



La Vía Campesina

Farmers North and South
Confront Agribusiness



John Riddell and Adriana Paz

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About the Authors

John Riddell is co-editor of *Socialist Voice* and a member of the Venezuela We Are With You Coalition <www.venezuelawearewithyou.blogspot.com>.

Adriane Paz is a co-founder and organizer of Justicia/Justice for Migrant Workers-BC, a volunteer collective based in Toronto and Vancouver that strives to promote the rights of Mexican, Caribbean, and Guatemalan workers who annually participate in the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program <www.justicia4migrant-workers.org/>.

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World Farmers' Alliance Challenges Food Profiteers

Annette Aurélie Desmarais. *La Vía Campesina: Globalization and the Power of Peasants*. Fernwood Publishing, 2007.

reviewed by John Riddell

The neoliberal assault that has driven labour into retreat over the last two decades has also sparked the emergence of a peasants' international, La Vía Campesina. Rooted in 56 countries across five continents, this alliance has mounted a sustained and spirited defense of peasant cultivation, community, and control of food production.

Annette Desmarais's book *La Vía Campesina* has given us a probing and perceptive account of the world peasant movement's origins, outlook, and activities. ("La Vía Campesina" means "Peasant Path" or "Peasant Way," but see "Peasant or Farmer?" on page 6.)

The movement began as a response to globalization, which Mexican peasant leader Alberto Gomez has defined as "a global offensive against the countryside ... against small producers and family farmers" whose existence poses a barrier to "an industrialized countryside."

Such coercive industrialization involves "delinking" food production from consumption through the intrusion of agribusiness corporations that usurp different stages of production: provision of inputs, food processing, transportation, and marketing, Desmarais says. Industrial products replace farmer inputs: chemicals in place of manure, hybrid seeds in place of farmers' seed stocks. Many peasants are shackled to corporate production contracts, which, Desmarais notes, now control about 90% of U.S. poultry farms.

"Farmers are no longer considered producers of knowledge," Desmarais says, but rather as consumers of the marketed wisdom of agribusiness, mere cogs in the gears of corporate industry.

Meanwhile, neoliberal trade policies have destroyed institutions and tariff barriers that provided farmers with market leverage, leaving them isolated victims of profiteering by gigantic worldwide agribusiness concerns.

The entire process recalls capitalism's "de-skilling" of industrial workers, which replaced independent skilled craftsmen by assembly-line labourers. The logical end point would be replacement of the family farm with factory-style capitalist estate farming.

But this has not happened.

Peasant survival

Family farming, Desmarais reports, has remained a prominent form of cultivation, in rich and poor countries alike. She cites data from the U.S., where farm technology is most advanced. There, family-owned farms made up 85% of all units in 1990s, although a significant proportion of them are dependent on wage labour. There is growing evidence, she says, "that small farms are more 'efficient' than large corporate farms" and are more "sustainable." Indeed, "'re-peasantization' is going on as the absolute number of peasants grows."

Farmers have survived – but have been subjected to extreme levels of corporate exploitation. Indeed agribusiness has learned to take maximum advantage of small-scale farmers, who carry the costs and risks of farm production but are robbed of almost all the proceeds. Added to that is predation by the banks, whose mortgages suck the lifeblood from farms before ultimately destroying them.

Even harsher exploitation is imposed on agricultural workers, concentrated in labour-intensive fruit and vegetable farms.

Desmarais reports National Farmers Union (NFU) findings that farmers in Canada earned just 0.3% return on equity in 1998, while "agribusiness corporations earned 5%, 20%, 50%, and even higher rates." Since then, the situation has worsened. In 2004, the NFU reports, farmers in Canada could not even

cover basic costs from their product sales.

In this context, peasants have both motivation and means for concerted resistance. The neoliberal era has in fact seen a revival of peasant activism, much of it coordinated by La Vía Campesina. Desmarais chronicles the dramatic intervention of Vía Campesina contingents in protests at successive World Trade Organization (WTO) gatherings. Among their achievements: “After having all but disappeared ... over the past 25 years, agrarian reform is now back on the agenda.” Moreover, Vía Campesina has succeeded in maintaining unity of member organizations in both the richest and poorest countries of the world.

The Vía Campesina website (www.viacampesina.org) reports member organizations’ activities in the first four months of this year in no less than 17 countries, nine of them in the Global South. Among these were a series of initiatives on behalf of the farmers and other citizens of Gaza under assault by Israel.

The peasants’ alliance has gone beyond defense of members’ immediate economic interests. It advocates the “right of peoples to define their agricultural and food policy,” which it terms “food sovereignty.” This program defends the interests of peoples of the Global South under pressure from the world’s richest states, while providing some key elements of a platform to unite working people and the oppressed both as producers and as consumers of food.

Food sovereignty embraces the principle that food is a basic human right, demands sustainable management of natural resources by those who work the land, and asserts the need for genuine agrarian reform.

