NAFTA Refugees as Protagonists: Mexican Migrant Workers Take on the Fast Food Giants

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Resumo:
Where does our food come from? Whose hands have planted, cultivated, picked, packed, processed, transported, scanned, sold, sliced, and cooked it? What production practices have transformed it from seed to fruit, from fresh to processed form? Who decides what is grown and how? What are the effects of those decisions on our health and the health of the planet?

Palavras-chave:
Globalization, food, health

The North American tomato food chain

For over a decade (1995-2006), I engaged in collaborative transnational research, examining the global food system through the lens of the tomato food chain within the NAFTA context. Our team tried to address the questions: Where does our food come from? Whose hands have planted, cultivated, picked, packed, processed, transported, scanned, sold, sliced, and cooked it? What production practices have transformed it from seed to fruit, from fresh to processed form? Who decides what is grown and how? What are the effects of those decisions on our health and the health of the planet?

Our aim was to demystify globalization by tracing the long and twisted journey of a corporate tomato from a Mexican field to a Canadian fast-food restaurant. In Tangled Routes: Women, Work, and Globalization on the Tomato Trail, I constructed an interdisciplinary examination of the dynamic relationships between production and consumption, work and technology, biodiversity and cultural diversity, and health and environment. A globalization-from-above perspective was reflected in the corporate agendas of a Mexican agribusiness, the U.S.-based McDonald's chain, and Canadian-based Loblaws supermarkets. The women workers on the front line of these businesses offered a humanized globalization-from-below perspective, while yet another "globalization" is revealed through examples of resistance and local alternatives.

Along the way, I discovered that with free trade, both tomatoes and Mexican farm workers were migrating al norte in ever greater numbers; not only did Mexican hands pick the winter tomatoes we imported to Canada, but they also picked the tomatoes we imported from the U.S., as well as our summer tomatoes in Canada. Fascinating stories within this intensified migratory process reveal a kind of boomerang effect with these migrant workers now taking the lead in challenging the injustices within the tomato supply chain.

The most prominent example of this is a small group of migrant farm workers, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), in southern Florida, who mounted a David vs. Goliath battle with the fast food giant McDonald's between 2003 and 2007. With headquarters in the United States, McDonald's has in the new millennium become a major target not only of anti-globalization activists worldwide (www.mcspotlight.org), but also of once-loyal U.S. consumers who are increasingly concerned about the impact of fast food on their own health, and, in particular, on child obesity. But how do you broaden consumers' consciousness from concern about their own health to concern about the workers who grow the food they eat? To concern about the entire production-distribution-consumption process and its impact on the environment?

A convergence of factors in early 2007 revealed the other side of economic integration of the Americas, and made McDonald's sit up and take notice of theMexican tomato workers in their midst. First of all, the increased migration of Indigenous campesinos from the south of Mexico to northern agribusinesses has spilled over into the tomato fields of California, Florida, and points north. Since the 1980s, structural adjustment programs and neoliberal trade policies expanded Mexico's agro-export sectors and, along with the Agrarian Reform Law 27, opened up once communally held land for foreign investors; many more Mexicans have lost access to land and have been pushed north to work in U.S. and Canadian fields. An estimated three million undocumented Mexican workers in the United States (150,000 NAFTA refugees enter per year) send remittances home, one of Mexico's major sources

of foreign exchange, second only to oil. In 2007, Mexican remittances reached $25 billion, more than doubling in the five previous years (although with the current economic crisis, there is a noticeable decline in employment and remittances).

Coalition of Immokalee Workers

The southeast region of Florida is the state's centre of agricultural production, and for over a century has depended on cheap seasonal labour, primarily African-American and Caribbean migrant farm workers. Since NAFTA, however, there has been an influx of Indigenous (primarily Mayan) campesinos from Mexico and Guatemala, who now account for 80% (50% Mexican and 30% Guatemalan), with the remaining 20% Haitian and African-American. And these 'NAFTA refugees' have also brought their sharp political consciousness, creative popular education practices and well-honed organizing skills to the fields.

In 1993, a small group of these workers started meeting in an Immokalee church to discuss how they could organize to change their working and living conditions. In forming the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, they aimed to fight for fair wages, more respect from the bosses, better and cheaper housing, stronger laws and enforcement against those violating workers' rights, the right to organize and the end of indentured servitude in the tomato and citrus fields.

Anti-slavery campaign

The phenomenon of modern-day slavery became an early rallying point. Most Americans who buy McDonald's meals with Florida tomatoes are not aware of the multi-worker, multi-state slavery rings in the agriculture industry, which hold workers (often undocumented) captive, living in crowded substandard housing (30 workers, for example, were stuffed into two trailers), forcing them to work 12 hour days 6 days a week for as little as $20 a week, under the control of armed guards who threaten them with violence – beatings, shootings and pistol-whipping. The CIW launched an Anti-Slavery Campaign in the late 1990s, and carried out its own investigations, collaborating with the federal government prosecutors to eventually convict several notorious employers by 2002. This successful model of community-government cooperation resulted in freeing over a thousand tomato and orange pickers held in debt bondage.

