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Perspective

Reformist, progressive, radical: The case for an inclusive alliance

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Abstract

Scholars of food regimes and food movements have argued that the capacity of the contemporary food movement to achieve significant change is dependent upon the nature of the alliances formed by the progressive, food justice component of the broader array of food change organizations. They have urged alliances primarily with the more radical food sovereignty branch of the food movement. I argue that in the United States, which provides far more assistance to poor people as food assistance than as cash welfare, alliances with reformist food security organizations, and specifically the anti-hunger organizations focused on protecting and expanding federal food assistance, must be an essential part of any significant food justice agenda. These programs are essential to the survival of millions of Americans in the present while we are trying to build a better world for the future. Mobilized and informed public policy advocacy has an impressive track record of successful defense and incremental improvement of food programs. Several of these programs are entitlements that actually create justiciable rights. The collective procurement associated with school food and other public meal programs creates levers for fundamental food system change. And the network of federal, state and local anti-hunger organizations is potentially a portal through which people can enter the movement for a just food future. Food justice activists should include anti-hunger advocates among their allies and partners.

Keywords: Food assistance; food movement; food regime; food security; food justice; food sovereignty; Supplemental National Assistance Program (SNAP); National School Lunch Program; Good Food Purchasing Program

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Introduction

I have spent much of my adult life trying to understand, document, protect, expand, and improve public sector food assistance programs in the United States. I have studied them, written about them, taught courses about them, spoken about them, and served on the boards of NGOs that strive to improve them. I have sent countless letters, emails, texts, and petitions and made numerous phone calls and visits to members of Congress, state legislators, and local officials, trying to prevent legislation that reduces their reach or effectiveness, and promote legislation that increases their support for low-income people. Occasionally, I have marched in the streets or rallied at city hall to promote the same ends. I consider myself a member of the anti-hunger community, variously called the "hunger lobby," the "anti-hunger movement," or, as political scientist Peter Eisinger (1998) has labeled it, "The Anti-Hunger Advocacy Group network" (p. 91).

To a non-U.S. and particularly a Canadian audience, such a focus may seem like a perplexing choice for anyone seeking fundamental transformation of the food system in the direction of a just food future. This is a situation, however, in which the US is truly an exception to the norms of social provision that characterize most wealthy, developed nations. Welfare is very nearly gone in the U.S. Only 2.9 million people out of a population of more than 330 million received cash assistance from the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program last year (Congressional Research Service, 2022). Another 8.1 million received help from the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program that serves disabled and elderly persons in need (Social Security Administration, 2019). In contrast, federal food assistance programs served more than 82 million people in the year before the pandemic, about one in four citizens and legal residents of the US. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) operates fifteen separate food assistance programs. In 2019, the year before the pandemic, these programs represented a total expenditure of $92.4 billion, approximately two thirds of the USDA's total budget. (Tiehen, 2020). [1] Although private, charitable food programs like food banks, food pantries, and soup kitchens have captured much public attention, their efforts are dwarfed by public sector food assistance programs such as the National School Lunch Program (NSLP); the School Breakfast Program (SBP); the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as Food Stamps; and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, commonly known as WIC. SNAP, for example, currently provides nine times the amount of food supplied by the entire Feeding America network of food banks and their affiliated agencies. No wonder these public sector programs have been an important arena of struggle in the US food system.

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[1] For an explanation of why food assistance programs in the US have survived while cash welfare assistance has been reduced to the vanishing point, see Poppendieck (2014), especially pp. 296-312.

Typology of food movements

Eric Holt-Giménez and Annie Shattuck (2011) and Holt-Giménez and Wang (2011) have established an analytical framework for the consideration of political and social trends in both corporate food regimes and food movements. This framework characterizes these trends as neoliberal, reformist, progressive, or radical, and identifies each with a specific discourse: food enterprise for the neoliberal, food security for the reformist, food justice for the progressive, and food sovereignty for the radical. In short, they argue that reformist food security policies are a phase of the dominant corporate regime, designed to make minor adjustments to "mitigate the social and environmental externalities of the corporate food regime" (Holt-Giménez & Wang, 2011, pp. 92-93), thus permitting it to retain power and reproduce itself. As Holt-Giménez & Shattuck have summarized (2011, p. 115), "Reformists call for mild reforms to the regime, for example through an increase of social safety nets, consumer-driven niche markets, and voluntary, corporate responsibility mechanisms" At the far end of the spectrum are radical trends associated with food sovereignty and dedicated to dismantling corporate agri-food monopoly power and establishing regionally based, democratized food systems—including agroecologically managed peasant agriculture. Between the two are poised the progressive food justice trends including farmworker and food labor organization, agroecologically produced local food, solidarity economies, land access, and regulated markets and supply. Writing in the aftermath of the Great Recession in the U.S. and the food crisis marked by food riots in the global south, Holt-Giménez & Shattuck (2011) predicted that the capacity of the global food "movement of movements" effectively to confront the current food regime would depend upon whether the organizations in the progressive category made primary alliances with the radical wing, or with the reformists. Only a progressive-radical collaboration, they argue, is likely to bring about serious change.

