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Land & Sovereignty in the Americas

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**Land & Resource Grabs in the United States:
Five sites of struggle and potential transformation**

by Zoe Brent & Tanya Kerssen

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About the series:

The Land & Sovereignty in the Americas series pulls together research and analysis from activists and scholars working to understand and halt the alarming trend in “land grabbing”—from rural Brazil and Central America to US cities like Oakland and Detroit—and to support rural and urban communities in their efforts to protect their lands as the basis for self-determination, food justice and food sovereignty. The series is a project of the Land & Sovereignty in the Americas (LSA) activist-researcher collective, coordinated by Food First. For media inquiries about this series, or to arrange an interview with an author, please contact land@foodfirst.org or call (510) 654-4400.

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Introduction

Across the United States, communities are fighting to defend the resources they need to produce food. Corporate control of the food system is undermining the livelihoods of family farmers, farmworkers, fisherpeople, communities of color, and indigenous peoples—squeezing them economically; contaminating their soils and waterways; and pushing them off the land. These processes of dispossession and disenfranchisement—dubbed a new wave of global “land grabbing”—are not new, nor are they confined to poor countries of the Global South. Indeed, they form the basis of the history of capitalist expansion in the US. What is new, perhaps, is the rapid rate at which land and other resources are being concentrated in the hands of new financial and institutional actors—thanks to policies that favor profits over people, and finance over food.

In the face of such momentous challenges, the capacity of local, regional, and community-based movements to create systemic change depends on their ability to link their respective struggles while at the same time confronting and resolving the historical, cultural, and strategic differences among them. While these differences are many, a number of crosscutting issues can be identified that help us to make sense of 1) the rapid transformations underway in our nation’s land and resource base, and 2) the ways in which communities have organized themselves to confront these threats. While numerous issues intersect with the question of land, here we identify five strategic



Farmworker justice protest in Oakland, CA. Photo by Leonor Hurtado.

“nexus” to help us understand how land converges with historically embedded power relations in the United States. While each nexus represents an area of capital expansion, growing crisis, and deepening inequality, it also embodies a key site of intensifying resistance and potential for systemic change.

The Land-Labor Nexus

The US food system has always relied on the exploitation of vulnerable groups of imported workers—beginning with the importation of indentured servants from England in the 1600s to

QUICK FACTS

WHAT?

Land and resource concentration is increasing—thanks to policies that favor profits over people, and finance over food. In the face of dispossession, communities are organizing, but their struggles are rooted in distinct histories and resistance strategies.

WHERE?

Across the United States, in cities and rural areas.

WHO?

Farmers, fishers, ranchers, workers, people of color, Native Americans, women, youth, students, activists, producers and consumers.

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work in the fields and the transatlantic slave trade from the 16th to the 19th century.¹ From the 1860s to the 1930s, as US agriculture rapidly expanded, the US imported large numbers of Asian immigrants so that by 1886, seven out of eight farmworkers were Chinese.² Throughout the 20th century, as large-scale and corporate-controlled agriculture expanded, the reliance on immigrant farm labor continued to deepen, but the people who filled these jobs changed. Today, most migrant farmworkers in agricultural states like California are farmers themselves—primarily from Mexico and Central America—who were forced to leave their land due to free trade policies such as NAFTA, which undermined their local farming economies back home.³ Upon arriving in the US after perilous cross-border journeys, migrant farmworkers tend to be severely underpaid⁴ and must endure conditions of isolation and fear under the constant threat of deportation.⁵ Women are especially vulnerable, as illustrated by high levels of gender-based violence against female farmworkers.⁶

Unfortunately, labor exploitation is not limited to large-scale corporate farms, but can also extend to small- and medium-sized family farms that feel the pressure to compete with larger operations. Since free-market capitalist agriculture favors economies of scale, small farmers—whose profit margins are extremely slim—are often forced to reduce costs in order to stay alive. In some cases, this means hiring unorganized, undocumented farmworkers at poverty wages.

