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# Forging Links Between Food Chain Labor Activists and Academics

Charles Z. Levoke  
*Wilfrid Laurier University*

Nathan McClintock  
*Portland State University, n.mcclintock@pdx.edu*

Laura-Anne Minkoff-Zern  
*Syracuse University*

Amy K. Coplen  
*Portland State University, acoplen@pdx.edu*

Jennifer Gaddis  
*University of Wisconsin-Madison*

*See next page for additional authors*

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## Authors

Charles Z. Levoke, Nathan McClintock, Laura-Anne Minkoff-Zern, Amy K. Coplen, Jennifer Gaddis, Joann Lo, Felipe Tendick-Matesanz, and Anelyse M. Weiler

## Forging links between food chain labor activists and academics

Charles Z. Levkoe <sup>a \*</sup>

Wilfrid Laurier University

Nathan McClintock <sup>b</sup>

Portland State University

Laura-Anne Minkoff-Zern <sup>c</sup>

Syracuse University

Amy K. Coplen <sup>d</sup>

Portland State University

Jennifer Gaddis <sup>e</sup>

University of Wisconsin-Madison

Joann Lo <sup>f</sup>

Food Chain Workers Alliance

Felipe Tendick-Matesanz <sup>g</sup>

Restaurant Opportunities Centers United

Anelyse M. Weiler <sup>h</sup>

University of Toronto

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### Abstract

Interest in food movements has been growing dramatically, but until recently there has been limited engagement with the challenges facing workers across the food system. Of the studies that do exist, there is little focus on the processes and

relationships that lead to solutions. This article explores ways that community-engaged teaching and research partnerships can help to build meaningful justice with food workers. The text builds on a special roundtable session held at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Geographers in Chicago in April 2015, which

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<sup>a \*</sup> *Corresponding author:* Charles Z Levkoe, Department of Geography, Wilfrid Laurier University; 75 University Avenue West; Waterloo, Ontario, N2L 3C5 Canada;  
[charles.levkoe@gmail.com](mailto:charles.levkoe@gmail.com)

<sup>b</sup> Nathan McClintock, Toulan School of Urban Studies & Planning, Portland State University; P.O. Box 751; Portland, Oregon 97207 USA.

<sup>c</sup> Laura-Anne Minkoff-Zern, Department of Public Health, Food Studies, and Nutrition, Syracuse University; 544 White Hall; Syracuse, New York 13244 USA.

<sup>d</sup> Amy K. Coplen, Toulan School of Urban Studies & Planning, Portland State University; P.O. Box 751; Portland, Oregon 97207 USA.

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<sup>e</sup> Jennifer Gaddis, Department of Civil Society and Community Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison; 4251 Nancy Nicholas Hall; 1300 Linden Drive; Madison, Wisconsin 53706 USA.

<sup>f</sup> Joann Lo, Food Chain Workers Alliance; 1730 West Olympic Boulevard #300 Room K; Los Angeles, California 90015 USA.

<sup>g</sup> Felipe Tendick-Matesanz, Restaurant Opportunities Centers United; 77 West Washington Street; Chicago, Illinois 60602 USA.

<sup>h</sup> Anelyse M. Weiler, Department of Sociology, University of Toronto; 725 Spadina Avenue; Toronto, Ontario, M5S 2J4 Canada.

involved a range of academic scholars and community-based activists. We present these insights through a discussion of key perspectives on collaborative research and teaching and learning as food-labor scholar-activists. We argue that despite significant gaps in the way that food movements are addressing labor issues, community-campus collaborations present an opportunity for building alliances to foster food justice. Building on our collective analysis and reflection, we point to five recommendations for fostering collaboration: connecting to personal experience; building trust; developing common strategies; building on previous community efforts; and, appreciating power differences and reciprocating accordingly. We conclude with some final thoughts on future research directions.

### Keywords

academic, activist, community-engaged scholarship, food movements, food justice, food systems, food workers, labor, teaching

### Introduction

Despite the growing interest in food movements over the past few decades, scholars and activists have been minimally engaged with the challenges facing workers across the food system. Most food movement initiatives narrow their focus to issues related to consumers, family farmers, and environmental sustainability, while the work of the people who plant seeds, harvest crops, process, package, deliver, prepare, and serve food often goes unaddressed (Allen, 2008; DuPuis & Goodman, 2005; Gray, 2014; Guthman, 2004; Harrison, 2008, 2011; Jayaraman, 2013). Yet the food system is the largest employer in the United States, with almost 20 million workers (one-sixth of the nation's workforce) and is responsible for over US\$2.2 trillion in goods and services annually, accounting for 14 percent of the US GDP.<sup>1</sup> In Canada, the food system generates CA\$106.9 billion in economic activity (6.7% of Canada's GDP) and employs over 2.2 million people, one in eight jobs (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada,

2015). While many food workers are citizens, a significant number come through temporary migrant worker programs or are undocumented.