In addition to calling for food self-sufficiency and strengthening family farms, La Vía Campesina’s original call for food sovereignty in 1996 included these points:

- Guarantee everyone access to safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food in sufficient quantity and quality to sustain a healthy life with full human dignity.

‘Peasant’ or ‘farmer’?

“When *Vía Campesina* was formed in 1993,” Annette Desmarais tells us, “delegates from Great Britain objected that the literal translation [of its name] – ‘Peasant Road’ or ‘Peasant Way’ – would be inappropriate not only because of the derogatory connotation attached to the term ‘peasant’ but also because peasants did not actually exist in the British countryside.”

The dictionary distinction between “peasant” and “farmer” is indeed sharp. Peasants are defined as small-scale cultivators, who are “coarse,” “boorish,” “poor,” and “uneducated.” The dictionaries politely omit another connotation of the term: “non-White.” Farmers, by contrast, are defined to include rich entrepreneurs who personally never work the soil.

In the 1993 *Vía Campesina* debate, many delegates objected to dropping the term “peasant.” Ultimately, a compromise was found: the term *Vía Campesina* would not be translated into English.

Nettie Wiebe, a leader of Canada’s National Farmers union and also of *Vía Campesina* during its first decade, believes English-speaking farmers must reclaim the term “peasant,” pointing to its origin in the French word *peysan*.

“If you actually look at what ‘peasant’ means, it means ‘people of the land,’ ” Wiebe says. Are we Canadian farmers ‘people of the land’? Well, yes, of course. And it’s important to take that language back.... We too are peasants and it’s the land and our relationship to the land and food production that distinguishes us.”

According to Desmarais, “reclaiming the meaning of peasant is perhaps one of the *Vía Campesina*’s most important achievements.”

She quotes Karen Pedersen, NFU women’s president from 2002-2005, who notes that the term “farmer,” too, has now become derogatory, carrying “the connotation of inefficiency” and obsolescence. “Well, I am a farmer and I am a peasant,” Pedersen says. “Through my participation in the *Vía Campesina* I learned that I had much more in common with peasants than I did with some of my agribusiness neighbours.... Being a peasant stands for the kind of agriculture and rural communities we are striving to build.”

- Give landless and farming people – especially women – ownership and control of the land they work and return territories to indigenous peoples.
- Ensure the care and use of natural resources, especially land, water and seeds. End dependence on chemical inputs, on cash-crop monocultures and intensive, industrialized

production.

- Oppose WTO, World Bank and IMF policies that facilitate the control of multinational corporations over agriculture. Regulate and tax speculative capital and enforce a strict Code of Conduct on transnational corporations.
- End the use of food as a weapon. Stop the displacement, forced urbanization and repression of peasants.
- Guarantee peasants and small farmers, and rural women in particular, direct input into formulating agricultural policies at all levels.

The end result of such policies, Desmarais believes, will be to build and strengthen rural communities, which she views as “sites of diversity, differences, conflicts, and divisions” among people “engaged in the same argument” about “the common things in their everyday lives.” The *Vía Campesina* model, she states, “does not entail a rejection of modernity, or of technology and trade,” but insists that they must be inserted in a model “based on certain ethics and values in which culture and social justice count for something.”

La Vía Campesina was born out of collaboration of farmers’ organizations in several parts of the world, with Canada’s NFU playing a prominent role. Nettie Wiebe, based in Saskatchewan, was the only woman member of *Vía Campesina*’s initial coordinating committee. She spearheaded the formation of a Women’s Commission to develop women’s participation and leadership, a high priority for *Vía Campesina*, and led this commission until 2000.

In 2004, *Vía Campesina* recruited an energetic Quebec component, the *Union Paysanne*, dedicated to “a human-scale agriculture and vibrant rural communities.”

Struggle for independence

For 60 years, the world’s dominant farmers organization has been the International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP), which functions mainly as a lobbying agency within international institutions such as United Nations affiliates, the

World Bank, and the WTO. Desmarais describes IFAP as “reformist or conformist,” and as “representing the interests of larger farmers primarily based in the industrialized countries.”

The NFU has stayed outside IFAP because it “simply did not represent the interests of smaller farmers,” Desmarais says. With the onset of capitalist globalization, IFAP – despite internal divisions – mostly lined up in support of trade measures favourable to agribusiness. During the process of forming *Vía Campesina*, there were efforts to involve IFAP, but these broke down over such differences. “Dialogue was not possible,” writes *Vía Campesina* activist Nico Verhagen.

In Desmarais’ view, “the very existence of the *Vía Campesina* is clear evidence that not all farmers speak with the same voice.”

Indeed, the *Vía Campesina* experience confirms that agricultural producers are divided in terms of their relationship to agricultural production. On the one hand are owners of large-scale operations dependent on exploiting wage labour, and those who identify with this model. On the other hand are working farmers utilizing mostly family labour, who are victims of corporate exploitation. The fact that the working farmers now speak through their own international organization is a historic accomplishment, going beyond what non-farm workers presently have at their disposal.

