and David Bacon, a labor photojournalist who has extensively covered farmworker issues and who once was an organizer himself.

We started off by discussing what it means for agricultural labor, considerably undervalued by capitalism before the COVID-19 pandemic, to now be considered "essential" by the government. Panelists noted how farmworkers and other food workers have always been essential to our food system. But despite their new, official status, farmworkers continue to face the threat of a racist immigration enforcement system while receiving no economic benefits (or government assistance).

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Food First is a “peoples’ think tank” and  
education-for-action center. Our work  
highlights the root causes and solutions to  
hunger and poverty, with a commitment to  
fighting racism and establishing food as a  
fundamental human right.

The webinar was framed so attendees could better understand the relationship between agricultural workers, our immigration system, and our capitalist food system. As David Bacon succinctly put it, “In the capitalist agriculture system in the US, the workforce has always been made up of people coming from somewhere else, going back to slavery.” Edgar Franks further articulated how capitalist agriculture feeds off an antagonism at the heart of American history, stating “there [has] always existed a contradiction about who is worthy to receive recognition as a human being and who is secondary.” This antagonism is clearly evident in the present period where an entire for-profit food system is dependent on a displaced, precarious workforce mainly from Latin America. Today’s immigrant agricultural workforce in the US is around 95% Mexican, with around half being undocumented. Decades of economic policies, largely driven by the United States and Mexico’s own ruling class, have forced many former farmers and workers from Mexico to migrate North and become wrapped up in a brutal immigration enforcement system. As Australia Hernandez noted, this system continuously helps to “produce new workers that our system can exploit for cheaper food,” while also making it incredibly dangerous and difficult to organize for workers’ rights.

The panelists also covered how the COVID-19 pandemic may be acting as a catalyst to set the US on a dangerous trajectory for the future of agricultural labor. President Trump’s administration is attempting to use this crisis as an opportunity to expand the H-2A guestworker program, a highly unjust, temporary visa program that Food First has criticized in the past. Panelists noted that the Trump administration, following a trend set by previous administrations including the Obama administration, was using this system of labor to further control immigrant labor. An expansion of H-2A could be used to negatively impact wages for all farmworkers while also undermining labor organizing and unionizing efforts in the fields. The Trump administration and large growers are pushing an expansion of the H-2A system to maintain a supply of highly exploitable labor that

limits permanent residency, rather than promoting stronger rights, better wages, and humane conditions so *all* farmworkers can work with dignity. Preventing growers and the US government from expanding this unjust program is a growing battle for the future of food justice.

The webinar made it clear that farmworkers are experiencing deteriorating health and safety conditions while receiving no help from recently passed federal relief packages. However, as Edgar Franks stated, “In order to receive some kind of worthiness of being human, it has always come through a struggle, through a fight, by organizing.” And COVID-19 may be providing new opportunities for organizing, which was covered in the final part of the webinar.

Panelists conveyed that the public is now clearly seeing our capitalist food system as inefficient, unsustainable, and inherently unjust for workers. As officially deemed “essential” workers, there is an opportunity during this crisis for farmworkers and communities to push back. Strengthening abilities to take action at work and collaborating with communities to build public support will be crucial in the coming months to improve conditions on the ground. As David Bacon said, we need to organize and “cross that enormous gulf that exists between rural areas and cities [...] When that happens we can win.”

If you missed the webinar, you can view the recording at <https://foodfirst.org/farmworkers-covid-19-and-our-capitalist-food-system-webinar/>.

### **Food First Fellow Walden Bello Unpacks Coronavirus and the Corporate Food System**

Food First Fellow and former Executive Director Walden Bello recently published an article illustrating how the COVID-19 crisis illuminates the weaknesses of the global food system. In *The Corporate Food System is Making the Coronavirus Crisis Worse*, Bello outlines the different dimensions of food systems that have contributed to the pandemic, noting the ecological disruption and extended supply chains as fatal flaws of the globalized food system.

Bello points to the destabilization of wildlife habitats through illegal trade in China as a key problem in viral transmission, and calls for radical changes to current government programs in order to protect public health and ecological systems. Bello explains how the growth of the global supply chain over the years has displaced regional and local systems, consolidating corporate control. The erosion of local food systems poses a serious threat to food security under the coronavirus crisis as the global supply chain struggles with issues of migrant labor and transportation bottlenecks.

Bello proposes a movement towards food sovereignty as an alternative to the corporate controlled global system, making it possible for us to work towards social and environmental harmony. As COVID-19 shines a spotlight on food production, Bello urges us to use the crisis to center our values, practice new forms of social relationships, and explore the possibilities of food sovereignty.

### Highlighting Food Worker Organizing in the Time of COVID-19

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, our food system's labor is finally being recognized as the foundation of society's daily life. Yet, our capitalist model of food production makes food workers extremely vulnerable to increased exploitation and danger under pandemic conditions. In *Food Workers Have Always Been Essential—Give Them What is Theirs*, Leila Mzali and Food First's Erik Hazard emphasize how the corporate food system create poor economic and social conditions for food workers, and suggest that the COVID-19 crisis demands a shift in power and true compen-



Photo courtesy of Joe Brusky (CC BY 2.0).



Australia's wildfires this past year reflect a fast-changing climate. Image by robdownunder (CC BY-NC ND 2.0).

sation for the workers who are the foundation of our food system. They highlight how workers are imposing new expectations on employers and the government, fighting to make this pandemic moment an opportunity to gain the long overdue rights that labor deserves.