Migrant farmworkers, however, are organizing and shedding light on this systemic issue. The farmworker strike—and allied consumer boycott—against Sakuma Berry Farms in Washington State is emblematic. Organized by the farmworker union Families United for Justice with the support of the nonprofit Community to Community Development (C2C), the ongoing strike protests sub-minimum wages, racial discrimination, poor living conditions, and workplace intimidation on the family-owned and operated berry farm.⁷ Additionally, C2C has been promoting women farmworker-led

cooperatives and community land ownership models in the hopes of establishing local, worker-controlled food production. In the words of Edgar Franks, Civic Engagement Coordinator at C2C, “As farmworkers, we want to bring in our knowledge and our collective experience to create something new ourselves, rather than having systems and values imposed on us.”⁸

The Land-Finance Nexus

The relationship between land and finance is rapidly changing. Since the financial crisis of 2007-2008, speculative investments in US farmland have skyrocketed. Brian Briggeman, a former economist for the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, estimates that approximately 25 percent of farmland acquisitions are a result of financial speculation and hedging.⁹ In other words, land is no longer just a productive asset; it has also become a *financial* asset—a process Fairbairn calls the “financialization of land.”¹⁰ Farmland is drawing attention from “high net worth individuals” like George Soros as well as institutional investors like pension funds, hedge funds, university endowments, private foundations, and sovereign wealth funds.¹¹ The pension fund TIAA-CREF, for instance, invested \$2 billion in farmland in 2010.¹²

This disturbing trend—which further erodes farmers’ control over the means of production—is a result of changes in policies and legal frameworks that paved the way for the institutional ownership of land. These include: the deregulation of financial markets in the 1970s¹³; reforms in the US tax code in the 1980s¹⁴; and declining Federal Reserve interest rates on loans to private banks since the 1980s, which provided more money for borrowing and investing. Meanwhile small-scale farmers are finding it increasingly difficult to access the credit they need to keep operations going, often causing them to lose their land.¹⁵

According to the 2012 US Census of Agriculture, the average age of farmers in the US is 56.¹⁶ As these farmers retire, young and aspiring farmers—including

In Community to Community, we are trying to create space and dialogue and intersecting movements. In our case, we are trying to do it by intersecting regionally and then linking nationally. Even our own internal structure and organizing dynamics are an experiment, as well as everything else that we are trying to do to move farmworker justice forward. Women’s leadership is our first goal; farmworker justice is next; and then immigrant rights and environmental justice.

— Rosalinda Guillén, Community to Community¹⁷

many who are already mired in college debt—face high land prices and little or no access to credit.¹⁸ Consequently, US farming faces the prospect of a dramatic transfer of land to investors and institutional owners within a generation—even with the renewed interest of young people in farming as a profession.

One of the organizations on the frontlines of these struggles, the National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC) has developed an online tool called the [Farmland Monitor](#), “a crowd-sourced, participatory mapping platform that allows farmers, fisherpeople and rural policy advocates to document and share articles or personal narratives describing land and resource grabs.”¹⁹ For instance, Farmland Monitor contributors Trina and Gerald Carlin—beef and produce farmers in Pennsylvania—note that land prices in their area have soared with the onset of “fracking” for natural gas: “These kinds of land prices, while potentially attractive to those leaving farming, hinder new farmers’ ability to access land.”²⁰ Recognizing that this is a political issue that relies on favorable policies and regulations, the NFFC sees the digital platform as a way to help “explain the widespread effects of the financialization of agriculture to elected officials and other audiences.”²¹

The Land-Race Nexus

Historically, race has been a key determinant of land access and control in the US. Military force first paved the way for the concentration of land in the hands of white settlers, dispossessing Native Americans and subsequently appropriating the land and labor of Mexican Americans, Japanese Americans, and African Americans.²² Since the abolition of slavery, African Americans faced persistent racism in their efforts to access—and hold on to—land.