Escaping the NGO embrace

During its formation process, *Vía Campesina* came into contact with a variety of groups from what is often termed “civil society,” that is, non-governmental actors. The term embraces everything from an indigenous Zapatista community in a Mexican forest to richly funded corporate research institutions. Quoting Catherine Eschle, Desmarais notes the “hierarchical and oppressive relations that exist within civil society.”

Among “civil society” groups, it was the NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) that posed a special challenge for the nascent *Vía Campesina*. NGOs exist to channel contribu-

tions from governments, corporations, and others to development projects. They vary widely – good, bad, and ugly – but mostly tend to reflect the agenda of the state and corporate agencies that provide most of the funds.

“In general,” says Desmarais, “NGOs have different aims, purposes, interests, organizational cultures and structures, and mechanisms for decision making and accountability than peasant organizations.” She quotes the stinging comments of James Petras and Henry Veltmeyer, who term NGOs a “neo-comprador class” that is “not based on property ownership or governmental resources but derived from imperial funding and their own capacity to control significant popular groups.”

NGOs claim to “speak for those without a voice,” Desmarais notes. Unfortunately, “many NGOs have not been comfortable with what the ‘formerly voiceless’ have to say” and “have not learned how to keep quiet when appropriate.”

For example, Wilson Campos, a Costa Rican peasant leader and founding member of *Vía Campesina*, commented in 1994, “We don’t need all those NGOs.... We farmers can speak up for ourselves. Already too many people have been taking advantage of us, without us getting any the wiser for it.”

At its formative stages, *La Vía Campesina* endured a concerted effort by an influential NGO, the Paolo Freire Stiftung, to take control – particularly by defining the alliance’s purpose in terms of research rather than militant action and promoting an orientation toward large landowners. The stakes were high, since NGOs represented the main potential funding source. Desmarais provides a vivid account of the ensuing struggle, which ended in a parting of the ways.

The sweeping vision of *La Vía Campesina* includes concepts that link the interests of working farmers to those of all victims of neoliberalism. Among them:

- *Food as a human right.* Back in 1974, a United Nations’ World Food Conference proclaimed with much fanfare that within 10 years “no family will fear for its next day’s bread.” Since then, amid evidence that hunger is growing, world

bodies have retreated from the 1974 pledge, in part because of U.S. insistence that the right adequate food is merely a “goal” or “aspiration.” In 2002, Desmarais reports, a World Food Summit abandoned any promise of the right to food. This commitment is central to the *Vía Campesina* program.

- *Down with junk food!* *Vía Campesina*’s French affiliate won worldwide attention to its concept of *malbouffe* (bad grub). Its leader, José Bové, won fame when he was jailed in 1999 for his role in a protest that dismantled a McDonald’s outlet then under construction in the rural town of Millau. *Malbouffe* is “food from nowhere,” Bové explains, food that has been stripped of “taste, health, and cultural and geographical identity ... the result of the intensive exploitation of the land to maximize yield and profit.”
- *Land stewardship.* For *Vía Campesina*, Desmarais says, agrarian reform means not just land distribution but a transformation of agricultural systems to favour small-farm production and marketing. “Land is a good of nature ... and cannot be a marketable good that can be obtained in whatever quantity.” She quotes João Pedro Stédile, a leader of Brazil’s landless tenants: “We want an agrarian practice that transforms farmers into guardians of the land, and a different way of farming that ensures an ecological equilibrium.” Some *Vía Campesina* groups, Desmarais notes, favour taking land off the market “and practicing the principle of social ownership of the land, whereby families who work the land have usufruct rights (the right to use the land without ownership).” This system, which has shown its worth in Cuba, provides a foundation for ecologically sound and sustainable agriculture.

The challenge of government

Annette Desmarais’s book does not take up how farmers can achieve a government that represents them and responds to their demands. In this regard, her book reflects the character of *Vía Campesina* itself, which states that it is politically plu-

ralist and non-aligned.

Yet the great rallies against oppressive trade treaties in which *Vía Campesina* has participated show us how the question of government can be addressed. Mass demonstrations like that in Quebec City in 2001 bring together militant farmers, labour activists, ecologists, Indigenous peoples, feminists, human rights advocates – a wide alliance of social movements.

Over the last decade, such alliances have been able to install popular governments in several Latin American countries, especially Venezuela and Bolivia, which brought to a standstill the plans for a hemispheric “free trade” treaty.

The case of Bolivia shows what peasants can achieve on a governmental level. A militant peasant movement, one of whose leaders was Evo Morales, gave birth to a broad people’s political instrument, the IPSP by its Spanish acronym. It now governs the country (as the MAS, or Movement Toward Socialism) under Morales’s presidency. Victory is by no means complete, but much has been achieved for a peasants’ agenda close in conception to that of *Vía Campesina*. Moreover, drawing on its Indigenous-peasant roots, the Bolivian movement has now adopted a vision for social transformation, which it terms “communitarian socialism.”

Annette Desmarais has provided us with a gripping account of *Vía Campesina*. Her book can help awaken labour, socialist, feminist, and ecological activists to the importance of farmers as allies and protagonists in the world struggle for social justice.