### Food First Presents New Series on Australia's Bushfires

As governments around the world respond to the COVID-19 crisis, it is increasingly necessary to consider how these actions relate to the ongoing threat posed by the climate crisis. Food First's newest series, *Lessons from Australia's Bushfires*, aims to explore the solutions needed to face climate change by elevating the voices of Australian farmers and Traditional Owners on the frontlines. In the first article of this series, *Time for a New Narrative on Climate Disasters: Lessons from Australia's Bushfire*, Food First Fellow Eva Perroni situates the devastating summer fires within Australia's legacies of colonialism and policy failures to reveal the need for a paradigm shift.

The current narrative that Australia's bushfires are inevitable and uncontrollable overlooks the underlying historical and political conditions that facilitate the climate disaster. Displacement caused by settler colonialism suppressed Aboriginal land use practices, and government policies centered on economic growth and coal exploitation continue to ignore scientific evidence. As Australia

faces increased environmental stressors, it is clearly time to reject the government's lack of environmental action and erasure of Aboriginal knowledge. By focusing on the perspectives and experiences of those most impacted by Australia's environmental catastrophe, we can envision a system transformation that offers hope for a more sustainable, resilient, and equitable future.

### No Straight-line Path Towards Movement Building and a Just World

If you're like us here at Food First, this year has felt like a tumultuous one already, even *before* COVID-19.

The Democratic presidential primary definitely has been part of this tumult. We saw issues discussed in ways that haven't happened in decades. We also saw setbacks.

The political losses of important, progressive candidates for change in the Democratic primary are very real and many are understandably disappointed and even dejected. But issues such as parity, antitrust, living wages, reparations, healthcare, and many others of fundamental justice and dignity that resonate with the lives of working people have been brought to the fore of politics and public opinion by social justice movements. This is no mere symbolic victory.

We thank these very social movements—particularly the many Latinx, black, rural,

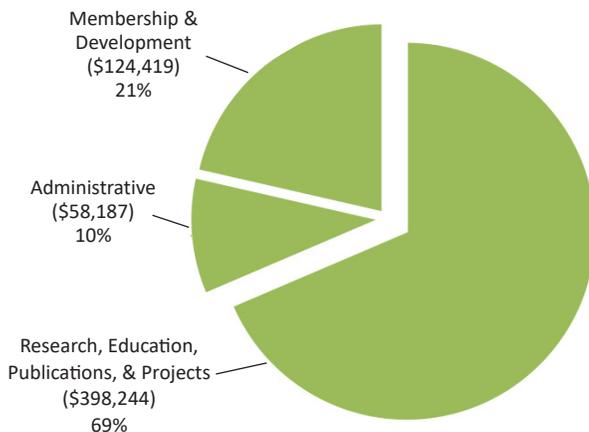
and worker-led movements, whose base also make up a majority of workers and farmers in our food system. Thank you for your leadership in mobilizing a transformative wave of political engagement that has changed the ground game of organizing.

We're excited to continue working with our movement partners and communities across the country, who remind us that no elected official is our savior and power will always remain with the people. Electoral politics are just one part of the larger strategy of building power to change society.

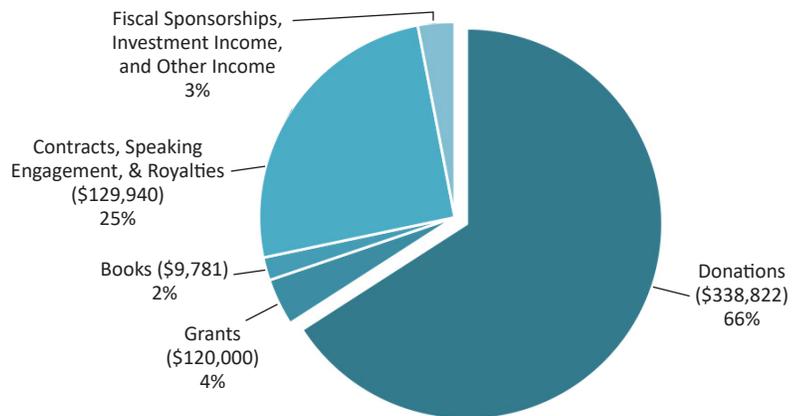
There is no straight-line path to a more just world, but the roots, shoots and seeds of that world are present. Together, we are building and supporting the movements bringing a liberatory future into fullest flower.

## Fiscal Year 2018-2019

### Expenditures Total \$580,850



### Revenue Total \$514,134



### A Note to Our Donors

Readers who remember last year's annual report may have questions about the drop in our income versus last fiscal year—and a similar change in expenses from last fiscal year. Although year-to-year fluctuations in exact amounts are to be expected, these very large differences (over \$150,000) in both income and expenses largely come from (a) our auditor's recommendation that certain funds we help coordinate and direct to partner organizations (i.e. fiscal sponsorship) no longer be included in our income and expenses; and (b) our discontinuation of the International Honors' Program (IHP). These two changes reflect the bulk of the changes in income and expenses from the prior fiscal year.

Your annual membership has made this COVID-19 special edition *Backgrounder* and *News and Views* possible.

Because of you, Food First is doubling down with even more free and online resources to support grassroots movements – and the solutions and alternatives that are being created every day for a more just world.



### HOW YOU CAN CONTINUE SUPPORTING FOOD FIRST DURING COVID-19:

**Keep up-to-date on your annual membership.** If you're due for a renewal, you will have received a letter in the mail in May. You can also renew online at [www.foodfirst.org/renew](http://www.foodfirst.org/renew).

**Become a monthly Sustainer.** For as little as \$3/month, you can help us navigate this crisis and plan ahead at [www.foodfirst.org/sustainer](http://www.foodfirst.org/sustainer).

**Name Food First in your will or donate a part of your retirement plan.** Leave a living legacy for future generations to benefit from Food First's research and action at [www.foodfirst.org/livinglegacy](http://www.foodfirst.org/livinglegacy).

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