At every link of the food chain, the majority of workers struggle with low wages, lack of benefits, and unacceptable and even dangerous working conditions. These jobs are disproportionately held by people of color, who, relative to the general population, are paid less and hold fewer management positions (Liu & Apollon, 2011). From farm to table, workers of color, particularly immigrants, are treated as expendable bodies, whose human rights and health are disregarded for the sake of profit (Barndt, 2008; Holmes, 2013; Harrison, 2011; Schlosser, 2004). This racialized exploitation is rooted in a colonial legacy through which agricultural, processing, food preparation and service workers of color have faced systematic oppression, on national and international scales (Mintz, 1985; Williams-Forson, 2006).

Food movements<sup>2</sup> are beginning to link concerns with food quality and sustainability to the kinds of organizing work that labor activists have been engaged in for the last half-century. Especially in the fields, workers have successfully challenged unsafe and exploitative conditions, although the movement, largely led by the United Farm Workers (UFW), peaked in the 1970s and has lost strength and general consumer support in recent years (Barndacke, 2012; Ganz, 2009; Garcia, 2012; Martin, 2013). The attention to labor by food movement activists of today is more comprehensive than ever before, as evidenced by the growing number of organizations working in particular food sectors, from the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) in Florida's tomato fields to the Restaurant Opportunities Center United (ROC) organizing in cities across the nation (Jayaraman, 2013; Minkoff-Zern, 2014). In addition, cross-sectoral linkages are being made by coalitions and solidarity alliances, such as the Food Chain Workers Alliance and the Fight for \$15, bringing together workers from

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<sup>1</sup> Analysis by Food Chain Workers Alliance (2012) of the U.S. Economic Census.

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<sup>2</sup> We refer to "food movements" as the range of multiscaled and cross-sectoral networks of individuals and organizations with the broad goal of challenging the logistics of the dominant food system while creating more socially just and ecologically sustainable food systems for all (Levkoe, 2014).

across the food chain to address labor abuses from a broader food systems perspective (Lo, 2014; Sbicca, 2015).

While many critical studies have pointed to the problems workers face across food systems (in addition to those cited above, Besky, 2014; Brown & Getz, 2011; Gaddis, 2014), there is a distinct lack of focus on the processes and relationships that lead to solutions, especially within the broad array of work undertaken by food movements. More specifically, how scholars might engage in this work is also unclear. There is a long history of academic institutions becoming involved in research and teaching that is ostensibly rooted in community needs. This engagement has traditionally taken the form of community-based research, participatory-action research, and community-engaged learning<sup>3</sup> (Buys & Bursnall, 2007; Strand et al., 2003). While there has been increasing interest in building community-campus partnerships (Barnett, 2007; Powell & Dayson, 2013), many community-based organizations have reported that universities and colleges too often privilege the work of faculty and students while failing to adequately consider and address community needs (Bortolin, 2011; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000). Further, many well-documented studies have criticized academics for not engaging substantially with communities and failing to challenge systems of social inequality (Mitchell, 2008; Swords & Kiely, 2010).

Notwithstanding the limitations of past experience, we suggest that community-campus partnerships present an important opportunity for building more robust and impactful food movements. In this respect, research on ways that food systems can be made more socially just and environmentally sustainable has been foundational to developing a critical and informed analysis for both theory and practice (Allan, 2008; Brem-Wilson, 2014; Wakefield, 2007). Further, campuses have long been vibrant spaces for student and faculty activism both for localized projects and for broader campaigns to build more just and sustainable food systems (Barlett, 2011; Friedmann, 2007).

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<sup>3</sup> Community-engaged learning is also referred to as community service-learning.

In this paper, we describe a series of efforts that aim to highlight the experiences and potentials for community-university partnerships to play a stronger role in addressing issues of labor across food systems. We present reflections from a roundtable discussion between academics and community activists held in Chicago in April 2015. In what follows, we first describe our process and methodology (i.e., how we organized the roundtable and analyzed the outcomes) before turning to the central themes that emerged from what proved to be a productive, insightful conversation. After some initial reflections on collaborative research, we move to the role of teaching and learning as a scholar-activist, and then to five crucial recommendations for fostering collaboration. We conclude with some thoughts on future research directions.

