

Original Research Article

Sharing the struggle for fairness: Exploring possibilities for solidarity & just labour in organic agriculture

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Abstract

Despite the organic movement's early connections to labour advocacy and commitment to the principle of "fairness," the evolution of the organic sector has generated questions about the strength of its links to food justice in certified organic farming. Scholar-activists have, in particular, highlighted the problematic nature of labour relations on many organic farms. This article reports on a growing relationship between an organic farming association (Organic BC) and a migrant workers justice collective (Fuerza Migrante) with aspirations of alliance building. We examine the extent to which efforts by the organic community towards fairness in labour relations may signal an opening for the organic movement to take up the more radical struggle for rights, status, and justice for racialized migrant workers. We draw on theoretical work on post-capitalist relations and emancipatory social transformations to illuminate the importance of complementary efforts. While the primary demands raised by migrant workers and their allies (e.g., structural changes to temporary foreign worker programs) are not yet mirrored by the organic community's advocacy, we see preliminary efforts towards centering of migrant worker struggles for justice that may open up spaces for social emancipation for workers in organic farming systems. We conclude with recommendations for how the organic community in Canada could act in solidarity with migrants and advance migrant justice priorities.

En sus inicios, el movimiento orgánico estaba fuertemente vinculado con la defensa de los derechos de los trabajadores y comprometido con el principio de "justicia". Con el paso del tiempo, la evolución del sector orgánico ha generado cuestionamientos sobre la fuerza de estos

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vínculos y su relación con la justicia alimentaria en la agricultura orgánica certificada. Académicos-activistas, en particular, han destacado la intrínseca problemática de muchas granjas orgánicas. El presente artículo reporta la creciente relación y aspiración de construir alianzas entre una asociación de agricultura orgánica (Organic BC) y un colectivo de justicia para trabajadores migrantes (Fuerza Migrante). Examinamos hasta qué punto los esfuerzos por parte de la comunidad orgánica hacia la justicia en relaciones laborales puede representar una oportunidad para el movimiento orgánico de asumir una postura más radical por los derechos, estatus y la justicia de los trabajadores migrantes racializados. El análisis se basa en el trabajo teórico sobre relaciones post-capitalistas y las transformaciones sociales emancipatorias que iluminan la importancia de los esfuerzos complementarios. Si bien las principales demandas planteadas por los trabajadores migrantes y sus aliados (por ejemplo, cambios estructurales en los programas de trabajadores extranjeros temporales) aún no se reflejan en la lucha de la comunidad orgánica, vemos esfuerzos preliminares enfocados en la lucha de los trabajadores migrantes por la justicia, los cuales pueden abrir espacios para la emancipación social en sistemas de agricultura orgánica. Concluimos con recomendaciones sobre cómo la comunidad orgánica en Canadá podría actuar en solidaridad con los migrantes y promover prioridades de justicia para migrantes.

Keywords: Fairness; food justice; labour; migrant justice; organic agriculture; organic certification; organic standards; participatory action research; social justice; social transformation

Figure 1: Painting by members of Fuerza Migrante in collaboration with BC Migrante and Company Erasga, created in 2018



Introduction

The contemporary organic sector¹ stems from diverse foundations, from the agricultural communities of India where Sir Albert Howard developed the so-called “Indore method,” to the environmental movement spurred by Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*.² Though perhaps a lesser-known link, the organic movement was also bolstered by hundreds of thousands of Mexican migrant farm workers in the late 1960s, around the same time that the organic food movement was starting to gain traction among both farmers and consumers in the U.S. The United Farm Workers (UFW) protested hazardous working conditions caused by unsafe application of toxic pesticides, and under the leadership of Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, and others, and in collaboration with allies like the Black Panther Party, succeeded in mobilizing millions of consumers to boycott the grapes and lettuce they were working to produce (Araiza, 2009; Garcia, 2013). The coalitions they formed were a radical act of labor and racial solidarity (Minkoff-Zern, 2014), and the resulting boycott bridged the linked struggles for farmworker justice and the interests of health and social justice-minded consumers—a boon for the organic market (Obach, 2015; Sligh & Cierpka, 2007). They also succeeded in bargaining with producers for the first-ever farm labour contract in the history of California (Garcia, 2013).

Despite this early connection to the labour movement and other social movements of the 1970s, scholars, activists, and the public question the current extent of the organic sector’s commitment to social justice in certified organic farming. Legal organic standards do not usually govern social aspects of production, such as working conditions (Klassen et al., 2022; Seufert et al., 2017). Many alternative food movement spaces occupied by the organic sector (e.g., farmers’ markets) recreate and perpetuate hierarchies of power and privilege (Alkon, 2008) and invisibilize the work of food and farm workers, many of whom are racialized migrants (Alkon, 2013; Sachs et al., 2014). Combined with consumer fears about pesticides and ideals about ethical and “good” foods, the economic barriers of higher-cost organic produce can also reinforce diet- and nutrition-related inequities (Cairns et al., 2013; Huang et al., 2016).

While the contemporary dominant notions of “organic” may have strayed from its social justice foundations, some argue that those foundations may never have been stable to begin with. Organic farming is not entirely independent from the agrarian colonial project, which was used as a tool for dispossession and displacement of First Nations when the first white settlers arrived in North America (Carter, 2019; Daschuk, 2013). Many practices that are foundational to organic

¹ We use the term “organic community” to refer to the collective of individuals who advance the work of the organic movement, and who are active in the discussions and activities that define it. We use the term “organic sector” to refer to the larger assemblage of official processes and institutions, including the market-oriented dimensions of organic agri-food production, which are animated by the organic community. While the organic community also includes eaters, processors, and others who play a crucial role in the evolution of the organic sector through their participation in organic supply chains, the focus of this paper is on those who participate in or work on organic food production, specifically.

² Other scholars have detailed the diverse origins of the organic sector globally. For an exploration of this important history, see Heckman, 2006 and Lockeretz, 2007.

and regenerative farming (e.g., polycultures and agroforestry) are built on Indigenous knowledge and cultivation methods, often without acknowledgement, contributing to the white-washing of sustainable agriculture (Heim, 2020). Through temporary foreign worker programs, agriculture in much of the global North depends on the labour of migrants, including Indigenous peoples of Mexico, who seek work in the U.S. and Canada due to the impacts of liberalized trade and structural adjustment on their home communities (Holt-Giménez et al., 2010; Rosset, 2006). Others have argued that the individualist “back to the land” movement (to which many organic farmers subscribe) is white supremacist and European settler-centric at its core (Calo, 2020; Philpott, 2020).

