

The Politics of Food Production

In this issue you will read about:

The hidden history behind food production in Bangladesh and Canada

A conversation among Canadians about justice for migrant workers

West African peasant farmers promote their land security through research

Proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal threatens food sovereignty

Last November in Bangladesh, Inter Pares staff member David Bruer had the chance to lay a wreath at the memorial to a courageous woman called Korunamoyee. Almost twenty years ago, this impoverished Bangladeshi woman was murdered by men hired by wealthy shrimp businessmen. Illiterate and uneducated, she had led her community in a protest against the shrimp industry, which wanted to flood their land with salt water to grow shrimp for export. Every year since her murder, the women and men of our counterpart Nijera Kori gather to honour Korunamoyee's memory, and her victory: the people in her community were successful in keeping out the shrimp industry from their farms. But the shrimp industry – not just in Bangladesh, but around the world – has forced many people off their land, making high profits and providing foreign consumers with cheap shrimp.

José Sicajau had been coming to Canada from Guatemala every year for four years helping to harvest vegetables that Canadians buy in our grocery stores. One day José witnessed a farm owner strike a fellow worker with a pipe and reported the attack. He was blacklisted and kicked out of Canada's temporary foreign worker program. José would like to come back and work here, as it enables him to



Memorial to murdered activist Korunamoyee.

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Food and Migrant Workers: An engaging matter

Last summer, Vivian Séguin was visiting her local farmers' market in Ontario. While browsing the stalls, she chatted with the farmers. Upon asking one of them if he employed migrant workers, the farmer said yes and boasted that they worked four times harder than local labourers. When Vivian inquired if the migrant workers complained about their working conditions, the farmer airily replied that they did, but he ignored them. Vivian informed the farmer that she did not plan on doing business with him.

When he indignantly asked if it was because she was prejudiced against migrant workers, she answered, "No, I'm prejudiced against the Canadian farmers who exploit them" – and promptly left, to applause from fellow shoppers.



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earn more money than in his own community – but he wants labour rights to be protected, and migrant workers to be treated fairly. José co-founded AGUND, an association of migrant workers supported by Inter Pares, that is calling on the Guatemalan government to take care of its workers abroad. Last year, we brought José to Canada to speak with government, migrant justice groups, and food activists from across the country about needed changes to the program. As a result, Guatemalan activists have joined forces with Canadians who believe that healthy food and fair working conditions are compatible.

Whether it is imported shrimp or Canadian-grown vegetables, it matters how food is produced. There are many personal choices involved in deciding what to buy, and nobody wants to feel guilty about what they eat. But while we can try to eat as ethically as possible, achieving justice for food producers goes beyond individual consumer choices. The roots of the problems lie deeper – in our trade systems, in our immigration policies, in the increasingly corporate nature of agriculture, and in our economies that have come to rely on cheap food. Inter Pares is working with groups like AGUND and Nijera Kori as part of the movement seeking to address the problem at the roots, by changing the conditions under which food is produced. ✂



Amena Begum lead a successful fight to reclaim land illegally taken by the shrimp industry.

Food and Migrant Workers: An engaging matter (continued from page 1)

Vivian’s question was prompted by her participation in Inter Pares’ “Just Work?” campaign, which explored the connections between the food we eat and the workers who travel each season from their homes in the global South to produce it. While many farmers treat their employees fairly, temporary foreign worker programs create a systemic vulnerability for migrant workers. Workers’ visas are tied to their employers, making it risky for them to speak out. There is too little oversight of working and housing conditions, and the program does not provide a path to permanent residency for those who would like to stay.



Meeting with migrant workers and advocates in Leamington, Ontario.

Over the campaign’s four months and beyond, Inter Pares staffer Sarah Blumel explored these issues through a blog and other social media, and shared inspiring examples of grassroots migrant mobilizing. Raising funds for this work gave us another opportunity to connect with people who care about these issues. The fundraising and social media campaigns engaged Inter Pares supporters like Vivian and the general public, encouraging them to reflect and take action on this issue.

As part of the campaign, a small team at Inter Pares planned a nine-city tour of migrant worker advocates based in Guatemala – José Sicajau, Diego Lorente, and Father Juan Luis Carbajal. Once in Canada, they were able to talk to migrant justice activists, food sovereignty activists, and to community members in Quebec, Alberta, and across southern Ontario. In their public presentations, Fr. Juan Luis, José, and Diego spoke about not only the distressing reality of migrant workers, but also about their determined efforts to change national and provincial policies and regulations. In these conversations, people discussed how

they were promoting, or could promote, justice for migrant workers in their own lives.

Today, Inter Pares is continuing to explore ways of promoting collaboration between the migrant justice and food justice movements, as well as ways to engage more Canadians in this conversation. ✂

Understanding Land Acquisitions in West Africa

In February, Inter Pares staff member Eric Chaurette travelled to Côte d'Ivoire to help facilitate an international workshop on massive land acquisitions in West Africa.