Farmers Seek Defences Against the Giants of Agribusiness

by John Riddell

Around the world, farm income is plummeting, pushing farmers off the land and into destitution. At the very same time, soaring food prices are putting tens of millions onto starvation diets.

Welcome to the bizarre world of capitalist agriculture, where the drive to boost profits of giant transnational corporations is imperiling the production of our means of survival.

Suzanne Weiss and I sought insight into this crisis by talking to farmers who live close to us — in Grey County, 200 kilometers north-west of Toronto. We had been invited there to report on farming in Venezuela to the local unit of the National Farmers Union. Our hosts took time to give us an education in Grey County agricultural economics.

“What is the one single measure that would do the most to help farmers in Ontario?” I asked Rae MacIntyre, president of the Grey County local of the National Farmers Union (NFU).

“Open up food markets to local producers,” he replied. “That would transform the situation.”

MacIntyre’s stress on “local food” reveals how much ground has been lost by Grey County’s 160 NFU members — and their 50,000 farmer colleagues across Ontario — during recent decades of big-business attacks on farmers and degradation of the food system. The challenge before farmers is no longer merely low prices for farm products. They are now almost entirely excluded from grocery-store shelves.

Check out your local supermarket: almost every food product has traveled 3,000 kilometers or more to reach the store.

Exploited producers

But more is at stake. Farmers are working people, exploited by big-business profiteering. Despite the supposed advantages

of large-scale farming, Canada has very few capitalist factory-farms worked by hired labour. The great majority of operations are “family farms,” where family members do most or all of the work.

Some working farmers employ seasonal labourers under the government’s oppressive migrant-labour programs. Defense of these workers must be a top priority of the labour movement as a whole. But the primary blame for this shameful system falls on the government that designed it, and the capitalist market that requires it.

Farmers are self-employed and must get by on what their products fetch on a hostile market. Many farmers have been subjugated by onerous contracts with giant corporate customers. They are exploited by big-business suppliers, buyers, and banks just as workers at General Motors or Wal-Mart are.

The last two decades of cutbacks, layoffs, and concession contracts, which wage workers know as “neo-liberalism,” hit farmers with extra severity. In that time, 25% of Canada’s farms disappeared.

‘No more buying local’

Our Grey County hosts, mostly beef and lamb producers, told us that most of their potential corporate customers had stopped buying from local producers, seeking to cut costs through giant contracts with foreign suppliers. Shawn, who runs a sheep farm, had just lost his marketing contract with a grocery chain that was cutting out local producers. Another NFU member had lost his contract for pumpkins. The buyer told him frankly: “No more buying local.”

Jon Radojkovic, a Grey County grower of shiitake mushrooms told us he has given up trying to sell them to Toronto distributors. Instead, he finds his customers through a local bartering network.

Like most Grey County farmers, Rae MacIntyre raises beef. Not long ago, “there was a slaughterhouse in every county,” he says. That’s all gone now; the only significant purchaser is

the corporate goliath, Cargill, which has an abattoir in Guelph, MacIntyre says. Most Ontario beef is sold into the U.S. for whatever it will bring, and these days that's next to nothing.

Grey County used to be a major supplier of apples. Now few apples are sold, MacIntyre says. "Juice apples ... are often composted or used for animal feed." Many of the apples we see in stores are flown in from China. The same applies to apple juice and apple sauce, despite the misleading "made in Canada" labels on the packaging.

"Many good farmers have given up," says Radojkovic. "They were proud and happy; now they have lost hope — killed by low prices."

The average farm in Canada represented an investment of \$1.3 million in 2006 — more per worker than in any other industry. Yet the average farmer's "net market income" from this massive investment was only \$13,000. And more than two-thirds must be set aside to provide for depreciation of buildings and equipment.

The NFU calculates that Ontario farmers' real return on their investment dropped to zero in 1991, and has declined since to "negative \$15,000 per farm" in 2006.

Meanwhile, farm debt has more than doubled over the last two decades. With income levels so low, such debts can usually be repaid only by selling the farm.

Farmers try to compensate by taking off-farm jobs. Small and mid-sized Ontario farms get 90% of their income that way. Even farms with the highest sales get more than a quarter of their total revenue from off-farm jobs.

Given the disastrous economic conditions, few young people are stepping forward to replace Canada's aging farm work force. In twenty years, the number of farmers under 35 years old is down 62%.

Corporate profiteering

The sickness in Canada's farms is rooted in the way the proceeds of agriculture are divided between farmers and workers,

on the one hand, and capitalist corporations on the other.

In Canada's hog industry, between 1988 and 2002, and despite inflation, farm-gate prices (including inflation) fell 5% from 1988 to 2007. Packinghouse workers' wages rose a bit, but much less than inflation. Yet the price of pork to consumers went up 39%.

In 2005, the NFU noted that wheat farmers were getting five cents from each loaf of bread, the same amount as thirty years earlier. The income of supermarket workers has been under sharp attack. But the share of each loaf that goes to corporate millers, bakers, and grocers rose from 38 cents to \$1.35.