### **Methodology: Organizing and Reflecting on a Scholar-Activist Roundtable Discussion**

To identify how community-university teaching and research partnerships can meaningfully help to build justice for food workers, we organized a roundtable session at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Geographers (AAG) in Chicago in April 2015. Organized by Charles Levkoe and Nathan McClintock, the session brought together community-based activists and scholars committed to labor struggles at various links in the food chain. To determine the make-up of the panel, we first brainstormed a list of food scholars—both faculty and graduate students—who we knew were working on labor issues and who would be attending the AAG meeting. We attempted to strike a balance between faculty and student experiences, so we ultimately recruited two graduate students, Amy Coplen and Anelyse Weiler, and two faculty members, Jennifer Gaddis and Laura-Anne Minkoff-Zern. The academic participants have partnered in various ways with a variety of food labor groups, including (to name only a few) UNITE HERE!, the Central New York Workers Center, and Justicia for Migrant Workers. In addition to Joann Lo, who was attending the meeting to participate in a related session, we wanted to include a local food labor organizer who had experience working with academics. A Chicago-based member of the Geographies of

Food and Agriculture Specialty Group, which was sponsoring the session, reached out to the local chapter of Restaurant Opportunities Center United (ROC) to invite Felipe Tendick-Matesanz.

Prior to the roundtable, the session organizers asked the panelists to draw on their experiences by reflecting on the various ways that academics and activists can build strong and effective collaborations to support ongoing movements organized by farmworkers, food processing workers, restaurant workers, and their allies. We asked each person to prepare a short presentation of no more than ten minutes that would consider the following questions:

- What research questions need to be answered to help advance these struggles?
- What does this kind of activist scholarship look like?
- How can teaching help build alliances to foster food justice?
- What kinds of collaborations have worked best and why?
- Should the research process be participatory every step of the way, or is there a welcome division of labor?
- What kinds of institutional support can academics provide for activists, and vice versa?

During the session, each participant presented their initial responses to the above questions, before the floor was opened up to comments and questions from members of the audience.<sup>4</sup> With the small scale of the room, the conversations were both intimate and productive.

The roundtable and the ensuing discussion was recorded and transcribed verbatim. Levkoe, McClintock, and Minkoff-Zern individually reviewed the transcript to identify dominant themes emerging from the roundtable. After we

came to a consensus about which themes were the most important, McClintock used Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis software tool, to code excerpts from the transcripts, which were exported and organized into a coherent outline and eventually written into a draft manuscript by the first three authors. The remaining authors—all panelists—then provided feedback on the draft. We have organized this paper into three sections to address the themes, both synthesizing panelist comments and integrating direct quotes from the conversation. The incorporation of lengthy direct quotes in the text (which appear in italics) is intentional, as a way to give voice to a range of participants. While the first three authors took responsibility for drafting the manuscript, all authors collaborated to develop the ideas presented in this paper, whether before, during, or after the roundtable session, as we believe that sharing authorship with community-based practitioners is one of the keys to successful community-academic partnership collaborations. More than simply giving credit where credit is due, sharing also helps to recognize and acknowledge that the production of knowledge is a social process, which is negotiated and/or contested across hierarchies of power. We hope, through this approach, to model our commitment to collaboration at multiple stages along the process, as well as to capture the interactive and conversational feel of the panel itself.

### **What Does Collaborative Research Look Like?**

The critical issues facing workers across food systems present important strategic opportunities for collaborative research between academics and community organizers. While there are growing bodies of scholarship focusing on aspects of labor justice and on food system sustainability, attempts to bring the two together have been limited. The few studies that do exist have been focused on themes distant from concrete concerns facing workers. Moreover, the research has not directly served the needs of campaigns working to change policy and/or practice. The roundtable participants identified this as a missed opportunity for faculty, students, and community organizers, and suggested ways that collaborative/participatory research

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<sup>4</sup> The one-hour-and-forty-minute session, titled “Labor/Workers Across the Food Chain: Building Collaborations Between Activists and Academics,” was open to all conference attendees and promoted by the Geographies of Food and Agriculture Specialty Group. Approximately 50 people attended.



could produce more rigorous, high-quality findings, as well as ensure that the results could be more widely used by organizers and activists.

#### *Diverse Forms of Collaborative Research*

One of the roundtable participants noted that there is already a significant body of excellent academic research that could be useful to worker justice campaigns. The challenge is that much of it is inaccessible to activists and needs to be organized and disseminated in ways that are relevant to current organizing efforts. However, Felipe Tendick-Matesanz (FTM) lamented that while we continue to talk about the problems, “the truth is, until there’s worker power and we are able to address the systemic issues, we’re not going to get anywhere.” Considering solutions emerging from collaborative research partnerships, a number of the participants discussed successful examples of collaboration they have been involved with and identified what worked well. Particularly successful were those cases where academics and workers developed projects in partnership and that had mutually beneficial outcomes, and cases where academics were able to take on work that community-based organizations and coalitions did not have the capacity to complete.