With that characterization as context, I find myself contemplating the place of anti-hunger advocacy, U.S. style, in a progressive-radical food movement alliance. While many anti-hunger activists think of ourselves as progressives, the food assistance programs to which we have devoted so much energy fit squarely in the reformist category. Is there a place for food assistance monitoring, lobbying, litigation, and legislation in a movement for substantive change in the food regime? This essay presents a case for including the anti-hunger network in the alliances forged by food justice and food sovereignty actors. Because the U.S. has such limited cash welfare, and relies so heavily on food assistance, this argument is largely specific to the United States. Nevertheless, I am heartened by Levkoe and Wilson's (2022, this issue) characterization of the present moment in Canada's food movements "as one where food movements are building bridges and connecting silos" (p. 2).

The case for alliance with anti-hunger groups

Survival pending revolution

Thanks to the legacy of the Black Panthers, many radical and progressive activists are familiar with the concept of "Survival Pending Revolution" (Hilliard, 2008; Patel, 2011), the need to work in the here and now to meet basic needs while simultaneously building toward more fundamental or revolutionary change. About 43 million people in the United States currently receive SNAP, often described as the nation's frontline defense against hunger. In 2018, before the pandemic, nearly one in five SNAP households had no income at all for the month in which the data were collected. Nearly two in five, 38 percent, had incomes *below half* the (already absurdly low) official poverty threshold, a benchmark that demarcates "deep poverty" (USDA, 2019). For these households, SNAP is literally a matter of survival.

School meals also alleviate dire hunger. For some children or their parents, they are simply a convenience, but for a significant subset of children, they are very nearly the only meals they consume on school days. Cafeteria personnel have described how the children in line for school breakfast were different on Mondays, and especially on Tuesdays after a long weekend: "you can tell the hungry kids when they come through the line, how they behave. They are not misbehaving, but they are just…it's almost like they are grabbing the food…and they will start eating in line" (Poppendieck, 2010, p. 162).

From a moral point of view, therefore, and from an underlying sense of solidarity with poor people, food system revolutionaries active in the U.S. arena cannot afford to ignore these programs. But do they need to involve themselves with the Congressionally focussed anti-hunger organizations that lead the lobbying activities "inside the beltway," in Washington D.C.? After all, these organizations are widely perceived as compromised by their receipt of funds from and cooperation with food corporations, both manufacturers and retailers—the "unholy alliance" detailed by Andrew Fisher in *Big Hunger* (2017).

Advocacy matters

I am not suggesting that food sovereignty and food justice activists should drop their anti-trust lawsuits and abandon their resistance to land grabs in order to participate in D.C. lobby days in support of SNAP. I *am* arguing that they should continue to sign petitions and join in email and phone campaigns to protect and enhance public food provision and maintain strong alliances with the anti-hunger organizations that lead these efforts. History has shown that food programs do not take care of themselves—eternal vigilance seems to be the price of food assistance. We had food programs for more than three decades before the birth of the hunger lobby amid

shocking revelations in the late 1960s of severe hunger in the nation. These early programs were among our least fair and least effective social provisions. They reached only a modest fraction of those in need—they did not provide sufficient assistance to enable those they did reach to achieve an adequate diet; and they were ridden with inequitable, discriminatory, and humiliating practices (Citizens Board of Inquiry into Hunger and Malnutrition in the United States, 1968; Committee on School Lunch Participation, 1968). Embedded in USDA and the Agriculture committees of Congress, these programs were shaped at every turn to give priority to the needs of the nation's large-scale commercial farmers (Kotz, 1969; Poppendieck, 2014).

The committees and commissions that revealed the shortcomings of these programs came from a coalition of religious, labor, anti-poverty, and civil rights groups, funded by liberal foundations, and quickly gave rise to a series of dedicated anti-hunger advocacy organizations (Eisinger, 1998; Poppendieck, 2014). Once advocates got involved, they spearheaded a major transformation of food assistance programs. Applying the standard policy evaluation criteria of coverage, adequacy, and equity, food program participation grew enormously as barriers to participation were removed by legislation and litigation, benefits were expanded to reflect an admittedly feeble underlying standard of adequacy, and rights were established to protect against discrimination and abuse. The programs that resulted are still flawed, of course, but they are far better than they were, far better than even the optimists among us thought possible at the outset. Nonetheless, they have required constant care. There is always a faction in American politics that believes that assistance to poor people undermines their desire to work, and combatting this persistent, pernicious trope has required an immense amount of public education and Congressional wrangling. The anti-hunger network led by national lobbying organizations connected to state and local organizations has demonstrated great skill and effectiveness in resisting such attacks and achieving continued expansion of access.