While acknowledging these injustices, this paper focusses primarily on openings for possible just futures. This research was sparked by the incipient development of relationships between members of an organic farming association, Organic BC (formerly the Certified Organic Associations of BC or “COABC”), a migrant rights collective (Fuerza Migrante) and university researchers with the possibility of becoming a “progressive-radical alliance” (Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011). Here, we seek to explore the ways in which actors in the organic sector are working towards more fair and just labour in organic agriculture. We draw from data collected through qualitative interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, and several years of participatory research and engagement by Fuerza Migrante, Organic BC, and university researchers relating to labour and migrant workers in the organic sector.

We examine how approaches to addressing labour-related injustice taken by the organic community and those fighting for migrant justice challenge and/or complicate one another (Rosol et al., this issue). In particular, we ask whether the “progressive” organic community’s recent work related to labour issues signals an opening towards the more “radical” struggles for rights and status advanced by the migrant justice movement (Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011). We draw on theoretical work on emancipatory social science and transformations (Wright, 2010) and post-capitalist relations (Gibson-Graham, 2006) to help us assess the potential of these efforts to support transformational change. Both of these bodies of theoretical and conceptual work illuminate a “politics of economic possibility” (where we want to go) as well as different strategies for transformation of social institutions (how to get there).

We begin by considering the relationship between the organic sector, “social fairness,”³ and labour, focussing on migrant labour in the Canadian context. We then provide an overview of our theoretical groundings and a description of the methodology used for this article. In our findings section, we discuss efforts by a subset of the organic community in BC and in Canada to better share the struggle for fairness with farm workers, and assess how these efforts align with the demands and struggles of migrant workers. We then discuss possible transformative openings for the organic community to work towards solidarity. We conclude with lessons for more just

³ For the purposes of this paper, we use “social fairness” to refer to relationships among and between human beings, with a focus on, but not limited to, the relationships between farm operators/employers and farm workers. The principle of fairness as defined by IFOAM refers more broadly to relationships with other living beings, including plants and animals.

food movement futures and the ways that complementarity between movements can give rise to them.

Background: Organics, justice & agricultural labour in Canada

Just organics?

We conceptualize the “organic community” as part of a broader social movement linked to the organic agri-food sector, operating both within and adjacent to organic institutions, including legal standards frameworks and research centres. Many actors in the organic community align themselves with the principles articulated by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM): Ecology, Health, Fairness and Care. Yet, for many food system actors today, the word “organic” evokes a different narrative. Over the course of several decades, the global organic movement has achieved major milestones with the creation of national organic standards and regulations.⁴ These legal and regulatory developments have ushered in a wave of interest from new actors, including governments and larger corporate agri-food firms, who in turn have wielded their influence on the sector. A growing body of research and scholarship has examined these changes of rapid growth, market mainstreaming, and corporate cooptation, and has called into question the adherence of the contemporary organic sector to its principled roots (Buck et al., 1997; Guthman, 2004, 2014; Jaffee & Howard, 2010). Many of these scholars have concluded that the capitalist context in which organic agriculture operates, including its dependence on extractive processes and low wages, has limited it from achieving its radical potential (Allen & Kovach, 2000; Friedmann, 2005).

As the organic sector has evolved to include larger farms with higher labour demands, and markets have expanded to include international trade, the fairness principle has been the subject of increased discussion and debate (Kröger & Schäfer, 2014; Sligh & Cierpka, 2007). To address gaps in organic standards with respect to fairness, IFOAM first included a section on social fairness in the 1996 standards, which now include requirements and recommendations for working conditions, local community impacts, and Indigenous land rights (IFOAM-Organics International, 2019). While the IFOAM standards represent concrete commitments to social justice that go beyond a statement of principle, the IFOAM standards—unlike national standards in countries with organic laws and regulation—are *voluntary*. As such, it is unclear how these

⁴ In Canada, voluntary national standards were released in 1999, and federal organic regulation to accompany the standards was put into place in 2009. In the United States, the Organic Foods Production Act was passed in 1990, and the final rule that established the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) National Organic Program were released in 1999. Globally, sixty-eight countries currently have fully implemented organic regulation, and twenty countries endorse regional voluntary standards (Willer et al., 2020).

ideological commitments translate to concrete practice in organic production in different jurisdictions.

There are strong theoretical arguments for why diverse, organic and agroecological farms may create the conditions for more just labour (Carlisle et al., 2019; Timmermann & Félix, 2015). While some research has posited social benefits of organic agriculture due to increased labour demands that can provide rural employment (Reganold & Wachter, 2016), this presumed positive outcome rests on the unproven assumption that organic agricultural jobs are “good” jobs. Yet, scholarship and activism focussing on injustice in the food system have highlighted the problematic nature of labour relations on organic farms and the associated struggles for rights, justice and decency for workers (Sbicca, 2015; Weiler et al., 2016b).

While agricultural jobs in general have been shown to be unsafe, poorly paid and with fewer opportunities for advancement, there are few large-scale studies that examine whether organic farms provide better conditions for farm workers (Seufert & Ramankutty, 2017). Emerging research shows that organic farms are not exempt from inequities that farmworkers experience in the broader agriculture sector, including the un[der]paid labour of farm apprentices, the moral economy of self-exploitation by organic farmers, and the use of “unfree” racialized migrant farm workers (Ekers et al., 2016; Galt, 2013; Weiler et al., 2016b). Moreover, unpaid apprenticeships on organic farms (e.g., WWOOFing) may contribute to devaluing farm work more generally, as they provide a source of free labour (albeit less skilled) without engaging in a politics of solidarity with waged and often racialized farmworkers (Gray, 2014; Guthman, 2017).

While both the public and researchers anticipated occupational health gains for labourers on organic farms, the evidence paints a more complicated picture. In what is perhaps the largest quantitative study comparing working conditions on organic and conventional farms, Cross et al. (2008) found no difference in the overall health outcomes of workers, with all workers scoring well below what is considered “normal” in the non-farmworker population. While there is some evidence of decreased pesticide exposure on organic farms (Costa et al., 2014), workers face significant risks to safety and wellbeing in the form of musculoskeletal disorders, traumatic injuries, infectious diseases, and mental health challenges which happen irrespective of pesticide use (Hennebry et al., 2016; Villarejo & Baron, 1999). Moreover, the “naturalness” or non-synthetic nature of an allowable organic input is not necessarily a proxy for non-toxicity.⁵

In a recent project, Soper (2019, 2021) found that workers prefer working on conventional farms due to improved earning potential. When assessing job quality (e.g., wages and employment procedures) across farm size, Harrison and Getz (2015) found that larger organic farms provided better quality jobs than their smaller counterparts, and that job quality benefits were disproportionately afforded to white workers in managerial positions across farms.

⁵ For example, elemental sulphur is an allowable input in organic production in both the U.S. and Canada (CGSB, 2020b; USDA, 2018), but has been documented as one of the leading causes of pesticide poisoning for farmworkers in California (Reeves et al., 2002).