Jennifer Gaddis (JG): *In 2013, I worked on a campaign called Real Food Real Jobs with the labor union UNITE HERE! in New Haven, Connecticut. (It was not something that I set out to do originally.) I was doing a lot of work in school contexts and a lot of the food workers got to know me and I had gotten to know them. They were concerned about the quality of the food they were serving and felt very frustrated that they lacked the hours and autonomy to do anything other than re-heat premade foods. (They wanted to do a campaign that would address both problems at once.) The organizers asked me to participate because they thought I could help with the research and writing of a report that would capture their vision for reforms.<sup>5</sup> Attempting to build a coalition to address these issues, we put together a panel of different people, including high school activists, workers, an alderman, and a labor organizer, to present at a food conference at Yale. We also did several actions at different*

*places in the city and went on the radio. After about nine months of this campaign, the workers generated enough support to win a binding contract with the city of New Haven that would create more “cook” positions in the schools. They were also able to start a pilot program that would bring more fresh cooking and more local sourcing into the schools.*

While a faculty member made this specific comment, this kind of community engagement is not limited to faculty. Anelyse Weiler, a graduate student, describes below the ways in which she was able to provide useful research and productive analysis for a community group, with tangible outcomes.

Anelyse Weiler (AW): *Over the past year, I was involved in a project that was part of a graduate community service-learning course at the University of Toronto. The partnership took place over eight months with a nonprofit food networking organization in Ontario with a mandate to promote ecological and economic viability for farmers as well as address issues of food justice. The organization recognized that the questions surrounding migrant farm labor were really important, but that they did not have the resources to be able to address this issue. The project’s purpose was to gather ideas from diverse groups across Ontario on how to advance healthier and more dignified livelihoods with migrant farm workers. Our collaborative research involved eleven interviews with government representatives, farm worker justice groups, health service advocacy groups, and farm lobby groups and farmers. As part of the outputs of the project, we created a blog series co-published by a farm worker justice group in Ontario and included a survey to get feedback.<sup>6</sup> The next steps of this project went beyond the scope of the course to share the action recommendations back with all the stakeholders that we interviewed and figure out how to turn these ideas into a provincial action strategy.*

*Academics have some unique skills to address food labor concerns, like drawing linkages between previously unconnected ideas and doing rigorous empirical research to support better informed decision making. Sometimes organizations don’t have the capacity or the resources to do that kind of empirical research or, in the case of my project, build*

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<sup>5</sup> The report is available at <http://www.realfoodrealjobs.org/wp-content/uploads/NH-Cafeteria-Report-for-web.pdf>

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<sup>6</sup> The blog series is available at <http://sustainontario.com/2015/03/24/26236/news/migrant-farm-workers-and-ontarios-food-movement-finding-common-cause>

*new audiences for ideas. Our blog series received both critical and supportive feedback from readers and groups I did not expect. For the migrant justice organization that co-published the blog series, it was an opportunity to profile some of their work to an audience of food activists who weren't necessarily aware of local migrant farm worker justice initiatives.*

In the comments below, Joann Lo, a community organizer, expressed ways in which academic research benefitted her work on improving food worker wages, particularly by contributing in-depth analysis that nonprofit staff did not have the time to do.

Joann Lo (JL): *In 2012 we published a report called "A Dime a Day" collaboratively with the Food Labor Research Center at the University of California (UC) Berkeley and Professor Chris Benner from UC Davis.<sup>7</sup> For that report, we considered how raising the minimum wage to US\$10.10 per hour—which was the proposal in Congress at the time—would impact food prices for the average American household. Our member organizations at the Food Workers Alliance have talked about the need for living wages for workers across the food system. But a lot of people asked, "Won't that make food too expensive for low-income communities, for the workers that you're trying to help?" So we realized we needed to answer this question. It was helpful to partner with Chris because he had the time (i.e., he was on sabbatical and had money to work with us) and the analytical skills to run the numbers for us. We guided what the report would look at, and Saru Jayaraman, the Director of the Food Labor Research Center at UC Berkeley and also the co-founder and co-director of Restaurant Opportunities Center United, wrote the report, bringing not only her academic background, but also her activist background. That was a very positive experience working with academics.*

### *Workers as Researchers*

Another important theme that emerged from the roundtable was the idea that healthy collaborative relationships should recognize that workers (and activists) are more than just sources of data. Through participatory methodologies, workers can play a role as active researchers and knowledge

producers. These approaches can also enhance the quality of the research and its outcomes, as well as empower researchers with new skills and knowledge. In the following comments, Joann Lo discusses the roles workers played in carrying out research for the Food Chain Workers Alliance. She describes the ways that engaging workers as part of the research process can be empowering as well as an ideal way to form alliances between organizers and academics researching and teaching about similar issues.