In a region vulnerable to food insecurity, these acquisitions, known as “land grabs,” are an increasing cause for alarm. This is the case for the community of Fanaye in northern Senegal, where 200 square kilometers of land were acquired for agrofuel production (destined mostly for European markets) with little consent from local communities who depend on the land for farming and livestock. This led to unrest in the communities, which resulted in two deaths, and the eventual suspension of the project by then-President Wade. Fanaye’s experience is not unique. Across West Africa, large tracts of land are being seized from farmers, fuelled by an ever-increasing demand for land by investors.

Inter Pares is coordinating a research collaboration that brings together the West African farmer movement COPAGEN and researchers from the Université de Montréal. For the next three years, farmers and researchers



Researchers Assétou Samaké, Mamadou Goïta, and René Segbenou presenting findings during a public conference in Abidjan.

research process is as important as the research results. As information is collected, awareness about the problem is generated, which in turn helps communities better assert control over their lands.

Researchers Mamadou Goïta, Assétou Samaké, and René Segbenou presented preliminary findings during a public conference in Abidjan. Already, the research is providing a clearer picture. Over 30,000 square kilometers of land have been acquired in the nine countries being studied. While land grabs have mostly been understood as land seized for export agriculture, COPAGEN is widening the scope of the research to also consider massive land acquisitions for mining and tourism development.

In her opening statement during the conference, the Canadian Ambassador to Côte d'Ivoire recognized that “land acquisitions are not an esoteric issue for a

handful of academics – this is current and needs to be studied.” While there has been quite a bit of research on the risks to food and agriculture of land grabs, there has been very little on their actual impacts. Our research will undertake to fill this gap in the coming months through impact studies carried out in Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, and Côte d'Ivoire. ❧



Participants at the international workshop on massive land acquisitions in West Africa.

will work together to document the scale of recent land grabs in nine West African countries and the impact on food security and community livelihoods. They have also helped establish a network of “land watch committees” to monitor land transactions, and to disseminate information to help defend community rights.

Most of the research is carried out locally by organizations working with people who are most acutely affected by land grabs: peasant farmers. In this way, the

Making Free Trade into Fairer Trade

Trade without justice further entrenches global poverty and misery.

Sanya Reid Smith, Third World Network

Sanya Reid Smith delivers this message during a webinar on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). She works from a small, sparse office in Geneva just down the road from the World Trade Organization. She speaks clearly and succinctly, entirely without notes, peppering her talk with relevant examples and statistics. The picture she paints is appalling – a landscape where the privileged skew the rules further in their favour, compromising the well-being of millions.

Sanya is the legal advisor and senior researcher at Third World Network-Asia (TWN), an organization Inter Pares has supported for over a decade. In collaboration with the Asia-Pacific Working Group, Inter Pares helped organize this presentation to diverse Canadian groups and government officials.

The TPP is a trade agreement spearheaded by the United States. It includes Canada, Australia, and a number of other Pacific Rim countries in both Asia and Latin America. The TPP is being negotiated in secret, and so Sanya's analysis was pieced together through extrapolation from other US-led trade agreements and confirmed by a series of leaks.

Under an "investor-state" dispute mechanism in the TPP, corporations can sue governments if they pass laws, policies, or regulations that infringe on companies' current or future profits. Already, countries, including Canada, that signed on to trade agreements with identical mechanisms have paid millions to corporations as "compensation" in these disputes.

The TPP would allow US agricultural subsidies, while requiring the removal of import tariffs (taxes) of other countries. This would give US agribusinesses a substantial competitive advantage. Malaysia currently has a 40% tariff on imported rice in order to increase its food self-sufficiency. Without this tariff, subsidized US rice would be cheaper than local Malaysian rice, devastating the ability of local rice farmers to compete.

The TPP would also require countries to sign another treaty, called UPOV '91, which would restrict, and in some cases prevent, farmers from saving certain seed varieties, giving large multinationals a monopoly on seed rights. Terry Boehm of Canada's National Farmers Union, a counterpart of Inter Pares, believes that "if farmers do not want to become serfs, they need to fight [this treaty] with all their energy."



RITA MORRIS

Sanya Reid Smith, Third World Network-Asia (TWN).

Inter Pares shares Sanya's grave concerns of the effect of trade agreements such as the TPP on agriculture, in both the North and the South. Trade is beneficial to the majority when it is deliberately and carefully designed to be. By supporting TWN in developing and advancing their critique with decision-makers and civil society, our shared goal is that free trade becomes fairer trade. ☘

 Inter Pares

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With the support of thousands of Canadians, Inter Pares works in Canada and around the world with social change organizations who share the analysis that poverty and injustice are caused by inequities within and among nations, and who are working to promote peace, and social and economic justice in their communities and societies.

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