Through its anti-slavery work, the CIW began to develop broader alliances and was a founding member of a national Freedom Network USA to Empower Victims of Slavery and Trafficking. The organization's approach was to first empower the worker community to organize to defend their own rights, through human rights education and involving them in worker-led investigations of the growers. Through the Freedom Network, they offered training to law enforcement officers and social service workers on how to recognize and assist enslaved people. They began to garner national respect and were honoured by the National Organization of Women (NOW) with the "Woman of Courage Award"; most recently, the CIW was awarded the 17th annual human rights award "for its work to eliminate modern day slavery in the agricultural industry."

But they realized that working at the level of employers and law enforcement was not enough. They began to turn their eyes toward a bigger target at the demand rather than the supply end of the food chain: the fast food companies and food retailers who buy immense quantities of vegetables and fruit from the growers, all the while claiming innocence about and denying responsibility for the conditions of the workers who plant and pick them. The CIW recognized the market power of these companies to push down wages and working conditions because of their economies of scale that allowed them to get the lowest possible prices from suppliers.

A new strategy: targeting the fast food giants

In 2001, the CIW launched the first-ever farmworker boycott of a major fast food company, choosing as a first target Taco Bell, perhaps because of its latino connection. The strategy was to demand that the company pay one cent more per pound for tomatoes they bought from growers in the area, having the effect of almost doubling workers' wages. By focusing at the demand end, the campaign also generated a public education process for fast food consumers, raising awareness of the often invisible supply chain and the slave-like conditions perpetuated by many crew leaders contracted by the company to produce the tomatoes.

The four year campaign gradually drew support from many other sectors – labour unions, churches, social and environmental justice groups and students; community-based boycott committees were established in all 50 states. High school and college students organized

"Boot the Bell" campaigns on their campuses, and joined farmworkers in a 10-day hunger strike outside the California-based Taco Bell headquarters. The question posed to company executives was "Can you guarantee your customers that the tomatoes in your tacos were not picked by forced labour?"

In 2005, CIW succeeded in getting Taco Bell (now owned by Yum Foods) to agree to pay a penny per pound more for their tomatoes. Along with their allies, they were joined in celebrating the victory by former President Jimmy Carter, popular musicians and artists, and members of the Congressional Hispanic caucus, who proclaimed: "This is a truly historic agreement, marking perhaps the single greatest advance for farmworkers since the early struggles of the United Farm Workers." The coalition both contributed to and benefited from a major new movement of undocumented workers. What is being heralded as a new civil rights movement has some of the energy and momentum of the 1960s, and indeed echoes and revitalizes the United Farm Workers movement of that era in California. The movement represents the growing political force of Hispanics in the United States, rapidly surpassing African Americans as the largest minority and a significant voting block.

Biting the Big Mac

Having sharpened their teeth on the tacos and buoyed by the precedent-setting agreement, the coalition and their allies moved on to the most formidable target, McDonald's. This campaign lasted less than two years, but in the meantime, the momentum of the broader movement surely fed the CIW's campaign to pressure McDonald's to follow Taco Bell's lead by paying a penny more per pound for the tomatoes picked in southeastern Florida. The food giant resisted initially, claiming that a grower-developed agreement, SAFE, ensured labor standards were being followed. This claim was discredited when CIW won a court case against AgMart, a major grower, resulting in the imprisonment of a crew leader for keeping workers in debt bondage and forced labor.

In 2006, the CIW helped found the national Alliance for Fair Food, and mobilized the support of its member groups for this campaign, with a multi-pronged strategy. Members of national church organizations and trade unions, representing the more privileged sectors in the alliance, became shareholders of McDonald's to push from within for the adoption of a human rights code of conduct. Led by the religious orders and the AFL-CIO Reserve Fund, these more mainstream allies put forth a resolution, entitled "Human Rights Standards," to the Board of Directors to be voted on in its May 2007 meeting. The resolution promoted a company-wide Code of Conduct, inclusive of suppliers and subcontractors, based on the basic human and workers' rights of the International Labor Organization's conventions; it included the right to overtime pay and freedom of association. When McDonald's Corporation attempted to exclude this shareholder resolution from the annual meeting, the federal Securities and Exchange Commission ruled that it should be voted upon.