JL: *At the Food Chain Workers Alliance, we see workers and organizers as researchers in that we can create and produce our own research and knowledge. Adopting a participatory action research methodology, we produced a report called "The Hands that Feed Us" in 2012 (Food Chain Workers Alliance, 2012<sup>8</sup>). We also worked closely with the Data Center, a nonprofit organization that supports social justice and community-based organizations, to help us do some initial analysis of government data. We shared it with food workers and asked for their feedback and thoughts on ways to move forward with our research.*

*At the same time, we created an advisory committee of academics and researchers from around the country, not to direct our research but to give us advice. We then developed a survey that was piloted by our member organizations, and the Data Center helped us put together a session to train workers to go back and train other workers to be surveyors. We collected over 600 surveys from around the country from April to December in 2011. And then we analyzed them with help from a grad student at the University of California, Los Angeles. Part of our goal was to build the leadership of workers that could be the ones doing the research, and then go out to talk to and recruit new workers to their organization by taking on the role of being a trainer. It was helpful to have that partnership with UCLA professors and our broader academic advisory board. Now "Hands That Feed Us" is central to a lot of our public education work that we do and has contributed to other projects and to building the food justice movement.*

### *Negotiating Barriers*

When conducting community-based, activist-oriented collaborative research, we must also

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<sup>7</sup> The report is available at <http://foodchainworkers.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/A-Dime-A-Day-Report.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> This report is available at <http://foodchainworkers.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Hands-That-Feed-Us-Report.pdf>



consider addressing questions of ownership and accountability: Who owns this data? Who owns the writing? Who is acknowledged and credited for the production of knowledge? Who holds the researcher accountable for sharing the outputs? These questions all point to the need to negotiate challenges that arise in both the academic and community sectors. Working in partnership also keeps academics more accountable to those they are doing research with, as explained in the comments below.

JL: *I have heard many examples from member organizations where academics or students interview the staff and workers and they say they will come back or share what is produced. In most cases, they never hear from them again. This has happened to me many times. In one case, an organization ended up seeing what was produced and it was a complete misrepresentation of what they do. Now that organization requires any researchers to sign an agreement about what's going to happen with the research at the outset. For our "Dime a Day" report, it was truly collaborative, and we felt like it added legitimacy in that we would be taken more seriously by policy makers. So we were fine with having Chris Benner's name on the cover as a co-author. Again, it goes back to the goal of the collaborative research. In the case of the "Hands That Feed Us" report, we really wanted it to be from the Food Chain Workers Alliance because the research was from workers.*

Structural barriers within academia can exacerbate tensions related to the co-production of knowledge. For example, when working within a community context there are often multiple contributors to the knowledge production process. Yet academics are often expected to produce solo-authored, peer-reviewed manuscripts for publication in journals or with an academic press, using technical or discipline-specific terminology that may be less accessible to community partners. These realities point to the increasing neoliberalization of academia, which also includes reduction in public funding with increases in private funding, the individualization and professionalization of education, and a host of other issues that can serve as barriers to relationship building (Giroux, 2014). Thus, presenting research data to both academic and popular audiences may end up doubling a

scholar's workload. From the presentations and ensuing discussion, it became clear that career advancement was not the motivating force behind decisions to become involved in these kinds of community-campus collaborations. However, academics must still be conscious of their responsibilities to conduct rigorous research.

One way this dilemma can be addressed is for academics and community partners to think strategically and collaboratively during the design phase of the research. Developing long-term relationships that begin at an early stage can help the project be mutually beneficial to everyone involved and can alleviate additional burdens (e.g., unrealistic expectations).

JG: *When we began our project there had been a previous Real Food, Real Jobs campaign in Chicago public schools that had used worker surveys, so we were able to build on their experience. The organizer leading the New Haven campaign, Cristina Cruz-Urbe, and I took the basic list of questions from the Chicago surveys and combined our collective understanding from interviews with the workers to formulate questions that would be specific to our community in New Haven. We developed a list of questions that were really interesting for me as a researcher, useful for UNITE HERE! in their campaign, and relevant to farm-to-school advocates interested in getting more "real food" in schools. I tried to manage different aims and expectations by workshopping survey questionnaires and interview guides with different stakeholders before starting to collect data. After having the workers collect surveys in New Haven, Cristina and I co-wrote a report that we really viewed as an organizing tool to build community support for the campaign.*

At the same time, social scientists must negotiate the action-oriented needs of their activist partners and the requirements of their discipline to use a critical lens in the analysis. In the comments below, Anelyse Weiler describes how she made use of her position as an academic and activist researcher. She explains how she found a productive way to critique the limitations without cutting ties to her nonprofit partner, ultimately leading to an analysis that was used to further their work.