In their exploration of precarious labour used in “alternative” food production, Weiler et al. (2016b) found actors used a moral economy frame based on the ethical foundations of “alternative” food production to rationalize the exploitation of migrants and unpaid interns.

At the same time, organic farms in Canada require more labour: farms with organic products for sale account for 7 percent of all hired employees in agriculture in Canada, even though they only account for 2.9 percent of farms and 2.1 percent of farm area (Statistics Canada, 2016). Data about the use of migrant labour on organic farms is limited, but preliminary analyses of a survey of BC vegetable growers and publicly available data suggest that organic farms utilize migrant farm workers at a rate that is similar to other farms (Klassen et al., 2022). Instances of abuse, neglect and unfair treatment of migrants have been documented on Canadian farms with organic production (Keung, 2010; Woodward, 2019a, 2019b). While organic farms represent a fraction of overall production, the organic sector holds significant potential for making progress towards labour fairness in practice because of its unique social movement legacy, stated values and intentions towards social justice, and disproportionate reliance on hired manual labour.

Unfair and unfree: Migrant agricultural workers in Canada

Since 1966, seasonal agricultural worker programs have facilitated the migration of individuals to perform agricultural work that Canadians or permanent residents are unwilling to do (Government of Canada, 2021).⁶ More than 72,168 positions for Temporary Foreign Workers were granted for primary agriculture in 2019 (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2020a). The majority of these (46,719 positions) were designated under the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP), facilitated by bi-lateral agreements between the national governments of Canada, Mexico, and participating Caribbean countries.

Conditions of employment for agricultural migrant workers in Canada have been characterized by the maxim of the four Ds: dangerous, dirty, difficult, and devalued (Otero & Preibisch, 2010). Migrant workers experience unique structural and socioeconomic vulnerabilities that exacerbate issues that stem from the nature of their work. Individuals who come via the SAWP receive work permits that are tied to one employer, meaning they cannot easily leave poor conditions on one farm to find better conditions elsewhere (Otero & Preibisch, 2015). These “unfree” conditions, combined with the impacts of neoliberal restructuring on working conditions in workers’ home countries, can result in workers accepting or submitting to

⁶ The TFWP includes several “streams” through which workers are brought to Canada to labour in agri-food operations, including the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP) (where workers come for a maximum of eight months at a time to work in primary agriculture), the “Agriculture stream” (where workers come for up to twenty-four months at a time to work in primary agriculture), and the high- and low-wage streams (for work in other sectors, including agri-food but not including primary agricultural commodity production) (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2020b).

conditions that other workers would flee (Binford, 2009; Otero, 2011). Migrant workers face unsafe working conditions, barriers to accessing healthcare, unsanitary housing, and isolation from their families (Caxaj & Cohen, 2019). If a migrant farm worker experiences abuse or a violation of their rights, there are significant barriers for them to access justice due to their precarious status, which is why they are considered to be amongst the most vulnerable workers in Canada (Faraday, 2012; Preibisch & Otero, 2014; United food and comercial workers union [UFCW] Canada, & Agriculture Workers Alliance, 2015).

A growing number of organizations, coalitions, and networks are working towards rights and justice for migrants in Canada. While some have existed for decades (e.g., Justicia for Migrant Workers), others have emerged more recently in response to emerging regional advocacy needs, expanding alliances and networks, as well as junctures stemming from different priorities or ways of working. Most of these organizations provide forms of direct support, including material support, facilitating culturally relevant celebrations, and accessing their rights and services.

Together with other experts and advocates, and in light of exacerbated inequities caused by COVID-19, migrant justice groups have called on the federal and provincial governments for structural changes to the TFWP, including: (1) regularized/resident status for all migrants upon arrival and the end of repatriations; (2) granting of open work permits to migrants; (3) improved protections and benefits; (4) improved procedures to follow-up on complaints from workers; (5) stronger mandates and supports for employers; (6) improved inspection regimes; (7) improved access to information for workers; and, (8) improved representation of migrant organizations in planning and implementation of supports (Barnetson et al., 2020; Haley et al., 2020; Migrant Workers Alliance for Change, 2020; Weiler et al., 2020).

Theoretical grounding: Transforming labour relations, building solidarity

In his influential book *Envisioning Real Utopias*, sociologist Erik Olin Wright lays out the logic and potential of emancipatory social science and pathways of social transformation towards “the elimination of oppression, and the creation of conditions for human flourishing” (2010, p. 10). Wright’s theoretical framing offers several important insights for transforming agricultural institutions towards fair labour relations. The first is a common understanding of “the ways in which existing social institutions and social structures systematically impose harms on people” (Wright, 2010, p. 11), and the role of economic structures of capitalism in doing so. Social justice—the equal access to the necessary material and social means to live flourishing lives—animates critiques of capitalism, as capitalism depends on extracting as much labour effort from workers at as little cost as possible, and incentivizes increasing the vulnerability of workers, making it inherently exploitative. Though not always framed as an explicit critique of capitalism, broader labour movements in agriculture in North America similarly challenge the economic and political structures that create systematic vulnerabilities for workers in the food system (Alkon,

2014). Indeed, the historical development and evolution of agri-food systems globally has been premised on the systemic vulnerabilities of workers (McMichael, 2005; Moore, 2003).

Second, Wright (and other public scholars) advocate for a role for social science beyond diagnosis and critique, towards the task of identifying where we want to go instead, and how to get there. This approach is complementary to J.K. Gibson-Graham's alternative project of "reading the economy for difference rather than dominance", to give the full diversity of alternative economic relations and practices "space to exist" (2006, p. 59). While economic alternatives that re-socialize economic relations are not new to sustainable food movements (e.g., Community Supported Agriculture where eaters have a direct relationship with the farm and share in the risk of farming), viable alternatives that challenge the exploitative nature of capitalism and create progress towards social justice remain elusive, impeded by the confines of what Gibson-Graham call "capitalocentrism" or the inability to conceive of economic relations beyond the dominant capitalist model. In other words, we need to do the work to envision, enact and articulate the various dimensions of alternative futures beyond capitalism for them to be possible.

A third aspect of Wright's theory of social transformation provides language to differentiate between strategies for the transformation of social institutions. Wright's framework highlights important complementarity between different strategies, such as the way that "symbiotic" strategies within the bounds of state-sanctioned institutions complemented by "interstitial" strategies outside of the terrain of the state create incremental change and open up spaces from where more "ruptural" strategies might become possible.

This paper seeks to better understand efforts and actions by the organic community towards fairness in labour relations in relation to the demands and struggles of racialized migrant farm workers as a counter-narrative to the overall erasure of worker perspectives and privileging of white settler voices in the food movement. Following from the organic community and migrant workers' linked struggles against the exploitative conventional agricultural model, and drawing from Wright and Gibson-Graham to assess efforts to improve social fairness in organic agriculture, we ask: how do the organic community's efforts to enact fairness compare with demands from the migrant justice movement? How do they complicate or complement one another? And, how might they work together to define viable alternatives (where they want to go), and pathways to transformation (how to get there)?