In 2004, which the NFU says was the second-worst year for farming in history, the corporations living off the farmers had their most profitable year ever. The corporations are appropriating every penny of the profits of farming — indeed, more than 100%, since farmers are unable to cover their costs from farm-product sales.

'The problem is market power'

How do they get away with it?

"The problem is market power," a Farmers Union document explains. On one side are the "huge transnationals with only two or three competitors" — on the other side, "individual farmers competing in a global market against a billion other farmers." In such conditions, agribusiness can set prices at will — whatever level best drains the farmers' resources without shutting down cultivation completely.

Farmers' incomes can be stabilized in two ways, the NFU points out:

(1) government subsidy programs that "transfer money from taxpayers" and

(2) programs to enable farmers "to extract money from the marketplace." The farmers' union strongly advises a focus on enabling farmers to gain more market power.

"If farmers are more powerful, they will be more profitable," the NFU concludes.

Unity in marketing

Farmers have long sought to achieve market power in the same way as workers — by joining together in order to impose a higher price for their product.

Workers do this through unions, which establish “market power” by bargaining collectively to set wage levels.

Farmers have sought to establish agencies — under their own or government management — that exercise control over the marketing of farm produce. The NFU points to the merits of existing plans of this type, such as the Canadian Wheat Board or Ontario’s egg and milk marketing boards.

In recent years, such “supply management” plans have come under government attack, and some have been shut down. New marketing agreements of this type are banned by the North American Free Trade Agreement. NAFTA clears the decks for agribusinesses to combine worldwide in giant transnational monopolies, while preventing the world’s atomized and oppressed farmers from uniting in self-defense.

Imagine a law banning collective bargaining by unions, and you’ll have some idea of the effect NAFTA has on farmers.

Hostile governments

Governments in Canada could ignore the NAFTA provisions, citing the need for food products to conform to local environmental and health regulations. But their policies cater to transnational corporations and are hostile to smaller family-based farms.

“The Ontario government wants land and farming to be in a few strong hands,” Rae MacIntyre comments. Leafing through government documents, he reads out some examples of this attitude:

- A government leader says, “I remain committed to working with industry leaders.” Rae’s comment: “That means Car-gill.”
- “\$1.5 billion in aid to livestock producers.” Farmers will not see a penny of that, he says. This aid goes only to farms

that have been profitable for three years running, which excludes almost all family farms.

Rae points to other government programs that exclude farmers with off-farm income — which again cuts out the vast majority who need help the most.

He recalls the statement of Ontario Deputy Agriculture Minister Frank Ingratta in 2004 that “We could produce all the product we need from 10,000 large highly mechanized farms” rather than the present 57,000. Despite Ingratta’s later denial, many farmers believe that the “10,000 farms” goal corresponds to current government policy.

Official programs with praiseworthy goals are blocked by bureaucratic methods. Several of the Grey County farmers express frustration with government staffers who are long on talk and promises but unwilling to take action. Meanwhile, the government has been creative in thinking up new regulations that make farming more difficult and shift inspection and other costs onto the farmers’ backs.

NFU program

The Farmers Union proposes an array of measures to help working farmers resist corporate profiteering. Among them:

- Encourage supply management and take initiatives to implement it internationally.
- Establish price supports to guarantee that farmers receive their cost of production.
- Break the monopoly of corporate suppliers of seed, fertilizer, and other farm inputs by funding creation of farmer-owned co-ops.
- Ban corporate farming as well as corporate contracts that dictate where farmers buy inputs and sell their product.
- Provide young people who want to farm with access to the land through community land trusts and land banks; ease the mountain of debt that now prevents sons and daughters from taking over the family farm.

None of this needs to increase the cost of food to consumers,

the NFU points out. Farmers receive so little of the food dollar that the cost of increasing their share can be absorbed by corporate processors and retailers without price increases.

Consumer awareness

In recent years, a new ally for working farmers has appeared: the ecologically minded consumer. Many such consumers now visit Grey County as tourists. “Tourists have new tastes,” says NFU member Lillian Burgess. “They prefer fresh local food. When buying food, they ask, ‘Where was it grown.’”

This new interest in local food has a Third World feel, Burgess says. Impoverished locals have to buy cheap, at the franchised groceries, but “tourists are willing to pay more.”

The rise of “food tourism” reflects concerns felt by a growing number of consumers about the impact of corporate methods on food supply:

- Locally grown food is prized by many consumers as fresher, tastier, and healthier; many seek direct contact with the farmer.
- Air-freighting food around the world when it can be grown locally generates damaging and unnecessary carbon emissions that contribute to global warming.
- Agribusiness imposes industrial farming methods that are unhealthy and unsustainable.
- Environmental degradation and the diversion of food to fuel are placing the security of world food supplies in jeopardy, as has been eloquently explained by Fidel Castro and other leaders of the Global South.