AW: *I don't think participatory research means relinquishing our license as academics to be critical. For academics, I think it's useful to retain a productive tension between doing value-based work as part of a community partnership, and simultaneously thinking more analytically and critically. Like any nonprofit, my community partner carefully curates its publication content to set a particular tone in the public sphere. At certain points in my service-learning partnership, however, I became uncomfortable with some of the constraints around the content we could publish. They wanted me to profile more positive stories about farmers in the blog series to ensure we were not vilifying or ignoring farmers. In some cases, there was a withholding of particularly controversial solution ideas interview participants had proposed. For instance, we couldn't endorse legal supports for farmworker unionization because many farmers feel unionization is unfeasible. We had to avoid branding the organization as championing solutions some perceive as unworkable or, in effect, poking the farm lobby bear. It was not necessarily appropriate for me to challenge the community partner's approach to content curation, so I decided to step back and reflect on the constraints facing nonprofits more broadly, and why it is they often face those pressures. I was also forced to consider some of the challenges faced by networking organizations that attempt to play a mediating role between ideas from farmers and farmworker justice groups, and then trying to take those ideas into the public sphere. And a lot of it, as I came to learn, had to do with funding, membership, and maintaining reputability with government. Many other nonprofits face similar challenges of striking a middle ground that challenges the status quo but without appearing too radical.*

Panelists and audience members also discussed the importance of choosing the right political moments to be critical of data. As activist-researchers, we must address the tension between remaining critical and conducting action-oriented work that supports labor struggles. An audience member noted that one must decide when to be “critical for a purpose” rather than critical only because one has the tools to do so or because it is what is expected of critical social scientists, stating that there is a tension between research that is “instrumental on behalf of organizations and critical work that ends up being in a peer-reviewed journal.” But another audience member countered, “I don't think it has to be a dichotomy and I think

there's a lot of flexibility.... I think it's really about making sure your work gets in the right people's hands.”

JG: *One of the important things about having these academic-activist relationships is for us to understand what kinds of constraints each other are under and how we can establish projects that are useful for both parties. I want to be doing things that are relevant to communities, but peer-reviewed publications are what allow me to keep my job. My department is very supportive of community-based participatory research, but the committee at the division level that decides my tenure case is much less familiar with this type of work. There are still a lot of barriers and we need institution-wide conversations.*

As Jennifer Gaddis notes, one's ability to do community-engaged work depends on many levels of scrutiny. This is an ongoing struggle for scholars attempting to do this kind of work within an academic institution. As she suggests, we must address these limitations not only as individuals, but also at the multiple levels of academic administration. Furthermore, we must work to reshape our own expectations about what we are able to achieve. Gaddis adds: “It's also important to have conversations with other community-engaged scholars about how we can better document our work so that the value of what we're doing is clear to others.”

### **Teaching and Learning as Food Labor Scholar-Activists**

While collaborative research was a prominent theme that emerged from the roundtable, participants also focused on some successful examples of using teaching to support food labor activism. With the rise in popularity of food studies, the classroom provides an excellent opportunity to engage with food labor issues and to foster not only critical thinking among students, but also to provide local activists with material resources, research skills, and/or time that they may not normally have available. Some critical food scholars have begun to document their engagements with food justice organizations through community-based research and community-engaged learning (Aftandilian & Dart, 2012; Andrée et al., 2014;

Hayhurst et al., 2013; Levkoe et al., 2014). Despite this growing literature reflecting on the role that community-campus engagement can play in contributing to transformative food systems change, labor issues are rarely included in these efforts.

Roundtable participants discussed their experiences in the classroom. They noted that an important part of working with students—many of whom have not thought about labor issues before—is to draw connections to their daily lives. While rooting teaching and learning in critical social theory is important, these theories need to be grounded and presented as a way to understand and analyze empirical observation and everyday life. Participants spoke about ways that building on their students' experiences as workers and consumers can serve as an important entry point for understanding broader issues of social justice and labor within the food system. Participants also discussed how well-planned courses could enable students to work directly with labor campaigns to support community-organizing efforts. Finally, roundtable participants identified ways that campuses can be spaces for organizing campaigns and engaging students and the university community more broadly. Beyond teaching, some academics are finding ways to engage students as activists and encourage them to get involved outside the classrooms. Encouraging students to see themselves as part of the food system's labor struggle has helped many academics teach and engage students on these issues.

*Laura-Anne Minkoff-Zern (LAMZ): In order to build the labor movement, we need to bring questions around labor into the larger food systems discussion that's growing on campuses, and draw on the increasing interest in food, environment, and sustainability more widely. Developing and teaching a course specifically focused on labor across the food system has provided me an opportunity to think outside my own research on farm labor, and to look more broadly at the food system. I'm also finding ways to discuss labor within my other food courses, so as to not compartmentalize the relationship between labor and food to one or two focused classes.*

*We need to ask how to engage students as activists and scholars, questioning labor injustices in our food system. We must work on finding ways to make food labor issues*

*actually relate to their lives. I teach students to think critically about social difference in a food systems context. When you talk about labor, you're inherently talking about race, class, gender, and other forms of difference. It is often a new way for them to grapple with food issues, and that's often challenging for students. I have been pleasantly surprised to see the ways that students have pursued this challenge on a personal level. When we talk about labor injustices and labor organizing, we're challenging deeply ingrained power structures at individual and institutional scales.*

The growing popularity of local, organic, and sustainable food pose additional levels of complexity, but provide other important entry points through which students can engage with labor.