Some of the anti-hunger groups have been doing this work for half a century and almost all of them have been around for decades. They have learned a lot. In their own policy work, food justice organizations can usefully draw on the knowledge, networks, and expertise of anti-hunger organizations. As Wilson and Levkoe (2022, this issue) have urged, we need "proactive efforts to listen to, learn from, and build strategic alliances with a much broader range of actors and organizations" (p.103).

Rights

Overall, the most significant accomplishment of public policy advocacy for food assistance has been the establishment of rights. Unlike the charitable food aid that captures so much of the public food and hunger imaginary, public food programs create justiciable rights enforceable in court. SNAP benefits are available by law to all who are eligible—by law, there is no cap on SNAP spending. Applicants who are turned down are entitled to a legal process called a "Fair

Hearing," in which they may have legal representation. Until the1996 welfare reform law—the famous "end of welfare as we know it" promised by Bill Clinton (1991)—SNAP (then called the Food Stamp Program) was available as a matter of right to any citizen or documented non-citizen with income and assets below the eligibility threshold. Despite the U.S. failure to ratify either the United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights or the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the two documents most used to assert a legal basis for claims of a human right to food, the U.S. did have, in effect, a right to food from 1979 until 1996. It continues to have this right for eligible groups. Almost any sociologist would argue that rights are socially defined—that is defined in human social interactions. They do not exist in the abstract but are created by human beings and human institutions. Rights that are merely asserted, as in "I believe that nutritious food is a human right," may be of less importance than rights that have been secured by the allocation of resources sufficient to fulfill them.

Procurement

Barbosa and Coca (2022, this issue) stress the importance of state sponsored institutional procurement in "fostering just food futures," (p. 2) drawing on case studies from Brazil. In the U.S., the national school lunch (NSLP) and breakfast (SBP) programs pay for huge quantities of food procured by local school food authorities in addition to lesser amounts purchased by USDA itself. Procurement favoring local farmers and other producers required successive bouts of Congressional legislation and USDA rule-making to overcome longstanding rules requiring procurement with public funds to accept the lowest bid. Now, however, it is legal for school systems to give preference to local producers, and more do so each year (National Farm to School Network, 2020). The farm to school movement has spawned a more comprehensive revision of public procurement, not only for schools, but for hospitals, jails, daycare, after school programs, and senior centres. A lively movement to encourage municipal governments to adopt the Good Food Purchasing Program (GFPP) pushes public procurement toward alignment with five core values: 1) healthy, nutritious food 2) produced in ways that preserve and protect the environment (including the mitigation of climate change) by 3) a valued workforce covered by adequate occupational health and safety rules and fairly compensated with living wages and comprehensive benefits, with 4) respect for animal welfare, and 5) a priority to invest in and strengthen local economies. While no city has yet achieved full compliance with these core values, many large cities are making progress in establishing standards to move their purchases in the GFPP direction, and school food has been the arena with the largest purchases and the greatest progress (Lo and Delwiche, 2016. Center for Good Food Purchasing, 2022). There has been a fundamental change in the culture of public procurement. With active food justice input, local food procurement can become a powerful tool for support of new entrants to agriculture, especially BIPOC and immigrant farmers. That is, public food assistance programs in the U.S.

have opened strategic paths for the progressive and radical wings of the food movement. A robust alliance, for example, might push the GFPP toward the addition of an explicit racial equity lens.

GFPP is currently being applied to those programs that provide actual meals: school meals (NSLP and SBP), the Summer Meals Program, the Child and Adult Care Food Program, and congregate and home delivered meals for seniors. The movement for its expansion is organized at the municipal level. With sufficient advocacy, however, its principles could be applied at the national level to at least four other U.S. food assistance programs: the Commodity Supplemental Food Program, the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations, The Emergency Food Assistance Program, and the Farm to Families Food Box program that was created to respond to the elevated need and supply chain disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, food banks, which increasingly raise money and purchase foods in addition to receiving food donations, could apply GFPP principles to their own food purchases.

Private household procurement is less susceptible to regulation, but a number of incentive programs at the federal, state, and municipal levels have tried to direct SNAP and WIC expenditures toward locally produced healthy foods. The WIC Farmers Market Program provides WIC household with modest vouchers for use at farmers markets, and arrangements like the Massachusetts' Healthy Incentives Program and New York City Health Bucks add purchasing power to SNAP households for purchase of locally grown fruits and vegetables at farmers markets and farmstands.