Over the four years of the campaign, the Alliance for Fair Food grew in membership as organizations came on board and mounted their own campaigns among their constituencies. The Presbyterian Church (USA), for example, hosted CIW members in their congregations, sharing in worship services and educational events. It isn't hard to imagine that the theology of liberation's "option for the poor" that developed in Latin America became a common base for the involvement of religious institutions, inspired by the Mexican farmworker leaders who could link the church's social justice mission to their struggles. Leading up to the 2007 McDonald's Truth Tour, 185 religious leaders sent a joint letter to McDonald's supporting the CIW's demands. They represented not only key protestant dominations, such as the Episcopal, Methodist and United Church of Christ, but also the U.S. Catholic Bishops Conference.

Student groups added migrant farmworkers' issues to their anti-sweatshop organizing and pushed for sustainable and equitable purchasing policies.
The Students/Farmworker Alliance (SFA) organized 40 communities across the U.S. in a late 2006 action to make "Fast Food Fair Food." Building on the years of campaigning on college campuses for sweat-free policies for university-labeled garments, student groups turned to food justice and started probing the sources of campus food service contracts, linking them to other forms of institutional exploitation and complicity in slave-like working conditions. In April 2007, SweatFree Communities and the Alliance for Fair Food organized a national Conference to Promote Justice in Factories and Fields in New York City.

A rich legacy of popular education

These various educational strategies aimed to educate consumers about issues of ethical consumption, building on a growing public consciousness of the health and environmental problems perpetuated by fast food production and diets, and focusing on the human costs to the workers who produce the food. By 2007, McDonald's had already morphed from being the desirable icon of American food and life to becoming a kind of pariah and symbol of exploitative labour practices (employing teenagers at low wages), environmental degradation (buying meat from cattle ranches in the south that razed rainforests), and the seduction of young children through toys into poor eating practices resulting in an alarming rise in child obesity. In fact, in 2006, Disney chose not to renew its contract with McDonald's to promote its latest movies through children's toys because they didn't want to be associated with child obesity.

The CIW adopted popular education approaches for both its internal education of members as well as for its public education strategies. This is another way that they brought their political savvy and cultural skills north with them, as popular education developed in Latin America, during the anti-dictator grass-roots movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and spread internationally through the ideas of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, whose classic text Pedagogy of the Oppressed became a kind of bible for community and political organizing. Central American popular educators applied and deepened Freirean methodology in the 1980s, spurred on by the historical literacy campaign of the Sandinista-led revolution in Nicaragua. A regional network, ALFORJA, met annually to develop new methods and to train more grass-roots leaders in these creative liberatory approaches.

First, the CIW aimed to empower the farmworkers themselves to become protagonists and not victims; they learned to investigate the injustices perpetuated by the growers and to share their testimonies with potential allies in other social justice organizations. Because many of the workers were illiterate, popular education techniques such as movies, popular theatre, and cartoons were used to deepen their own consciousness and develop their capacities to speak out and organize.

In alliance building, the CIW drew on cultural practices such as carnavál and fiestas to bring new energy to political work, and organized hunger strikes and pilgrimages or long marches with a latino twist. They adopted as a mascot Rolando the Clown, the long-lost half-brother of Ronald McDonald. They also utilized popular theatre techniques within their campaigns, most recently in a public protest on the steps of Florida's capitol building in Tallahassee. The heart of the play was a box truck where workers were chained at night so the growers could find them in the morning; the chaining, beating and robbing were abuses on top of the backbreaking work of picking tomatoes in the hot sun for little pay, and under the threatening watch of a crew leader. This reenactment went on day and night during a three-day campaign, which brought many social justice leaders to the capitol to speak out in support of the workers. By the end of this campaign, CIW was invited to meet with Florida Governor Crist, who in late March of this year, finally went public in his support of the coalition's Campaign for Fair Food.

A symbolic victory

In early 2007, the CIW organized for a national demonstration in mid-April near the Illinois-based McDonald's corporate headquarters. Thousands of allies were committed to join forces there, as well as key popular musicians like Rage Against the Machine and Cuban hip-hop groups. Four days prior to the big gathering, threatened by the potential negative public relations, McDonald's reached an agreement with the CIW, facilitated by the Carter Center as mediators, to pay more for the Florida tomatoes served in U.S. restaurants.

As important, they agreed to work with their produce suppliers and the CIW to develop a new code of conduct for Florida tomato growers as well as increased farmworker participation in ensuring that the increase goes toward workers' wages. It was estimated that, if a migrant worker picked tomatoes regularly for both McDonald's and Taco Bell suppliers, their wages could almost double, from about U.S. $40 per day to over $70. Of course, it is a big IF, since most are still day laborers who go early every morning to a parking lot, where they may or may not get contracted for a day's work. And they are also likely to follow the seasonal harvests up the east coast, thus working for other employers who don't abide by the same agreement.

