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Injustice in the Food System

America is esteemed to be a country where equality and fair treatment trumps all. Millions have flocked to this country with this impression instilled in them, but for decades, America has ignored the needs of marginalized communities and prioritized capitalist profits. In this paper, I will be exploring various groups of people that are disproportionately harmed in our food system. Specifically, I will be looking into examples of these groups being discriminated against in the US and the causes behind them, drawing from both historical examples and contemporary evidence as well. Recognizing the mistreatment and understanding the root causes behind them will be a starting point for us to pave the way to greater equality for everyone in the United States.

Those who are vulnerable are one of the major groups of people who are frequently exploited and treated unfairly. This group is characterized by those who are financially unstable, fled from a life of poverty, lack the literacy and educational skills to defend themselves, and are undocumented. Any combination of these characteristics allow them to be easily taken advantage of by their employers. The agriculture industry has always treated its laborers as disposable objects that are used with the sole purpose of maximizing profits. As Harrison described in her paper *Accidents' and Invisibilities: Scaled Discourse and the Naturalization of Regulatory Neglect in California's Pesticide Drift Control*, California's agricultural industrialization in the 19th century largely depended on the labor from migrant workers who were controlled through

“various racist immigration and landholding policies, intense physical harassment, disparagement, and deportation” (Harrison, 513). Furthermore, in the 1930s “California workers were hailed as valuable when they were complacent and obedient workers, and they were attacked and vilified as subversive ‘communists’ when they endeavored to collectively organize and demand better living and working conditions” (Harrison, 514). Later on in 1994, Prop 187 was approved which denied immigrants’ use of health care and education, and measures that allocated funds to ensure fair immigrant labor were not passed. Evidently, from the very beginning, America has established the notion that migrant laborers did not need to be treated as people and could be viewed as invisible. The reason that farm owners could get away with this degrading treatment is because of the workers’ vulnerable status. According to Ayazi and Elsheikh in their critique and discussion on the US Farm Bill, the 2009 National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) found that 78% of all farmworkers were foreign born and 44% said they couldn’t speak English at all. In addition, “50% of California farm laborers are undocumented, most live in abject poverty” (Harrison, 510). The combination of these factors renders them defenseless to the power of farm owners and the organizations in charge of them. Their inability to speak up for themselves and their fears of going back to their lives of extreme poverty in Mexico stop them from advocating for themselves and their rights. Thus, when there is any sort of crisis in the food system, they are the ones being taken advantage of because of the control that farm owners have on them. In recent times, with the heavy demands being placed on the agriculture industry to cheaply and quickly produce mass quantities of food, farm worker abuse and exploitation is even more severe. One crisis in the food system is the heavy use of pesticides that causes lasting damage to the farmers working in those fields. The interview

responses that Getzschman writes in *Earthjustice* give harrowing first-person accounts of the effects of this crisis on the people who are working in the field. For example, Andrea Cabrera Hubbard describes that “I think most field workers would share their stories but because of the fear, nobody speaks up. They think they are going to be deported so they would rather keep silent and hold back the pain from all the chemicals they use” and as a result, “these women have deformed babies; some are born with no strength in their bones.” This is only one of many responses where the interviewee would describe how despite the abuse, they are fearful of speaking up because of the possibility of losing their job or hurting their family. As Schlosser in-depthly reports in his article *The chain never stops*, the meat-packing industry’s treatment of their vulnerable workers is equally disturbing. The demographic that makes up meat-packing is similar to the agriculture industry in that “more than three-quarters of the workers are not native English speakers; many can’t read any language, and many are illegal immigrants” (Schlosser, 41). In addition, “they’re also unlikely to complain or challenge authority, to file lawsuits, organize unions, fight for their legal rights. They tend to be poor, vulnerable, and fearful” (42). Thus, when there are large-scale transformations in the meat-packing industry, such as in the 1960s when IBP (Iowa Beef Packers) disrupted the industry by turning it into one that would do anything to minimize cost, one of the major areas that corporations look into is cutting costs in their workforce. During this time, “wages in the meatpacking industry soon fell by as much as 50%,” safety became less of a concern, and efficiency was of the highest priority (Schlosser, 41). In 1999, more than ¼ of America’s meatpacking workers suffered a job-related injury (41). Despite these conditions, the high-risk and high-turnover meatpacking industry could count on illegal immigrants who desperately needed the money. Fearfulness and dependence on a source