*Amy Coplen (AC): Most food movement efforts valorize the farmer and the chef who are predominantly white and male and devalue all of the racialized and gendered hands, bodies, and minds that do the bulk of farm-to-table labor. A UNITE HERE! organizer in Portland tells a story of one worker who talked about how her employer was really concerned about sourcing cage-free eggs. The employee asked, "What about our cages?" I think this story speaks to the fact that sustainable food movements are not concerned with the welfare of the workers. This is a theme that I organize my class around in order to interrogate the contradictions of sustainability, expose labor exploitation, and also support the efforts of organizers and activists and food workers in Portland.*

*On the first day of class, we were doing a round of introductions and many students said, "I don't know anything about food labor, but I'm really excited to learn more." When we dug in a little deeper, I realized that the vast majority of them had worked or were currently working in the food service industry as dishwashers, servers, or prep cooks. The fact that they were unable to see their experience as relevant is evidence of how devalued and invisible food labor is. The students' tendency is to celebrate foodie culture, so taking a critical approach has been difficult for some of them. But half of our students are first-generation college students. Most of them receive financial aid. A lot are working part-time, a lot of them full-time. I'm trying to encourage students to draw on their own experiences as food workers, as meal planners, as grocery shoppers, as home cooks, as food stamp recipients, as students eating in the dining hall, and of course, as eaters in general, to understand the broader*

*political economy of the food system and low wage labor. I'm also trying to convey to them that capitalism relies on the invisibility of workers and if we can bring their struggles to light, it's not only the first step to changing that, but it's also in and of itself a radical act.*

Bringing practice to theory empowers students to see the ways in which these injustices are both institutionally reinforced by the food system at large, and being resisted by labor activists and organizations.

LAMZ: *I try to get my students to think about labor issues in real-life terms, not just using scholarly literature, but also activist publications—and there is a lot of great work out there. I provide students with a theoretical framework that gives them some tools to think about these issues and combine that context with practical examples. For example, they read Marx on the production of the working class and then an article by Joann Lo on organizing food systems workers. I then ask them to make connections between the theory and practice.*

Bringing labor organizers into the classroom (in person or virtually) is another way to make these connections and allow students to “actually hear those voices.” As Laura-Anne Minkoff-Zern further explains, another way to make labor “feel real to students is to connect them to what is going on locally...It is important for them to understand that food labor injustices are not just happening far away in the fields—it's all around them,” whether the nationwide Fight for \$15 movement or the struggles of food workers on university campuses. Minkoff-Zern gives an example:

*We partnered with the Central New York Workers Center to organize a showing on campus of the film Food Chains, which focuses on farm workers in Florida and California. Afterwards, the workers who attended were inspired to stand up and talk about their lives and how their experiences in New York paralleled the experiences that they saw in the film. The event provided an opportunity for our students to organize a chapter of the Student Farmworker Alliance. There's an incredible amount of excitement on campus, coming from the students. We just needed to introduce the issue and now they're running with it.*

Many of the panelists provided concrete examples of and reflections on how to engage students in the “real world” of labor injustice and labor action.

AC: *I put together an event called “Working for Food Justice” and invited local organizers to come and talk about their work to connect students and build collaborative relationships. About a week before the event, I got a call from a labor organizer who had heard about the panel and alerted me to a struggle that was happening on my campus, which I didn't even know about. Several of the university's food service workers attended the event and took the time to educate students. This was an amazing opportunity to start connecting students to the struggles of food workers on their own campus.*

As these comments illustrate, pushing the boundaries of academia is both necessary and fruitful for pursuing deeper and contextual understanding and for creating movements for change concerning labor in the food system. By thinking outside traditional academic constraints in their research, teaching, and student engagement, panelists identified opportunities for positive collaborations, which highlighted the strengths of academic and activist collaborations.

### **Some Recommendations for Fostering Collaboration**

Building on the successes and challenges of these examples of collaborative partnerships between activists and academics focused on food and labor issues, we conclude by highlighting five key recommendations that emerged from the roundtable discussion.

#### *Connect to Personal Experience*

The first recommendation is the importance of connecting to personal experience by making food and labor issues visible—something in which we are all implicated. While this does not directly address systemic issues, it creates a foundation for further action and research. This is not a stretch, according to Felipe Tendick-Matesanz: “Everybody touches this industry in some way, shape, or form.” This sentiment was echoed by a number of speakers.