The Land Loss Prevention Project (LLPP) based in North Carolina and the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund (FSC/LAF) were founded in 1982 and 1967, respectively, to help African American farmers retain their land amidst ongoing discriminatory practices and economic crises. Organizations in Washington DC like the NFFC and Rural Coalition/*Coalición Rural* pursued policy changes to reflect the work happening in the South, resulting in a number of new programs under the 1987 Agricultural Credit Act.²³ In the 1990s, LLPP, FSC/LAF, and the Farmers Legal Action Group (FLAG) began investigating and further documenting discriminatory practices.²⁴ This led to the Pigford Class Action Suit



Earthworks Urban Farm in Detroit, MI. Photo by detroitunspun.

accusing the USDA of denying loans, disaster relief, and other benefits to black farmers.

Unfortunately, the legacy of black land loss persists to this today. Between 1920 and 2000, the population of black farmers declined by 98 percent,²⁵ and as of 2007, only 0.3 percent of US farmland was principally operated by black farmers.²⁶

Furthermore, the trend in the financialization of land has affected not only rural areas, but also cities, where communities of color have been most severely affected. For instance, as a result of financialization, the securitization of risky (“sub-prime”) mortgages became immensely profitable for banks and investment firms. In the lead up to the 2007 financial crisis, predatory, sub-prime lending practices are estimated to have caused a loss of \$71 to \$93 billion in asset values among African Americans alone.²⁷ Overall, four million people lost their homes in the US foreclosure crisis, constituting a massive process of dispossession.²⁸

What’s more, the crash in real estate values—combined with the deregulated financial environment—has laid out the welcome mat for investors to purchase land at rock bottom prices and speculate on their eventual increase in value. The case of Hantz Farms in Detroit illustrates this trend. Under the guise of scaling up urban agriculture and revitalizing the city’s blighted land, Hantz hopes his farm of high-value hardwood trees “will create land scarcity in order to push up property values—property that he will own a lot of.”²⁹

The Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (DBCFSN)—created in 2006 to build power for food system transformation among African American communities—has voiced strong opposition to the

Hantz project. DBCFSN co-founder Malik Yakini observed:

They don't have any sense of using urban agriculture to empower communities. They are driven by the profit motive. The current urban ag movement is clearly steeped within the social justice movement and clearly is trying to empower people. And none of that is on the radar of the Hantz project. So that is very troubling... There are major questions around use and ownership of land. And how land serves the common good as opposed to trying to serve the interests of wealthy individuals who are trying to make a profit.³⁰

For DBCFSN, “the most effective movements grow organically from the people whom they are designed to serve; representatives of Detroit’s majority African-American population must be in the leadership of efforts to foster food justice and food security in Detroit.”³¹

The Land-Water Nexus

Access to water is another important factor that determines both the ability of local communities to grow food and the financial value of land. Land grabbing threatens community-based water resources in two key ways: 1) by appropriating them for water-intensive, monocrop production or speculation of land values (betting that land values will rise as water scarcity heightens), or 2) by contaminating water sources that sustain local livelihoods and food production.



Salmon fishing in Bristol Bay. Photo by Emma Forsberg.

First, access to groundwater for irrigation greatly affects the value of farmland. Therefore, many large-scale land deals are essentially a vehicle for water grabbing. Harvard University, for example, recently purchased roughly 10,000 acres of land in California—just before the state began negotiating the regulation of groundwater resources.³² In the case of a 3,000-acre parcel in the Cuyama Valley of Santa Barbara County—for which Harvard now holds the water rights—the University’s farmland investment firm has begun drilling test wells with an eye towards converting the grazing lands into high-value irrigated vineyards. Neighbors who have formed the Cuyama Valley Watch are concerned this will deplete aquifers for neighboring farms in an already drought-stricken area.³³