While the victory was hailed as a landmark decision and the Chicago protest was transformed into a celebration, the impact on the industry was unclear. First of all, McDonald's garnered excellent public relations points

for less than one million dollars, the estimated cost to the company for the increased price of tomatoes, and a very small percentage of their annual advertising budget of two billion. What's more, only grape tomatoes were covered in this deal, not the tomatoes that are sliced and inserted into a Big Mac (which still may be produced in Mexico, where workers earn less than one-quarter the amount of Florida workers). Grape tomatoes are key ingredients in McDonald's Premium Salad, a $4 item that appeals to health-conscious consumers who are willing to pay more; in fact, it accounts for 10 percent of the total revenue. Thus, indirectly, the company that has been trying to repair its image of promoting unhealthy eating has gotten more attention for its salads, while also scoring points for supporting struggling Mexican farmworkers in Florida. But would Mexican farmworkers in Mexico ever get similar increases?

And, in fact, it has not proven easy to implement this agreement, as Florida growers have been intransigent in actually raising the farm workers' wages, especially as the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange has threatened to fine growers who support the penny-per-pound program. Nonetheless, building on the momentum of this somewhat symbolic victory, the CIW has gone on to mount similar campaigns and secure similar agreements with other fast food giants: signing with Burger King in May, 2008 and Subway in December, 2008.

This story reveals a new kind of coalition, one that is led by the most exploited workers in the NAFTA food chain, a transnational workforce; CIW is really a relatively small group of 2,500–3,500 workers of Mexican, Mayan, Haitian, and African American origin, but with a new strategy of cracking the corporate tomato by targeting the big companies and buyers as well as consumers with a concern for health and, increasingly, for justice. The significance of this campaign is two-fold. On the one hand, it has signaled not only all big fast-food companies but also food retailers that they are going to have to consider codes of conduct around the wages and living conditions of the workers who grow the food they profit from. And, on the other hand, the organizing led by the mainly latino workers has converged with a growing movement of undocumented workers in the United States.

CIW tapped the interests of major social, economic, and environmental justice groups, who have formed the Alliance for Fair Food, now ready to take on other food giants. As of May of this year, the Alliance had around 50 high profile individual endorsers (including politicians, artists, musicians, and public intellectuals) and over 250 organizational endorsers, with significant representation from human rights groups; labour unions, federations, and organizations; sustainable food and agricultural initiatives; environmental organizations; faith-based organizations; student and youth groups; responsible business; and many other community-based social, economic and environmental justice groups. The Alliance "promotes principles and practices of socially responsible purchasing in the corporate food industry that advance and ensure the human rights of farmworkers at the bottom of corporate supply chains." It represents the first major cross-sector coalition in the United States to integrate issues of food safety, environmental degradation, and workers' rights, and has the potential to link with other organizations in Canada and Mexico mobilizing cross-sectorally around these related issues.

Beyond fast food to food services and supermarkets

The winning alliance of farmworkers and social justice organizations in partnership with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers has most recently made a major new foray into food services of major institutions and companies. In April of this year, the CIW reached an agreement with Bon Appétit Management Company, which runs food service for 400 university and corporate cafés in 29 states. This agreement went beyond those made with fast food corporations by pledging a minimum fair wage, an hourly wage replacing piece work, a worker-controlled health and safety committee, worker participation in third-party monitoring, and worker empowerment, ensuring workers would be informed of their rights and that there would be a process for them to lodge complaints without fear of retribution. Ultimately, unless the large-scale growers agree to these conditions, Bon Appétit Management Company will favour small and medium-sized producers. This landmark decision also gives student-led sustainable purchasing organizations new ammunition for campus campaigns pushing for similar agreements from the big university food service providers, Sodexo, Compass, and Aramark. In early 2009, they launched a new campaign, Dine with Dignity, to hold these three major companies accountable for the exploitation of farmworkers in their tomato supply chains.
Supermarkets are next on the list for campaigns, with

Wal-Mart being the ultimate target, as the world's largest food retailer (this is a phenomenal story in itself as 15 years ago, Wal-Mart, originally a dry-goods store, wasn't even in the food business). But the first and easiest step on this new path has been to garner an agreement in September 2008 with Whole Foods Market, the leading organic supermarket in North America. Just last week, they announced that Florida tomato growers Lady Moon Farms and Alderman Farms signed agreements with Whole Foods, supporting the CIW penny-per-pound program.

The amazing new coalition that the CIW has birthed and nurtured – with the political strategic sense, popular education and community organizing skills of Indigenous Mexican migrant workers, or 'NAFTA refugees' – has launched in the belly of the beast a cross-sectoral movement for fair food that could not have been imagined a decade ago. As CIW leader Lucas Benitez proclaimed: "Without a doubt, the food market is changing, and for the better. Sustainability, social as well as environmental, is the way of the future. Together we -- as farmworkers, farmers, and buyers -- are forging a path toward that better future."