AC: *I've had students say, "I just realized that I've been a victim of wage theft. I had no idea, but that's happened to me." They didn't understand it at the time. When it finally clicks for them that what we're reading about is very relevant to their experiences, it is an interesting turning point.*

JL: *If we're trying to highlight a campaign of workers' stories, then it's helpful to have interviews with workers. That way we can show examples of minimum wage workers and why we need to raise the minimum wage.*

But it is also important to connect these stories to the bigger picture.

FTM: *Most likely many of your students work in the food industry in some way, shape, or form. Recognizing this was very profound for me, and then I realized that it could be a way for impacting others. It may not speak to everybody's experiences, but for me, it was a way to understand what was going on in the world in a very different way than just reading about it. Stories are very important, but to transform things, we need statistics and analysis to go with them. So it's combining the stories with the research that has really helped catapult our work forward.*

### *Build Trust*

A second recommendation is the need to build long-term relationships of trust between academic and community partners.

FTM: *It's all about relationship and trust building that comes with time. Our organizations have struggled with a lack of capacity to do all the things we know we need to do and to work in collaboration with academics. So, for the long term, we need to build trust together. Let's begin that now! Our organization doesn't just represent workers, but also employers and consumers. The goal is to challenge the powers at play and create better wages and working conditions across food systems.*

Indeed, trust can take many years to develop, so collaboration must be seen as a long-term project. In the words of one audience member, "It would be nice to see academics that have a career relationship with the labor sector and with particular nonprofits. Like a biologist that has studied a specific species of frog for 50 years, we need academics that have worked in partnership with a

labor group for that amount of time."

### *Find Common Strategies*

A third recommendation that emerged is to build a strategy of solidarity based on the common concerns that academics, students, and workers face.

FTM: *The reality is that we are all in the same boat. Actually, a lot of the struggles that people are going through in academia are very similar to ours as food workers. That's why I always start out by saying, "We're all workers." From there, we can work together to get to larger societal answers that we're looking for because we're all being undervalued. It's not just in our industry. The reality is that labor in general is undervalued across the board, so we can all come together on some focused topics and move forward.*

### *Build on Existing Work*

A fourth recommendation focuses on the need for collaborative partnerships that build on existing community efforts, and do not attempt to "reinvent the wheel."

AW: *A lot of community organizations are faced with having to put out day-to-day fires, and that can make it difficult to meet the interests of academics in this context. Thus, partnerships work well in situations where the community partners wouldn't otherwise be able to attend to the project. That is, when it's not academics replacing community partners. Often there's a temptation in academia to create brand new packages of de novo projects that look really appealing to granting agencies, but this can duplicate (or undermine) the work and the existing relationships that community organizations have already built.*

### *Recognize and Reciprocate*

A fifth recommendation is that it is important, when working with community organizations, to recognize power differences and to find ways to reciprocate the time and energy put into collaboration.

LAMZ: *When we ask organizers and activists to come to our classrooms and take part in our class projects, we need to think about the ways that work is going to be valued and reciprocated. We must be aware that we are asking community partners to do extra work. As these courses develop, I'm going to be increasingly drawing on activists to*

*give their time to my classes. My program benefits from this. This is an institutional problem because whether you have funds to pay them or not may not be the choice of the individual scholar. We need to talk about ways to build institutional alliances that do work in both directions.*

We recognize that these five recommendations are not completely new and, in some cases, have been echoed in the broader literature on community-university partnerships. Nevertheless, the fact that these experiences remain prominent (and are repeated in different sectors) highlights their importance and the need to continue to explore them. Furthermore, these insights have yet to fully shape what such collaborations could and should look like. Speaking more directly to the theme of food and labor, finding ways for food scholars to better support the work of labor activists across food systems and build collaborations to strengthen food movements is a vital step forward. The coming together of academic and community-based practitioners in the roundtable session and documenting the discussion is part of that process.

In sum, the ideas expressed in this reflective group-essay highlight the fact that despite significant gaps in the way that food movements are addressing labor issues, community-campus collaborations present an opportunity for building alliances to foster food justice. Collaborations are already taking place both within and outside the classroom, led by academics and community groups alike. When they work together, outputs can be more meaningful. But more important, the process of engaging in collaborative and critical research can be transformative for those involved. Building partnerships takes tremendous time and energy, but when done well can offer new approaches to age-old problems. While there is extensive research on understanding what engagement looks like when it is effective, there is less understanding of how to actually make engagement happen. We offer these experiences and five recommendations—connect to personal experience, build trust, find common strategies, build on existing work, and recognize and reciprocate—as a contribution to community-campus collaborations aiming to create more socially just food systems for all.



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