World outlook

According to a United Nations report, retail prices for food worldwide in 2007 were 40% higher than in 2006. The price of rice, wheat, and corn doubled. (Globe and Mail, March 29) The long-term impact on farmers is uncertain. Those producing grain for the world market may benefit. But farmers buying grain for fodder will pay more. The big winners will be

the agribusiness giants. And the big losers are the world's poor — many of them farmers.

The National Farmers Union has been alert to these threats. On May 9, 2006, it wrote the United Nations, noting that the world body's own reports show a decline in the "area of arable and permanent crops" since 2001. Grain stocks are the lowest since 1975. "In five of the last six years," it notes, "our global population ate significantly more grain than farmers produced."

The NFU seeks to develop an international response to this crisis as part of its participation in the international farmers' organization *Vía Campesina* (Farmers' Way).

Local-food initiative

Given the scope of the challenge, the Grey County NFU members' focus on the local-food issue is quite modest. It concedes that for now, local farmers have been driven from mainstream supermarkets and must focus instead on niche markets. But winning the chance to provide consumers with a local-food alternative could be vital for these farmers' survival.

Wayne Roberts, a Toronto-based ecologist active in efforts to promote local food, points out how easily such a transition could begin. "Two simple actions by the Ontario government would transform the situation," he says.

First, "all government-funded institutions could buy local and sustainable food: jails, hospitals, educational institutions, seniors residences, and the like. [The government] would not even have to change a law. Ontario farmers would need five to ten years to catch up with the demand. This is readily doable and cost-effective; it just takes organizing to bring it to the attention of the politicians."

Roberts cites a recent victory in convincing the massive University of Toronto to go over to purchasing local and "sustainable" foods. Such efforts are coordinated through Local Food Plus, which establishes criteria for sustainable food based on positive social and ecological practices.

Roberts's second proposal concerns the right to farm. As things stand, land is available to aspiring farmers only in the form of large farms that sell for hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars. "The provincial government could make land available to those who wish to farm," he says.

The government owns plenty of idle agricultural land, he says. "They could lease it out in small packets for reasonable prices, with special programs to encourage members of minority groups and new immigrants who may wish to grow products favored by their communities and neglected by conventional supermarkets."

Labor's stake

The local-food effort is helping to provide farmers with an influential potential ally — the ecological movement. Farmers deserve determined support from the labour movement as well. Working people have a lot to gain from the availability of local-food at grocery stores and from ecologically sound and sustainable agriculture.

It is also a question of solidarity. Working people who are employed need to stand together with farmers, fishers, truckers, and other independent producers who are exploited by the same corporations and face the same enemy.

Harvest of Injustice: The Oppression of Migrant Workers on Canadian Farms

By Adriana Paz

Some say that nothing happens by chance. At the very least, it was a fortunate accident that my first job, when I arrived in Canada from Bolivia three years ago, was in a tomato greenhouse in South Delta, British Columbia — one of the first in the province to request migrant farm workers from Mexico under the federal Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP). My job was to run from the office managers' office

to the greenhouse and back relaying information on workers' productivity levels.

My first observation was that brown bodies are the pickers and white bodies are the managers. I naively asked my boss why there are no Canadians picking tomatoes. He answered me simply, "Because this is not a job for them."

That was my first lesson in Canadian social history. In B.C., most farm workers are and have long been immigrants of colour, including recently a growing number of seasonal migrants under SAWP and a related federal scheme, the Temporary Foreign Workers Program. Battered by the whims of global capital and local government policy, farm workers are the most vulnerable part of the work force, facing extreme job and economic insecurity.

According to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives BC, most farm workers in the province are immigrants from India, chiefly women in their 50s and 60s who came to Canada under the family reunification program. Lack of language skills and the obligation to their families to repay money advanced for their immigration and settlement pressure them to accept working conditions that Canadian workers find unacceptable.

Their plight is worsened by the Farm Labour Contractor (FLC) system, unique to the agricultural sector. The FLCs act as coyotes or intermediaries between farm workers and greenhouses/farms, determining how workers will get to the job, how long they will work, what they will earn, and so on. Obviously the FLCs do nothing to ensure respect for employment standards and safety regulations, leading to all sort of violations while the provincial authorities close their eyes.

For generations, South Asians have toiled in the fields of British Columbia under unsafe and exploitative conditions, enduring low wages and long hours of hard work while creating massive profits for agrobusiness.

Although fully informed about the corrupt FLCs and their blatant violations of employment and safety regulations, the

provincial government decided in 2001/2002 to reduce enforcement. Then in 2003/2004 they excluded farm workers from various provisions of the Employment Standards Act, leaving this group of racialized labour even more vulnerable to hyperexploitation.

How to create a labour shortage

Since 2000, farm operators in B.C. have been complaining of a shortage of labour to harvest their crops. Little science is needed find the cause. When wages are low, often less than the legal minimum, and working conditions are substandard, workers are unwilling to work in agriculture if they have a choice.