Methodology

This research emerged from a nascent alliance between two BC-based food movement organizations: Fuerza Migrante, a migrant worker collective; and Organic BC, an umbrella association that represents organic certifying agencies in BC. Fuerza Migrante is a volunteer-based organization made up of migrant farm workers and their allies working to build the power,

autonomy, and liberty of migrant workers through mutual aid and community support. With shared goals of better understanding the working conditions for migrants employed in organic agriculture, and supporting action in solidarity with them, Fuerza Migrante and the first author (Klassen) co-organized a 2020 conference session on allyship with migrant workers at the annual Organic BC conference. The co-authors have also worked together to share information and knowledge with the organic sector and in other food movement spaces about the struggles of migrant workers (Fuerza Migrante & Klassen, 2020), and what action in solidarity with migrants looks like (Food Secure Canada, 2020).

Organic BC was formed in 1993 to ensure the consistency and credibility of organic certification in BC, and convenes the provincial organic community—including farmers, inspectors, program administrators, food businesses, and researchers—through their annual conference. This paper specifically examines work towards social fairness emerging from organic community actors affiliated with Organic BC, but some of these initiatives are national in scope (e.g., efforts to integrate social fairness into the national organic standards). We also consider perspectives from across provincial and national borders, as many leaders in the BC organic community are also members of national and international bodies working toward more just food production systems.

The findings presented in the next section are drawn from several distinct phases of data gathering. The first author conducted thirteen semi-structured qualitative interviews with organic community members who have been involved with the efforts to advance labour fairness in organic agriculture. The majority of these participants were from British Columbia (seven) and are actively involved with Organic BC and national organic policy work. Additional interview participants from elsewhere in Canada (four) and the United States (two) were recruited based on their involvement as members of the national organic standards committee and with parallel efforts on labour justice certification standards. These participants included farmers, verification officers, and organic movement or sector leaders, and were conducted between September 2019 and April 2021.⁷ One interview was also conducted with another BC-based migrant rights organization that has collaborated with Organic BC in the past. These interviews were transcribed and coded in NVivo using an inductive coding strategy in order to be sensitive to the specific framing, language and key issues shared by participants.

Findings are also drawn from dozens of hours of participant observation in meetings and gatherings related to farm worker justice, fairness in the organic sector, and solidarity with migrant workers. These sessions occurred between November 2018 and November 2020, and included two gatherings and one panel session in BC, and two national workshops involving BC-based migrant justice organizations. Notes and transcriptions of these sessions were also coded using NVivo software, and were used to triangulate and complement data from interviews. In

⁷ As per our procedures of consent as approved by the Behavioural Research Ethics Board at the University of British Columbia, interview participants who agreed to be identified have been identified by their position where relevant to the research, or remain anonymous.

addition to data gathered through interviews and participant observation, perspectives on and demands for migrant justice were contributed by the Fuerza Migrante collective in their capacity as a co-author of this paper. Finally, we also analyzed migrant advocacy organizations' websites, reports, and advocacy materials.

Findings: Working towards fairness in organics

According to the IFOAM, the principle of fairness is “characterized by equity, respect, justice and stewardship of the shared world, both among people and in their relations to other living beings” (IFOAM-Organics International, 2020, para. 1). Despite the inclusion of fairness as a guiding principle of the Canadian Organic Standards, the standards themselves do not contain a single requirement relating to social fairness, including for workers (Klassen et al., 2022; CGSB, 2020a). Yet, the principle of fairness has been the basis of dynamic conversations across the organic sector. Here, we draw from interview and participant observation data to explore efforts by a group of organic community actors to integrate the principle of fairness into organic agriculture in Canada (section 5.1), including efforts to centre migrant worker voices (section 5.2). In the last part of this section (section 5.3), we interrogate how these efforts and the logics behind them are complicated by the demands of migrant workers and migrant advocacy organizations like Fuerza Migrante.

Integrating labour into organic certification

In Canada, the national organic standards are governed by the Canadian General Standards Board (CGSB) Committee on Organic Agriculture (“the Technical Committee”). This multi-stakeholder committee includes over forty representatives from organizations and associations from across the country (Government of Canada, 2019). They oversee the standards review process that occurs every five years.⁸

In recognition of the disconnect between the organic sector's stated principles and its required practices, several individuals came together to propose a new chapter on social fairness to be added to the standards in the most recent revision process (see Appendix A). The proposal included eleven clauses, most of which are focused on actions for employers to improve conditions for workers.

Despite lengthy discussions, the Technical Committee was not able to achieve consensus about the proposed addition during the latest revision process completed in December 2020. According to several interview participants, some actors involved with discussions at the

⁸ See Nawaz et al., 2020 for further discussion of this process.

Technical Committee objected to the proposal based on the feasibility of implementation for farmers, which mostly centred around the clause recommending that employers pay a living wage, which brought up tensions about the perceived trade-offs between producer viability and conditions for workers. Participants also described the challenge that the Technical Committee faces in balancing enforceability—a crucial aspect of successful standards—with the more aspirational nature of some of the social fairness ideals reflected in the proposed addition. However, reflecting on the debate that they observed at the Technical Committee, one interviewee challenged a common assertion that social fairness standards would be difficult for organic inspectors to enforce: “[You could] check if there are contracts, and for example, if they have a policy for resolving disputes, maybe some time sheets, like if you've got workers...any business is going to have stuff like that! And you could ask a couple of questions and look on the site and it would be like five extra minutes...so I really don't see why they were complaining that it was too many hoops. If they don't have contracts or some arrangement with people they have in, or if they say they are providing housing and they don't” (Interview 11, October 21, 2020).

Other participants felt that the requirements were an unnecessary duplication of existing labour laws. While some participants (both in interviews and participant observation) voiced that they felt the relatively more rigorous inspection regime of the organic sector would be an opportunity to improve compliance with provincial and federal laws, others stated that adding labour-related organic requirements would create an undue burden on the sector to enforce standards that should be the responsibility of the government. While this view was not held by all, the Chair of the Technical Committee elaborated on this as a central reason for objecting to the inclusion of labour clauses in the organic standard: “The overall intention of fairness, from an IFOAM perspective globally, is sometimes seen as being a different conversation in Canada...we have fairly good labour standards in Canada, and we have regulations in Canada. So, it's hard for us to incorporate regulations for labour within the organic standards because that's regulated at a pretty good level” (Interview 5, February 5, 2020).