Potential allies

Large numbers of people and many organizations are involved in anti-hunger advocacy, and such engagement is potentially a portal to the progressive and radical agendas of the food movement. When I taught undergraduate courses on the food system in the first decade of this century, many of my students had first become aware of food issues through high school canned food drives to support local food pantries. Some of them stayed stuck in the charitable food paradigm, but others went on to embrace food labor issues and opposition to corporate control of the food system. No one is born with a full-fledged analysis of the capitalist food regime; people learn from each other as they become engaged. I have watched with great interest as a subset of food bankers in the U.S. has embraced a more progressive agenda, trying to move from what they call "feeding the need" to "shortening the lines." If food justice and food sovereignty proponents fail to engage with people who have already exhibited concern about inequality and hunger, where will they find the new recruits they will need to achieve their ambitious agenda? Further, food programs involve literally millions of participants in the roles of guest, recipient, and eater. These are experts by experience, and food movement organizations and scholars are paying increasing attention to the importance of involving them in decision making (Klassen et al.,

2022, this issue; Tung et al., 2022, this issue; Vibert et al., 2022, this issue). Ironically, this has proven easier for charitable organizations and other non-profits than for public agencies, but gradually demands for inclusion are being made upon public entities. For example, food non-profits have begun organizing high school and middle school students to advocate for better school food. The radical and progressive food movement leaders of the future may be serving on high school food advisory councils or college campus food security boards today.

The effort to involve the end users of food programs in policy advocacy and political action bring us full circle to the importance of using what we have at hand to meet immediate needs to liberate people to participate in more fundamental struggles (i.e., "survival pending revolution"). As Power and McBay (2022, this issue) have written of Basic Income, food assistance can "facilitate the participation of those currently marginalized…it can provide the freedom from want, scarcity, and desperation that is essential to imagine and struggle for more just ways of living together on the planet" (pp. 3–4).

Reflections on the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has both revealed and intensified the inherent inequities of the corporate food regime. As one astute observer recently put it, pandemic lockdowns "divide those who must stay out in the world, picking tomatoes and restocking grocery shelves, and those with the luxury of sheltering at home to await their contactless deliveries" (Mishan, 2021, p. 121). The pandemic has shone a spotlight on workers all along the food chain, now deemed "essential" but previously invisible to many: "For those seeking change in the world of food…that represents an opportunity: to reach out to a public newly (if belatedly) awakened to the urgencies of our time—the chasm between rich and poor, racial inequity and environmental degradation—all of which were with us before the pandemic and will, without systemic change, outlast it" (Mishan, 2021, p. 121).

Food assistance has played a complex role. The expansion of public sector food assistance in the U.S. has been substantial, even dramatic, including a temporary rise in SNAP benefit levels, conversion of school meals to a universal free basis, and a cash benefit to replace lost school meals called Pandemic-EBT. (USDA, 2021; Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2021). Nevertheless, what has captured public attention and raised consciousness are the mediagenic lines of cars at food banks, and the poignant interviews with food bank first timers. "This is a renaissance for food banks" one food bank CEO said at a recent online roundtable. He continued, "There is such a spike in appreciation among people for whom food banks were not on their radar. Now they really appreciate who we are and what we do" (Food Bank News, 2020 paragraph 5). I worry that the newly awakened concern about food inequality will be captured by food banks instead of food rights.

I believe that it is urgent that progressives in the U.S. harness the new social solidarity potential of the pandemic, not only for long term transformation, but in the immediate present for fairer, more generous, more inclusive public sector food and income programs. Food banks cannot create rights. Kind and gentle though they may sometimes be, they are still "emergency" measures to fill in the gaps left by inadequacies in wages, employment, and public income maintenance and food assistance programs (Poppendieck, 1998). Some may transform themselves into the sorts of comprehensive food centres active in Canada (Saul & Curtis, 2013; Habib, this issue), but in the U.S. context, we need to put concentrated energy into revitalizing and shoring up the public sector provisions that can and do confer rights. Two opportunities are urgent: First, the Thrifty Food Plan upon which SNAP benefit allotments are based has recently been revised toward a more adequate standard, but benefit levels in the plan are adjusted for inflation only once per year. This means that they are always lagging behind reality, and in periods of rapid food price escalation, the lag can be substantial. Food justice activists need to weigh in, loud and clear, in favor of a standard, adjusted quarterly, that would be sufficient to permit SNAP households to access fresh, healthy, and locally grown foods. Second, advocates are gearing up for a fight for universal free school meals. Since these programs are so essential to the survival of low-income households, we cannot afford to miss the moment of heightened concern and consciousness created by the shared experience of the pandemic. Food justice activists should lend their considerable moral force and organizing skills to these fights to expand rights to food.

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