The farm operators are of course passing on downwards the immense pressures they face from the forces of globalization and the power of agribusiness monopolies. Far from providing protection against these profiteers, the government, urged on by the farm/greenhouse operators, has adopted policies that have worsened the “labour shortage.”

Nothing was done to raise farm labour wages or to increase the supply of immigrant labour. On the contrary, their measures serve to make agricultural labour not only unattractive but unlivable. To make matters worse, Citizenship and Immigration Canada in 2003 restricted the family reunification program, reducing the traditional South Asian labour source of those utilizing this program to immigrate to Canada.

Meanwhile the federal government is closing the door to permanent immigration of farm workers while steadily moving towards a U.S.-style policy based on temporary migration.

All this is of course the total opposite of the “free market” policies that the government claims to support. In a free market, when demand for something goes up, so should its price. If there’s a labour shortage in Canadian agriculture, wages should tend upwards until the supply of labour increases. By aggressively expanding Temporary Worker Programs, the government is manipulating market conditions to keep wages and working conditions low in order to increase corporate profits.

Government-imposed servitude

Ottawa's seasonal agricultural workers program (SAWP) is an old federal initiative that started in 1966 with Caribbean countries. Mexico and Guatemala were incorporated in the seventies. SAWP operates in Alberta, Quebec, Manitoba, Ontario, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island, supplying 20% of seasonal farm jobs on vegetable, fruit, and tobacco farms and greenhouses. B.C. was incorporated in 2004.

Under the SAWP a farm worker comes under a temporary work permit visa tied to one single employer for periods of up to eight months. Before leaving the home country, the worker must sign a contract with the employer specifying wages and terms of employment — in other words, sign away the right while in Canada to seek better conditions. Those seeking permits are not allowed to bargain collectively with their prospective employer. Impoverished and dispossessed workers abroad stand alone against the power of employer and government. The employer is able to dictate contract terms.

Justicia/Justice for Migrant Workers-BC calls on Ottawa to offer the migrant workers permanent status — for them and their families — on their arrival in Canada. In fact, as things stand, workers have no option to apply for permanent status. They are sent home as soon as their contracts expire — or sooner, if they complain or raise concerns about poor working or living conditions..

They take with them an evaluation form from their employer, which must be given to the home government. At the end of the season, employers fill an evaluation report indicating if they would recall the workers for next season. A negative report can result in suspension from the program. Workers also report on their treatment by Canadian employers, but most of them avoid complaints for fear that this would be held against them in reapplying for work in Canada.

In the Mexican case, the government requires that applicants have less than grade three education, a farm-worker background, and strong family ties — factors believed likely

to prevent them from establishing themselves in Canada as undocumented workers.

Workers get little information on what to expect in Canada. Once here, they start at or near minimum wage, exposed to long shifts of hard labour (up to 12-16 hour days in peak season). They receive no overtime pay, no paid holidays, sometimes no weekends, and no vacation pay. They are also subjected to unfair paycheck deductions for social benefits such as Unemployment Insurance and Canadian Pension Plan that they can never receive because of their “temporary” status.

The SAWP program does not provide a path to regularization of status. Migrant labourers work here for years as migrants, coming and going yearly, sometimes for their entire work life. They develop ties here and establish themselves up to a certain point, but are never able to settle with their families. This creates a pattern of extended and painful family separation. Children grow up without fathers, while men here establish separate lives, and the fabrics of relationships and communities are strained.

Immigrant-based community grassroots organizations, progressive faith groups, and the labour movement point out that such temporary worker programs depress standards for all workers in Canada. The migrant-worker programs are yet another tactic of the “divide and conquer” strategy that aims to divide and fracture the working class. It encourages a perception that migrant workers threaten the jobs and employment standards of the local population, when in fact it is the migrant-labour programs — not the workers — that threaten us all.

How to create a labour surplus

The rural economy of Mexico has been devastated in recent years by the provisions of the North American Free Trade Agreement. This is entirely intentional, reflecting NAFTA’s goal of reshaping Mexico’s economy in line with the needs of mainly U.S. corporate interests, while enriching the notoriously corrupt Mexican ruling class.

NAFTA and related policies deepen economic distress in Mexico where, according to the World Bank, 50% live in poverty and 15% in extreme poverty — about 15 million Mexicans struggling to fend off starvation. Meanwhile, Mexico, one of the world's most unequal and unjust countries, boasts more new billionaires than Canada, including the richest man on earth, Carlos Slim.

The economic collapse of the Mexican countryside has created waves of migrants seeking a future in Mexico's large cities and in the U.S. It is estimated there could be as many as 12 million undocumented Mexicans in the U.S. Half a million brave the dangerous journey north every year. About 3,000 die each year in the attempt, mostly from exposure while crossing the unforgiving deserts of the U.S. Southwest. The migrants' remittances back home are now Mexico's largest source of foreign revenue, about \$25 billion annually.

SAWP and other temporary worker programs take advantage of the huge surplus of cheap labour in Mexico that NAFTA helped to create. Through temporary worker programs, governments of both Mexico and Canada aim to manage the flow of migrants to the North for the benefit of local business elites, while stripping workers of rights and liberties.