The assumption that Canada's “fairly good” labour standards and regulations will result in better job quality for workers compared to other jurisdictions is challenged by workers themselves. Advocacy groups emphasize that farmworkers in Canada endure poor working conditions, abuse, and stifled rights, and there are also many barriers to obtaining justice when standards and regulations are not followed (see section 2.2). Furthermore, agricultural work is often excluded from employment standards and legal protections, such as the provincial hourly minimum wage in BC (Weiler & Fairey, 2021), or the right to unionize in Ontario (Vosko, 2018). Moreover, Weiler and Encalada Grez (this issue) demonstrate the ways that governments in Canada have “long relegated migrant farmworkers to a legal space of exclusion, exemption, and exceptionalism” (pp.45).

Rather than the addition of enforceable clauses around working conditions, the committee put forward the addition of an expanded definition of the principle of fairness (Table 1), now included as an annex in the 2020 Canadian Organic Standards (CGSB, 2020a).

Table 1: Expanded definition of the principle of fairness from the Canadian Organic Standards (CGSB, 2020a).

<p>IFOAM Organics International describes fairness as:</p> <p>Organic Agriculture should build on relationships that ensure fairness with regard to the common environment and life opportunities.</p> <p><i>[Expanded definition]</i> Fairness is characterized by equity, respect, justice, and stewardship of the shared world, both among people and in their relations to other living beings.</p> <p>This principle emphasizes that those involved in Organic Agriculture should conduct human relationships in a manner that ensures fairness at all levels and to all parties— farmers, workers, processors, distributors, traders, and consumers. Organic Agriculture should provide everyone involved with a good quality of life, and contribute to food sovereignty and reduction of poverty. It aims to produce a sufficient supply of good quality food and other products.</p> <p>This principle insists that animals should be provided with the conditions and opportunities of life that accord with their physiology, natural behaviour, and wellbeing.</p> <p>Natural and environmental resources that are used for production and consumption should be managed in a way that is socially and ecologically just and should be held in trust for future generations. Fairness requires systems of production, distribution, and trade that are open and equitable and account for real environmental and social costs.</p>
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Well-defined principles do not guarantee any concrete improvements for farm workers; however, the processes of deliberation and discussion that resulted from the proposal were seen by many interview participants to represent progress towards actualizing fairness in the sector. According to interview participants who have been involved with the organic standards writing process, the Canadian standards allow the stated intent of organic production to guide the interpretation and enforcement of the standards. One organic inspector who was part of the effort to add social fairness requirements described how even the older, more abbreviated definition of fairness has enabled her to investigate working conditions on organic farms: “As I have inspected increasingly large operations across Canada and the US, I see that they have temporary foreign workers, and I have—based on the principles of the organic standard, fairness—asked to see the housing that the people are receiving, and to ask some questions [about working conditions]” (Interview 11, October 21, 2020). As such, the expanded definition of fairness may open up possibilities for verification officers, certification bodies, and the Standards Interpretation Committee to consider alignment between this principle and practices on organic farms, and grounds to decertify or raise complaints about farms who do not demonstrate commitment to fairness in practice.

Another proposition brought forward both in national and provincial discussions was to add voluntary questions about fairness and labour to the certification process. One farmer who also serves on the Technical Committee (Interview 6, February 6, 2020) described this option as a possible “first step”, where farmers can describe some of their practices related to fairness in order to “introduce the idea slowly” to farmers. Reporting on this question could nudge farmers towards making some changes that benefit workers on organic farms, and could also help avoid some of the resistance by farmers that would likely result from suddenly introducing a series of

mandatory labour requirements. Nearly every individual from the organic community interviewed for this research spoke of the importance of a more incremental approach, coupled with intentional dialogue within the community. The Chair of Organic BC board explained:

“I have been involved in informal conversations on [labour and social fairness] and I have seen that needle move a lot.... So I feel like informal conversations about social fairness are of huge value, and I don’t know if formal edits to standards.... I feel like the informal conversations and formal changes to standards should sort of support each other. I feel like the organic movement just has to—especially on this particular issue—the community can’t be dragged kicking and screaming” (Interview 12, December 17, 2020).

Participants articulated an awareness that small changes to certification standards for organic farms do not fully address the many inequities experienced by farmworkers across the agriculture sector more broadly. They also consistently expressed a desire to identify feasible measures that they could take within the bounds of the institutions, expectations, and norms of the organic sector. In other words, participants expressed feeling constrained both by what they perceived as being feasible to implement in the certification process, and what aspects of the organic sector they felt they were in a position to change.

Bringing migrant worker struggles to the fore

Conversations about the links between labour and fairness in the organic sector are not new. In the past, the organic community has paid attention to un[der]paid interns and apprentices after allegations surfaced of exploitation. However, several interview participants noted that the organic sector has “moved away from the WWOOFing and apprenticeships,” implying that possible fairness issues associated with these work arrangements have subsided. The feeling that the community has addressed or moved on from these issues has left more space to discuss the unique struggles of migrant workers, the other major group of workers experiencing unfair conditions in the sector. Where labour fairness issues have been discussed in a broader sense in progressive food movement spaces, the perceived comparison between the experiences of un[der]paid white apprentices with racialized migrant farm workers has resulted in significant tension and warranted pushback from session participants. Based on participant observation in these spaces, elucidating the unique structural conditions that make migrant workers distinctly vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, and health inequities, must be a precursor for enacting labour fairness in organic agriculture.

A central aim of the sessions we have been involved with as part of alternative agriculture and food gatherings—and a central demand from migrant justice organizations—is to make space for and listen to migrant workers themselves, and to centre their voices and

demands. At the 2020 Organic BC Conference, members of Fuerza Migrante shared their experiences and their work to foster migrant power through mutual aid strategies. The conversation was focused on the forms of coercion used by employers as well as the structural barriers for workers to access benefits and realize their rights while in Canada. In particular, a significant portion of the discussion focused on the lack of worker voice in, and knowledge about, their own employment contracts. During this session, a member of Fuerza Migrante described this situation: “[The contract] is always negotiated between the Canadian government, the Mexican government, and employers. The voices of the workers are not included in this situation. We can see that workers of course have a lot to say about the contract, but there is nothing really in place to have their voice included.”

Another collective member from Fuerza Migrante also raised that sometimes workers don’t even have access to their contracts, either because they are not given a copy, or they are only given a copy in English. Reflecting on this session several months later, one interview participant from the organic community recalled: “That was the thing that made my jaw drop about their presentation. [That there is] no representation of workers around the tables where these agreements are being negotiated is like —Wait. What? That doesn't even make any sense! [Contracts] provided in English only. Like oh my god this is freakin crazy!” (Interview 12, December 17, 2020). In response to this and other instances of the structural disempowerment of workers, conference participants brainstormed possible actions that they could take, echoing the concerns and issues being raised.