of income bound them to the harsh conditions of working in a meat-packing plant so when corporations are trying to cut costs, these vulnerable and in-need populations are the ones suffering the consequences. Evidently, both the agriculture and meat-packing industry exploits the vulnerable populations who aren't able to stand up for themselves and capitalizes on their fear to achieve desired financial outcomes.

Another crisis in the agro-food system is the increase in concentration and consolidation of firms in the industry. This crisis also harms the vulnerable population but in a slightly more indirect way compared to what was discussed in the previous paragraph. When firms consolidate and gain market power, they have a powerful ability to demand lower prices from suppliers and lower wages for workers, as described by Howard in *Concentration and Power in the Food System: Who Controls What We Eat*. We see from players such as Walmart, McDonalds, and Tyson-- who all hold a large market share in their industries-- that they are known to have extremely low wages and treat their workers poorly. Thus, this mistreatment of workers in the food system is not just among farmers but workers in general who are under heavy authority. Large corporations like Walmart (which accounts for 33% of US grocery retailing), also have the power to demand lower prices from their suppliers. Morosi reports in his article *Hardship on Mexico's farms, a bounty for US tables* what it's like as a farmworker in Mexico working to serve a large American corporation. On these farms, "many farm laborers are essentially trapped for months at a time in rat-infested camps, often without beds and sometimes without functioning toilets or a reliable water supply" (Marosi, 2). Even though American corporations will verbally express commitment to ensuring worker's safety and rights in their suppliers, they do little to enforce it and still focus on reducing the cost of the produce and maintaining the

condition of it rather than the conditions of the workers. As a result, firms that are able to produce the highest quantity are incentivized, rather than those who commit to worker rights. Marosi states that “Some of the worst camps were linked to companies that have been lauded by government and industry groups. Mexico’s President... presented at least two of them with ‘exporter of the year’ honors” (Marosi, 3). Similarly to farms in the US which relies on impoverished immigrants with no other jobs to turn to, “the farm laborers are mostly indigenous people from Mexico’s poorest regions” (Marosi, 2). These workers, like the Mexican immigrants in the US, are bound by fear. As a result, they bear the weight of the demanding American corporations. Unfortunately, the increase in US corporations that we see today is a crisis that hurts the vulnerable businesses and communities that they are dependent on.

It is shameful to see how the workers that comprise the backbone of the US, who pick our vegetables and prepare our meats, are some of the most cruelly treated humans. These workers’ need for financial support and lack of alternative job choices, forces them to stay in the inhumane conditions that agriculture and meat-packing gives them. External forces in the landscape, including increasing corporate power and desire for corporate profits, further drive this mistreatment and ignore basic human rights. In order to change this, the first step would be to empower the workers so they no longer hold the mindset that their efforts to enact change will be futile and harmful. For example, there can be laws that require farm laborers to join a union and each union is required to have a director that is able to converse in English and the language the laborers speak. Something as simple as this gives the workers a way to vocalize their concerns in a safe environment. However, to enact large-scale change, we need to start at the root of the problem which is society’s demand for unreasonably cheap food. The prices we see at

grocery stores barely cover the cost of producing food because prices are constantly being pushed down. This causes farms and food makers to prioritize cost reduction over anything-- leading to a complete lack of care for the workers. To make long lasting structural changes, we need to uproot our expectations of food needing to be cheap and think about the lives behind the food on our tables.

Works Cited

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