The result is to create in this country an underclass of workers, an underclass of human beings stamped with the labels of "foreign," "undocumented," "unskilled," and "temporary." Meanwhile it relieves the Mexican government of responsibility to ensure healthy rural and urban development throughout the country.

The need to organize

The creation of this oppressed migrant workforce must be answered by a migrant labour movement with its feet and heart in the countries of both origin and destination, one that seeks real and lasting solutions to the migrant workers' problems. This movement must be based on grassroots organizing initiatives that empower workers to lead their own struggle. Real

changes happen only when those most affected, those who suffer the most, are at the forefront of the struggle. If this is not the case, changes if any will be superficial and short-lived.

The Justicia/Justice for Migrant Workers collective sees its mandate as assisting those most affected — the migrant workers — in stepping to the fore and consolidating their position and participation in the movement. We help workers organize in an effective manner, avoiding possible risk of repatriation and seeking to meet their immediate and long-term needs.

We expose migrant workers' conditions and apply pressure through the media, while accompanying the workers' process of raising consciousness, and developing skills and tools drawn from their own analysis of their condition and situation. We seek to help create different types of support systems — legal, political, and moral — within the community to overcome the numerous barriers that silence migrant workers.

In B.C., unlike other provinces in the east, migrant farm workers are allowed to unionize. In some cases, unions have sought to respond to their plight, as with regard to the temporary workers employed in B.C. on the Richmond-Vancouver rapid transit line and the Golden Ears Bridge over the Fraser River. The United Food and Commercial Workers operate Migrant Support Centers in Ontario, Manitoba, Quebec, and recently B.C. Currently it is fighting for the right to represent these workers in Manitoba and Quebec.

On the whole, however, efforts by the trade union movement to defend these workers have been sporadic, and their character raises legitimate concerns.

In addition, it must be asked whether Canada's unions, with their present hierarchical and primarily white leadership structures, can effectively represent migrant workers and serve their interests. Are unions long-term allies of migrant workers, supporting their struggle not only here but in their country of origin, where the root causes are found that forced them to migrate? Should an independent migrant workers union be formed to better represent their interests by exercising their

skills and building on their organizing culture and historical backgrounds?

What is certain is that regardless of the structure or model, the most affected ones — migrant workers and migrants of colour — should represent themselves. Only this will counteract their historical background of marginalization. Otherwise systemic patterns of charity and paternalism will be perpetuated, making token gestures to those most affected — the migrant workers — without changing the structures that determine their fate.

Alliances of migrant workers with other sectors, inside and outside the labour movement, should address systemic issues, such as the root causes of migration, structural and systemic racism in immigration policies and hiring systems, and so on. There are ways unions can support migrant workers other than merely “representing” or “leading” their struggle.

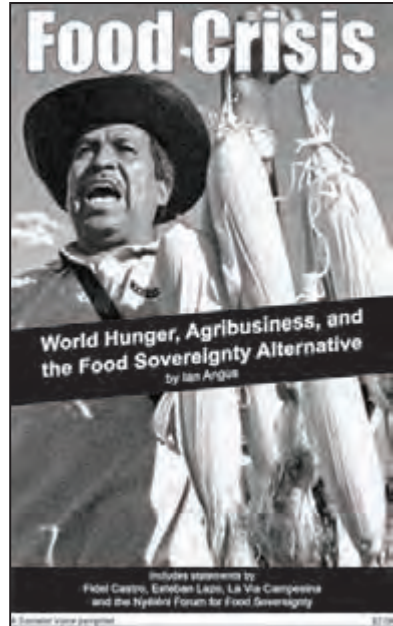
Support and solidarity can be expressed through respecting, facilitating, and encouraging migrant workers’ self-organization instead of speaking for them and having others doing the work for them. Respect and support is also needed for grass-roots organizing efforts to develop leadership and capacity within community-based organizations. This can help grass-roots organizers and migrant workers develop the tools needed for their struggle for justice and dignity.

After my first “Canadian social history lesson” in the tomato greenhouse three years ago, many more followed. Undoubtedly, the most powerful and hopeful lessons came from the migrant farm workers themselves, who through the years have been resisting with admirable courage and dignity their “patrones” (bosses), both in their farms and the consular offices, where officials are often from the employer’s side. They do this sometimes silently and sometimes loudly, accompanied by external supporters or just by themselves. They demand the right to be human beings, not just the “economic units” that global capital needs them to be.

Reading from the left

Food Crisis: World Hunger, Agribusiness and the Food Sovereignty Alternative.

by Ian Angus. A Marxist analysis of the worldwide food and farm crisis. Includes statements by Fidel Castro, La Via Campesina and the Nyeleni Food Sovereignty Conference



Fidel Castro on Global Warming, Biofuels and World Hunger. "It hurts to think that 10 billion tons of fossil fuel is consumed every year. This means that each year we waste what it took nature one million years to create."



Venezuela Eyewitness
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