Both attendees and organizers of these sessions seem to recognize the imperative to centre the experiences and voices of migrant workers themselves. However, Fuerza Migrante reminds us that these efforts are still preliminary, and better representation of migrant workers in these conversations is still needed. In a discussion session about allyship with food workers at a recent food movement gathering, a member of Fuerza Migrante put it frankly, describing the concrete improvements they are seeking: “The employer asks that [the worker] complies with the working hours, with the farm regulations...but he hardly fulfills his part of the contract to be responsible for our health, for our payments, our housing conditions.... And that is what I would like to see at the end of all this. Thank you for the invitation [to speak], but still.... I would like everyone to reach a more physical contribution, a more sincere contribution, a significant contribution...to really raise awareness.”

Discussions within the organic community about social fairness and labour, even when focussed on struggles of migrant workers, have largely been limited to the scope of the organic certification processes; however, they do show indications of the beginning of a process of reckoning about the responsibility of the organic sector to better understand and advocate for the issues facing migrant agricultural workers. Along these lines, the author team has been involved with several efforts to improve access to data about employment of migrant workers on organic farms, and access to information for organic farmers who employ migrant workers (Fuerza Migrante & Klassen, 2020). Recently, an Organic BC board member who sits on a federal agriculture committee raised concerns with the committee’s chair that a push for “less red tape”

for bringing migrant workers to Canada could translate to lower standards, and suggested the government consult with a migrant rights group before making any changes to the TFWP. However small, they attributed this action on their part to their enhanced awareness of migrant worker struggles as a result of one of the sessions with Fuerza Migrante at the Organic BC conference.

In Table 2, we summarize the propositions from the organic community to recognize the voices and challenges of migrant workers, and to integrate labour fairness into the organic certification process. These efforts contribute to educating a larger public about the structural injustices facing migrant workers, but they also help to position these injustices as ones that should be shared by the broader food movements—for food security, sovereignty, and justice—that they represent.

Table 2: Efforts and proposed actions proposed by the organic community to address social fairness for workers.

Effort or Proposed Action	Goal	Scale/Location of Observed Intervention	Status
A. integrating fairness requirements into the Canadian Organic Standard	include working conditions in organic inspections; possibility to de-certify for infractions	national; discussion happening at the technical committee of the CGSB process	proposed; deferred until 2025 revision process
B. expanding the definition of fairness in the Canadian Organic Standard	further articulate the centrality of fairness in organic agriculture, including for farm workers; open up space for further integration of concrete standards	national; decision made by the technical committee of the CGSB process	published in Appendix C of 2020 organic standards.
C. integrating labour considerations into the certification process in a voluntary way	raise awareness about what is expected of organic farmers and employers; employer education that could lead to possible action	proposal has been raised both at the national technical committee, and for a subset of BC organic certification bodies	proposed
D. increasing employer education on labour fairness issues in organic sector	improve organic sector's access to information about migrant workers on organic farms; inspire action to support improvements	provincial in BC (but likely happening elsewhere in decentralized ways)	nascent; preliminary interest and action by organic association in BC
E. centering voices and experiences of migrant workers	community education and representation; make visible and listen to the experiences of racialized migrant farm workers within organic and broader food movement spaces	national; many spaces and organizations across Canada (e.g., the national farmers union, food secure Canada), including at gatherings of organic BC	nascent
F. amplifying demands from migrant workers (e.g., status for all on arrival)	increase collective power of these calls for action; democratic participation as citizens as opposed to	N/A	nascent; preliminary interest and action by some organic community members.

	individual action as employers or consumers		
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A progressive-radical alliance?

The efforts by the organic community described in the preceding sections represent progress towards the principle of fairness in the Canadian organic sector. However, towards the goal of solidarity and alliance-building with more “radical” demands for justice, we must ask how the logics and strategies espoused by those working towards fairness in organics complement and contrast with the central demands of migrant justice organizations like Fuerza Migrante.

Table 3 summarizes some of the key efforts, logic, and strategies being advanced by movements advocating for migrant justice and fairness in organics, respectively. When it comes to fairness, participants from the organic community have focused significant efforts on making institutional changes within the sector to address labour as an aspect of social justice (as outlined in section 5.1). However, the proposal to add a clause recommending workers be paid a livable wage has prompted objections from producers based on perceptions of financial viability and competitiveness, which is linked to larger debates about how our current capitalist societies artificially determine the cost of food with little regard for sustainability and community needs. Moreover, the demand for higher wages is not always articulated as a priority demand for migrant workers.⁹ The organic community’s focus internally is in contrast to the clearly articulated demands of migrant worker advocacy groups from across Canada for broader structural changes to the federal government programs across all agricultural sectors (see migrant justice demands summarized as background in section 2.2), interventions that will require more collective power.

⁹ While some migrant advocacy groups do not articulate higher wages as among their key demands for change, in their work to build a worker-centred contract for migrant agricultural workers, Fuerza Migrante articulates higher wages as one of several demands.

Table 3: Contrasting strategies and logics of the movements for fairness in organics and Migrant Justice using the cases of organic community participants from Organic BC and Fuerza Migrante.

	Migrant Justice	Fairness in Organics
Diagnosis of problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explicit calls for multi-dimensional solidarity rooted in anti-oppression, anti-capitalist, and anti-patriarchal critiques. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledges role of capitalism and colonialism in creating food systems injustices.
Gaps in knowledge or capacity identified	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Importance of internal capacity building in anti-oppression strategies (including anti-colonial and anti-paternalistic). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledges gaps in knowledge about worker experiences and extent of migrant labour on organic farms.
Concepts employed in framing of solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Framed around concepts of solidarity, liberty, mutual aid, collective power, justice, community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Framed around concepts of regeneration, sustainability, fairness, care, humane treatment, social/food justice, community.
Central proposal or strategy for change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structural reform of migrant worker programs focussing on status for all on arrival, equal access to rights and protections, and an end to tied work permits. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integration of labour and broader fairness considerations into certification processes.
Additional strategies for change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education and support for workers to realize their rights. • End the “whitewashing” of agriculture. • Incorporate workers’ voices in decision making processes that impact them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education for employers. • Support more racially and culturally diverse voices within organic sector. • Incorporate worker perspectives into organic sector discussions.

Migrant justice organizations, researchers and advocates aren’t only advocating for an overhaul of the structure of TFWPs, but improved enforcement of existing rules, regulations, and laws that are in place to protect workers. Fuerza Migrante has voiced a need for effective ways to ensure compliance with existing regulations, and the fair application of existing laws to migrant workers’ claims and complaints. In some ways, this way of thinking is in line with some arguments made at the Organic Technical Committee against the integration of labour standards into organics, as these should be the responsibility of the government to enforce.

