

Nourishing the roots of food justice

Nov 17, 2011 by Marcia Ishii-Eiteman



What a week! PAN and over 1,000 food movement activists from around the country have just wrapped up the [Community Food Security Coalition's 15th Annual National Conference](#), **Food Justice: Honoring our Roots, Growing the Movement**, which filled five days with stimulating field trips, workshops and discussion in Oakland and around the Bay area. As [Jim Embry](#) of Sustainable Communities Network in Kentucky observed, "More than 1,000 kindred folks from USA, 1st Peoples Nations, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Kenya and all in between attended. The conference held near Occupy Oakland was a blessing. The healing (between groups) was so needed and inspiring!"

A smaller number of us capped the week by participating in the 1st National Assembly of the [U.S. Food Sovereignty Alliance](#), a post-conference gathering of over 70 activists from the family farm, worker and food justice communities along with allied organizations working to build a grassroots-led food sovereignty movement in the U.S.

Farmers & farmworkers speak out

Highlights for me last week included hearing the stories of farmworkers from [Florida](#) and family farmers from [Iowa](#), [Montana](#), [Wisconsin](#) and [Maine](#), who spoke to students at a community event that PAN co-organized with [National Family Farm Coalition](#), hosted by San Francisco State University professor, Kathy McAfee. The panel, **Farmer and Farmworker Voices from Across the Country: Fighting for Justice on the Farm**, sparked animated questions from the students, after they heard how farmworkers and farmers are organizing for their rights and for their very survival.

We have a problem. It's called the extraction of wealth. — Joel Greeno, Wisconsin dairy farmer, speaking to President Obama.

To a spellbound audience, Joel Greeno (dairy farmer and leader of the farmer tractorcade during the Madison protests) described his late summer meeting with President Obama, who walked into a workshop on rural issues, sat down and asked if anyone had anything to say. While everyone else (mostly industry lobbyists) froze in their chairs, Joel didn't miss a beat. "We have a problem in Wisconsin", he told the President. "It's called the extraction of wealth. All you need to do to fix the situation and put people back to work is to pay farmers a living." When Joel finished speaking, the entire room had gone completely silent. Even Obama — caught like a deer in the headlights — had not a word to say in response.

Occupy — and liberate —the food system

A couple hundred folks turned out for PAN's three [workshops](#) on domestic fair trade, resisting corporate land and seed grabs from the U.S. to Africa, and building food democracy by bridging rural-urban divides in this country. As Dave Murphy of [Food Democracy Now!](#) explained, "We've got food deserts in urban areas; we've also got food wastelands in rural areas. I'm from Iowa and I know that family farmers can't win this battle alone." Maybe, he suggested, the rural-urban "divide" is a false dichotomy and we have more in common than we think. Iowa farmer [George Naylor](#) reminded us that how we farm is everybody's business, and we need good policies so that vulnerable communities aren't competing against each other. Adam Scow of [Food and Water Watch](#) laid out concrete organizing opportunities around the 2012 Food and Farm Bill that will shape our food system for years to come. And Navina Khanna of [Live Real](#), underscored the point that the heart of the movement is about reclaiming control, ownership and power, wherever we stand.

But to do so collectively, to really listen to and hear each other, build trust and be there for each other at all of our critical moments of struggle, is no easy thing — and is not something that we have yet managed as a movement to accomplish. Still, the conversations I heard last week at the CFSC conference — the most diverse to date in all its 15 year history — have given me new hope that maybe, just maybe, the U.S. food movement is coming of age and is poised to take on the challenge of tackling economic, racial and political oppression in all its manifestations.

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