Second, extractive industries like mining affect the productive and life-giving capacity of nearby waterways. The commodities boom—i.e. the price spike for agricultural raw materials, metals and oil that peaked in 2008—has helped fuel the expansion of mining activities throughout the US, with the support of institutions and regulations that manage the rights to subsurface minerals. On public land, the Bureau of Land Management facilitates mining by granting mineral leases whereas on private property, US law allows companies to negotiate directly with landowners for access. Private companies hire armies of “land men” to pressure rural residents into signing away their mineral rights.³⁴ Although these mechanisms for accessing mineral rights have been in place for decades, President Obama’s “[all of the above](#)” energy strategy has increased their use by pushing for more domestic energy development—from agrofuels to oil to natural gas.³⁵

The combination of the commodities boom and aggressive energy policies has made places like Alaska the targets of new offshore oil drilling and large-scale mining operations. Bristol Bay, Alaska, the largest sustainably managed salmon fishery in the world, is currently threatened by a proposal to implement a large-scale, open pit copper and gold mine known as Pebble Mine. A project of Northern Dynasty Mining, the mine is projected to produce between 2.5 and 10 billion tons of waste—enough to bury the city of Seattle—and require environmental treatment “in perpetuity.”³⁶ Fearing the disastrous impacts on fishing communities, the Bristol Bay Regional Seafood Development Association (BBRSD) has sustained a campaign to block Pebble Mine for nearly a decade. Representing 7,000 fishermen and -women, many of BBRSD’s members come from local

Native communities who also rely on subsistence fishing. As a result of the BBRSD's efforts, the EPA was forced to publicly recognize the disastrous potential impacts of the mine on the surrounding wetlands and fisheries. But translating this recognition into binding regulation has been slow. As Katherine Carscallen, a BBRSD board member, notes, "If there isn't political will for the EPA to act, even though they have the authority now, there is potential for them to either lose it or lose funding for it, so we really need the will of the people and the will of the White House for the EPA to finalize an action."³⁷

The Land-Climate Nexus

Land relates to climate change in four critical ways: 1) the greenhouse gas emissions generated by land use (from agriculture to the extraction and burning of fossil fuels), 2) the disproportionate impact of climate change on small farmers and marginalized communities, 3) land speculation related to climate volatility, and 4) "false solutions" to climate change that facilitate the further appropriation of community lands and resources.

First, agriculture, livestock, and other related land uses (such as deforestation) are responsible for just under a quarter of global greenhouse gas emissions.³⁸ Yet not all agriculture systems are created equal. While *industrial* agriculture represents the majority of emissions from global agriculture, ecologically based practices—used primarily by small-scale farmers—not only contribute fewer emissions, but also sequester more carbon and other greenhouse gases.³⁹ Nonetheless, the incentives to double down on large-scale, energy-intensive monocultures far outweigh the incentives to diversify agriculture and conserve natural resources.

Second, crop losses due to the effects of climate change—such as more intense droughts and floods—hit small farmers the hardest, threatening their hold on land. Climate change also affects livestock and fisheries through, for example, the reduction of quality forage and changes in marine life due to increased water temperatures, respectively.⁴⁰ Third, many investors view climate change as an opportunity. With increased climatic instability, land degradation, and water scarcity come the potential for soaring profits. As celebrity investor Jeremy Grantham observes, "Good land, in short supply, will rise in price to the benefit of the landowners."⁴¹

Finally, many so-called *solutions* to climate change



People's Climate March, NYC. Sept. 2014. Photo by Lightning Brigade.

also threaten to displace marginalized communities and small food producers from the land. For example, on September 24, 2014, the Global Alliance for Climate Smart Agriculture was launched in New York City, which seeks to link agribusiness to expanded carbon offset markets. Despite its name, so-called climate smart agriculture "incentivizes destructive industrial agricultural practices by tying it to carbon market offsets based on unreliable and non-permanent emissions reduction protocols."⁴² For the international peasant movement La Vía Campesina:

Climate smart agriculture begins with deception by not making a differentiation between the negative effects of industrialized agriculture and the real solutions offered by traditional sustainable peasant agriculture which has contributed to alleviating poverty, hunger, and remediation of climate change... Climate smart agriculture will lead to further consolidation of land, pushing peasant and family farmers towards World Bank Projects, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and other institutions, creating dependency on so-called new technologies through their complete packages that include prescriptions of "climate smart [seed] varieties", inputs, and credit, while ignoring traditional tried and true adaptive farming techniques and stewardship of seed varieties in practice by farmers.⁴³

As demonstrated by the recent People's Climate March, the movement for climate justice is fast gaining momentum and linking numerous community-

based struggles—many rooted in the defense of land and resources. The burgeoning climate movement brings together urban communities of color fighting air pollution—such as Richmond, California’s struggle against oil giant Chevron—and Native American communities fighting extraction on their territories—such as Navajo and Hopi resistance to coal mining in the Black Mesa region of Arizona.⁴⁴ In April 2014, the “Cowboy Indian Alliance” in Washington, DC, united ranchers, farmers, and Native American tribal leaders in opposition to the proposed Keystone XL oil pipeline.⁴⁵ In cities, churches, and college campuses across the country, a movement for “divestment” from fossil fuels is rapidly spreading.⁴⁶ Disinvestment necessarily implies a transformation of the model of industrial agriculture and extractive industries that most threatens the ability of people all over the world to live dignified lives on the land.

Convergence in Diversity: The path to transformation

Without a doubt, historic inequalities and more recent processes of financialization—fueled by the political influence of corporate monopolies and wealthy elites—are aiding the advance of corporate control of farmland, fisheries, urban land, and the very air we breathe. But in the face of such steep challenges, there is hope: examples of community-based resistance, grassroots solidarity, and broad-based alliances abound.

The food justice movement—emerging from the economic, environmental and health disparities plaguing the US food system—has tackled the issue of land and resource control in various ways. For many community-based food justice activists—such as members of the US Food Sovereignty Alliance—this has meant fostering greater political awareness, strategic capacity, and alliances among those most affected by structural inequalities: youth, women, workers, small farmers, and communities of color. This work faces many challenges, not least being the highly fragmented nature of our movement. Forging a coherent platform for food justice—rooted in diverse, community-based struggles in defense of land and resources—is perhaps our most daunting task going forward.

This political coherence can only be forged through a broad, collective analysis of the dynamics of capital expansion that threaten community-based food systems everywhere. It also requires local or sector-specific movements to look up and out, and express

solidarity on issues that don’t appear to affect them directly. In a recent article in response to the shooting of unarmed black teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, Brett Tolley from the North Atlantic Marine Alliance (NAMA) writes:

I imagine not everyone reading this will understand why NAMA or any group that works on marine conservation or food justice issues would be discussing racism. But I’m reminded of what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said: Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. To our allies and colleagues who are committed to advancing justice for the ocean, fishing communities, and the seafood system, I’d say Michael Brown’s death is highly relevant. I appeal to the white community to go deeper in our collective dialogue, remembering that we’re part of a much larger community of people, and to lean into the challenging discussions of our time.⁴⁷

The five nexuses of struggle outlined in this brief do not constitute an exhaustive list—nor are they mutually exclusive. Nonetheless, they demonstrate some key ways in which movements across the US are rooted in distinct histories of struggle, which have yielded specific ways of interpreting injustice as well as specific resistance strategies. If we are to succeed in stopping the onslaught of land grabbing on a broad scale—and in building sustainable, culturally appropriate alternatives—the movements on the frontlines will need to lead the charge. And those movements will need to forge alliances in order to build broad-based social and political power.

There are clear and concrete challenges ahead as we enter the next phases of our struggle for food sovereignty. Particularly as the struggle manifests [itself] in the US, Canada and parts of Europe, where only small fractions of the population are engaged in food production. The ability to build support amongst the people is critical. The struggle for food sovereignty and agroecology is not just a peasant struggle, it is a people’s struggle for democratic and autonomous control of the food system.

— Blain Snipstal, La Vía Campesina⁴⁸

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