These policy and regulations-focused actions are not the only strategies being advanced by migrant justice organizations. Fuerza Migrante is also working to build collective migrant power through mutual aid strategies. In other words, they see value in intervening *outside* of state-sponsored programs and political institutions, including conventional union structures (Fuerza Migrante, 2020). One aspect of this capacity building involves educating workers about the rights they are entitled to, and providing support for them to access these rights. According to one migrant advocate:

“Our view is that educating the workers is much more effective than educating the employers because first of all, the employers already have a legal obligation to know the laws. And, when workers are empowered to know what their rights are, they can take steps to stand up for them. You can educate employers all you like, but if they know they have a workforce that is uneducated about the same things, there is really

nothing to stop them from taking advantage of that lack of education”
(Interview 8, October 14, 2020).

In this interview, this participant went on to offer for their organization to conduct workshops with migrant workers on organic farms to better educate them about the rights, protections, and benefits that they should have access to in Canada. A focus on worker empowerment through education was not explicitly discussed by participants from the organic community, whose emphasis has largely been on employer-focused changes. This conflicts with the views expressed by many migrant justice organizations, as exemplified in the preceding quote, who have articulated not only the imperative to empower *workers* (as opposed to educating employers), but also for this education to come from worker-led movements themselves. The focus on employers, standards, and certification is likely a result of the perceived room to maneuver with farmers being the focus of the organic sector; however, the tensions observed here suggest that supporting migrant justice organizers to educate workers on organic farms (i.e., education by migrant workers for migrant workers) could represent a complementary approach to the organic community’s efforts to change standards and certification processes (Table 3).

Migrant worker advocacy groups also highlight the racialized dimensions of labour inequities, and the imperative to take structural racism into account when identifying or pursuing solutions. Organizations advocating for migrant justice prioritize discussions of race and racism, such as the recent campaign on Twitter by J4MW to “Stop whitewashing agriculture” (Justice4MigrantWkrs [@J4MW], 2020). Fuerza Migrante names racism as a structural problem impacting the lives of migrant workers, and is working to build internal capacity to integrate anti-oppression strategies, including anti-paternalistic and anti-colonial practice, to ensure they are not perpetuating these systems and structures within their own organization. They have also articulated the imperative for those aspiring to be “allies” to work to address the structural oppression faced by migrant workers in several of the gatherings and conference sessions they have been a part of. For example, one collective member articulated in a gathering how true allyship would “contribute to the destruction of dynamics of power and oppression of the temporary foreign workers.... So if you really want to support migrant workers, you need to take this seriously, and you need to understand that you come to support the workers’ struggle, and for their benefit. Not for your benefit” (Fuerza Migrante, November 16, 2020).

Like many “progressive” food movement factions, organic sector participants from Organic BC have voiced the importance of having more racial and cultural diversity at the decision-making table (Participant observation, February 2020), and two interview participants brought up their personal work towards decolonization and anti-oppression in their local communities and personal lives. However, during the course of this research, neither Organic BC nor the national organic sector institutions explicitly named the role of structural racism and their responsibility to address it. When asked how much the organic community explicitly talks about systemic racism, especially in relation to labour and farm workers, the Organic BC Board Chair

responded: “At the [Organic BC] level, not much. Except on committees where again we are like, ‘okay we’re not very inclusive at this organization’.” The difference in explicit structural analysis of the roots from where social justice issues stem between “progressive” organizations like Organic BC and more “radical” ones like Fuerza Migrante may present a barrier to a productive and positive alliances in the future.

Fuerza Migrante has also expressed caution against the tokenistic representation of people of colour seen in many food movement spaces, and the importance of migrant workers themselves bringing their experiences and voices to weigh into decisions made about the conditions that impact their lives. Perhaps the most visible tension that arises from contrasting these strategies is current paucity of migrant worker voices or representation at any formal decision-making table in the organic sector (e.g., as a voting member of the Technical Committee). If the organic community is to take seriously the demands for improved representation of migrant justice organizations in planning and decision making, more formal representation in governance may be the most logical place to start—for instance, inviting and providing appropriate supports for migrant justice organizations to sit on the CGSB Technical Committee as a voting member.

While the two groups articulate different analyses of the problems at hand with respect to fairness and justice in the food system (see table 3), they share a common recognition of the role that capitalism has played in the exploitation of both human and ecological systems. This is exemplified by the synergies between the key concepts used in their framing of solutions and better futures rooted in justice, fairness, and community. We would like to emphasize that not all organic community members identify with an opposition to, or desire to move beyond, capitalism. This was an issue raised by several interview participants, naming that “[they’re] not all lefties” (Interview 3, January 16, 2020). However, many members of the organic community moving this agenda forward in BC and elsewhere in Canada have explicitly raised the role of capitalism as the root of problems facing the organic sector, both in interviews and more public fora.

Despite some complementarity, the differences between approaches and the informal nature of the current collaboration—facilitated in large part through scholar-activism—should not be overlooked. The majority of the efforts by the organic community highlighted in this research (Table 2) do not respond to the principal demands by migrant justice organizations and their allies (see section 2.2). Fuerza Migrante, the authors and Organic BC, are still “feeling our way” through a potential form of collaboration that can be helpful to each of our respective lines of work, and no formal plan, project, or initiative, nor working group has as yet been formed. Contrasting the central demands of these two movements may help facilitate this process by naming and working through the political tensions between the two groups (e.g., the employer-focused nature of Organic BC, and the worker-focused nature of Fuerza Migrante). Perhaps these differences will also encourage the organic community to look past organic standards and certification reform to the broader horizon of political demands and representation of migrants in discussions about more just agriculture and food futures.

Discussion

What does theory about social transformation tell us about the efforts by members of the organic community to advance social fairness? The strategies and efforts in Table 2 can be characterized in terms of different logics of transformation articulated by Wright (2010): (1) interstitial transformations, where actors build new forms of social empowerment in the niches and margins of capitalist society where they do not appear to threaten dominant classes and elites; and (2) symbiotic transformations, where increases in social empowerment are sought in ways that simultaneously solve problems for the dominant class on the terrain of the state or by using the state.

Through our conversations and engagement with organic community members advancing work on social fairness, we can see processes of *interstitial* transformation at work in the social movement spaces convened by organizations like Organic BC, which are reinforcing links between migrant struggles and the alternative enterprises and labour relations that the organic movement seeks to foster. This is the social movement work of the organic sector, where a heterogeneity of interests, identities, and constituencies are coming together under shared and articulated values. For Wright (2010), success in interstitial strategies depends on the identification of inhabitable niches; organic actors who participated in this research identified several of such “niches” outside the institutional bounds of organic standards, such as centering the voices of migrant workers in community gatherings and public fora, and advocating for migrant worker participation in decision making.

The petition to add enforceable clauses to the national organic standards can be considered a form of *symbiotic* transformation. Here, actors from the organic community proposing the addition of labour requirements have identified a strategic convergence of interests between consumer expectations and organic values. The expectations of the public that organic should foster an ethic of social justice is not only in alignment with the sector’s stated value of fairness, but with the interest of the organic sector as a whole to maintain its status as a more ethical alternative to “conventional” food production (Bell, 1980; Seufert et al., 2017).

This work to change the standards is in many ways typical of the “progressive” faction of the food movement, as it seeks to advance a practical alternative to the conventional food system (Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011). Yet, the transformative potential of this work seems to be challenged by a broader tendency of food movement actors to focus on the food system itself, and especially on individuals’ food-related choices, rather than broader politics of societal change (Levkoe & Wilson, this issue). Many critical scholars have identified shortcomings of certification and consumer-focused labelling strategies, including the burden they place on the consumer (Weiler et al., 2016a); the lack of involvement and voice of farmworkers in their development (Sowerwine et al., 2015); and the way that they excuse inaction by governments (Brown & Getz, 2008). Fuerza Migrante and other migrant rights advocates have made complementary arguments, advocating for improved representation of migrant workers,

improved enforcement of existing laws and regulations by governments, and the end to the “agricultural exceptionalism” and unwillingness to upset farmers, which has played a key role in reproducing unfair labour conditions (Erwin, 2016; Rodman et al., 2016).

Notwithstanding these critiques, Wright points out the value of such symbiotic strategies to “open up” spaces for future transformation. For participants who engaged with us for this research, making changes to the organic certification process is the most accessible form of systemic intervention available to them. If changes to these institutional frameworks can also be a pathway for farmworker voices and demands to enter into the discussion, struggles over changes to the national organic standards could be a space for solidarity and movement building for food justice (Alkon, 2014; Allen & Kovach, 2000). To do so effectively, the organic community will need to work through some of the tensions between these movements outlined in section 5.3 (such as a more explicit analysis of structural oppressions), and of course, migrants, migrant justice organizations, and their allies will then decide for themselves whether this kind of alliance is worth their time and energy to build.

Previous research has highlighted the resistance of alternative food movement actors to formal accountability systems and added bureaucracy, and cautions that this aversion may limit the possibilities for fair and dignified work (Weiler et al., 2016b). However, the perspectives shared by participants in this research suggest that this aversion to formal accountability mechanisms may have been surmounted following the creation of the Canadian Organic Regime. Several participants from the organic community admitted that they had been hesitant to support the institutionalization of organic certification processes at the national scale, but now see the benefits of working with government to legitimize the sector. Viewing the strategies summarized above in Tables 2 and 3 in this light, the institutionalization of the organic sector over the last several decades may actually help overcome the “anti-politics” barrier discussed by Weiler et al., (2016b) and open up further possibilities for the organic community to work with and within institutions under the purview of the state (e.g., national certification) through symbiotic strategies, in addition to working outside of it through interstitial strategies.

The organic community’s efforts to enact institutionalized improvements toward fairness (which may act as guarantees for consumers) may be seen as a continued attempt to persist and compete within a predominantly capitalist, industrial, and large-scale farming industry (Ekers et al., 2016). While improvements that require financial investments (e.g., requiring organic farmers to pay a living wage) may disadvantage organic farmers in the marketplace, improvements to labour conditions and job quality on organic farms that are predicated on social empowerment and non-monetary benefits may aid the sector in differentiation from conventional methods, re-asserting their claim over their alternative agricultural niche and its consumers. Moreover, these improvements to job quality could accrue broader benefits to the organic sector by attracting and retaining workers, including the children of organic farmers. Several of the core demands of migrant workers also hold potential to “level the playing field” between organic producers and their conventional counterparts, such as the end to tied work permits and granting of permanent residency status, which would enable workers not only to safely flee poor working

conditions without risk of repatriation, but to move freely to operations that offer more fair and safe alternatives.

In a sense, both the organic community and migrant advocacy groups are already engaging in a politics of possibility for constructing new forms of “economic politics” (or re-socializing economic relations), though they engage with these alternatives in different ways, and for the most part they are doing so separately. Through their strategies of mutual aid and collective governance, migrant workers and allies are engaging in new practices of the self through self-development as citizens and collective members, and through their cultivation of multidimensional solidarity. Though from an objectively more privileged position, the organic community members seeking changes to norms and practices in the organic sector are finding ways to exercise this power after realistic consideration of the limits and constraints that affect their ability to maneuver (Gibson-Graham, 2006).

For these symbiotic strategies to be successful and create fertile ground for alliances, the organic community will need to be careful not to tokenize participation or representation of migrant workers in their efforts to maintain consumer trust, as this could cause harm to migrant communities in the process. As Saima Habib thoughtfully describes in her reflection on her work in poverty reduction and community food security, transformative work must stem from a place of interconnectedness and mutuality, and be rooted in relationships (Habib, this issue). Similarly, Laura-Anne Minkoff-Zern’s (2014, 2018) research shows the transformative potential of redistributing power to workers, including where workers were embraced as leaders, and where traditional producer-consumer and employer-worker binaries are challenged. What offers the most potential based on our analysis would be for the organic community to deepen their conversations about the role of capitalism, racism, and patriarchy in the exploitation of people and the land, which holds potential for common struggle, and to use their institutional influence to advance migrant worker demands.

Conclusion

For the majority of participants in this study—including those who were interviewed, those who participated in the many discussion sessions, and the author team—the current unjust labour relations in agriculture are not immutable. In an attempt to make visible this work towards fairness in organics, we have summarized current efforts for change, highlighted instances of interstitial transformation (alongside efforts for more symbiotic transformation), and raised possibilities and barriers to igniting alternative relationships between farm workers and the organic community, particularly those of solidarity. Perhaps more powerful than the actions towards making concrete changes to the organic certification process, this paper documents nascent efforts towards redistribution of power and the re-centering of voices in a way that could be transformative.

While efforts towards fairness by the organic community appear promising, these efforts and the logics that they emerge from are complicated by those of migrant justice movements, which epitomize labour-related struggles for justice in the food system. Indeed, the primary concerns and demands raised by migrant workers and their allies are for large-scale structural changes to TFWPs, such as the end to tied work permits, and improved oversight and enforcement of existing regulations designed to protect migrants. These are not yet mirrored by the organic sector's efforts to improve fairness in labour relations; however, evidence presented here does not preclude such political and collective action by the organic association and its members. The organic sector has a history of wading into politically controversial topics (for example, the governance and regulation of genetic engineering technologies), and both movements identify with goals of justice, and articulate a common enemy of industrial, extractive, and exploitative agricultural production. Despite this potential, true solidarity with migrant workers must go beyond incorporating fairness into organic certification to include real actions from the organic community to redistribute power and voice to workers, and demonstrated commitment to using their relative privilege to add weight to migrant worker demands for structural changes to TFWPs. Such changes could represent progress toward crafting a true alternative to the dominant food system in terms of labour relations. These moments of interstitial transformation appear to be opening up spaces for further expansion of social emancipation for workers on organic farms; whether this will open up a pathway for meaningful alliances with migrant workers struggling for justice is yet to be seen.

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