

# Immigrant Labor, Food Politics: A Dialogue between the Authors of Four Recent Books about the Food System

**Abstract:** This dialogue serves as a forum for four authors of recent books on food politics to discuss their different approaches to analyzing immigrant workers' contested and changing roles in the U.S. food system. Bridging disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and political science—and sites in the food industry ranging from poultry processing plants, slaughterhouses, and industrial agribusiness to organic farms—the authors address a consistent set of questions: What does the increase in immigrant workers in the food industry tell us about our food system, and how do immigration and labor policies facilitate employers' exploitation of all workers' vulnerabilities? What

are viable models for change, and what role can scholars play in creating an ethic of responsible consumption that incorporates labor concerns? By contributing fresh perspectives on immigrants' hidden work in plants, slaughterhouses, and farms, the authors illuminate the factors that divide workers and obscure the human costs of how we make our food.

**Keywords:** food system, immigrant labor, farmwork, poultry industry, slaughterhouses

## The Books

Gray, Margaret. 2014. *Labor and the Locavore: The Making of a Comprehensive Food Ethic*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Horton, Sarah. 2016. *They Leave Their Kidneys in the Fields: Illness, Injury, and "Illegality" among U.S. Farmworkers*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Ribas, Vanesa. 2015. *On the Line: Slaughterhouse Lives and the Making of the New South*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Stuesse, Angela. 2016. *Scratching Out a Living: Latinos, Race, and Work in the Deep South*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

QUESTION 1: WHAT DOES YOUR BOOK CONTRIBUTE TO THE STUDY OF FOOD SYSTEMS IN THE UNITED STATES AND OF THE ROLE OF IMMIGRANT WORKERS WITHIN THEM?

### *Ribas, On the Line*

Our four books connect agroindustry and labor issues, and certainly bring to the fore the centrality of workers' exploitation in contemporary food systems. Whereas Gray's and Horton's books stage workers' experiences in the fruit and vegetable

fields from New York to California, Stuesse's book and mine open up a view to the slaughterhouses and processing plants of the Deep South. For a number of reasons, these workers exist hidden from the general public. Partly, this reflects the geographic concentration of the industries—though in the case of meatpacking, their current prevalence in the South and rural Midwest is very much the result of strategic moves by the big packers since the latter twentieth century. More importantly, the shadowy remoteness of these workers' experiences from the general public's perception is a reflection of their relative powerlessness in the face of the enormous political might of agroindustrial interests. On a very basic level, these industries do not want the public to see what goes on in their factories and fields. Because these industries employ workforces made up primarily, or disproportionately, by racialized and subordinated groups—employers know that the general public tends to care very little.

*On the Line* is a study of the lives of slaughterhouse workers in the rural American South, based primarily on my sixteen months employed as a regular production worker in a large North Carolina meatpacking plant. My objectives were to gain a better understanding of the social and economic incorporation of Latina/o migrants in a region that until the late 1980s had not been a major destination for labor migrants. For this reason too, I was interested in whether immigration from

Latin America might be contributing to a reconfiguration of the racial system of stratification in the South—one that has always been characterized by the social arrangements and ideologies of white supremacy and the subordination of blacks—and if so, what this might mean for the future of the American system of racial stratification more generally.

In order to study the experiences of immigrants, and the role of immigration, in what has been termed the “New South,” I knew I needed to situate my research where labor migrants and working-class Americans spend the majority of their time—the workplace. And because the animal production and processing industries have been a major draw to the region for migrants, I chose to locate the bulk of my ethnographic research in a meatpacking plant. Through my deep and prolonged immersion in the life of the factory, I came to know intimately the brutalities that workers there withstand on a daily basis. Indeed, the social organization of labor at Swine’s Inc.—the fictitious name I give to the slaughterhouse I studied—profoundly shapes the incorporation experiences of migrants. And the way in which workers perceive different groups’ position vis-à-vis oppressive exploitation, mediated by the optical filter of white supremacy—a relational dynamic I refer to as prismatic engagement—has an important bearing on the present and future of the racialized system of belonging in the United States.

### Stuesse, *Scratching Out a Living*

*Scratching Out a Living* looks at the development of the U.S. poultry industry, which in half a century has transformed into one of the most highly specialized and labor-intensive forms of industrial agriculture in the world. It considers not only *why* these changes took place, but also *how* they unfolded and with what consequences.

As our consumption of America’s favorite white meat escalated, the industry, located primarily in the South, harnessed the technologies, logics, and labor control strategies of globalization and began recruiting immigrant workers at unprecedented rates. By 2000 over half of the country’s quarter-million poultry workers were immigrants.

To better understand these changes, I moved to Mississippi’s poultry region over a decade ago, as community members, unions, faith leaders, and others were grappling with the rapid transformation of the area. People didn’t know what to make of the newcomers in their midst from across Latin America, few of whom spoke English. Longtime poultry workers were frustrated with the turnover in their plants and couldn’t communicate with their new coworkers. Union representatives struggled to incorporate immigrants into their membership. Meanwhile, the chicken plants were segregating processing

lines by race, gender, nationality, and citizenship status (Stuesse and Helton 2013).

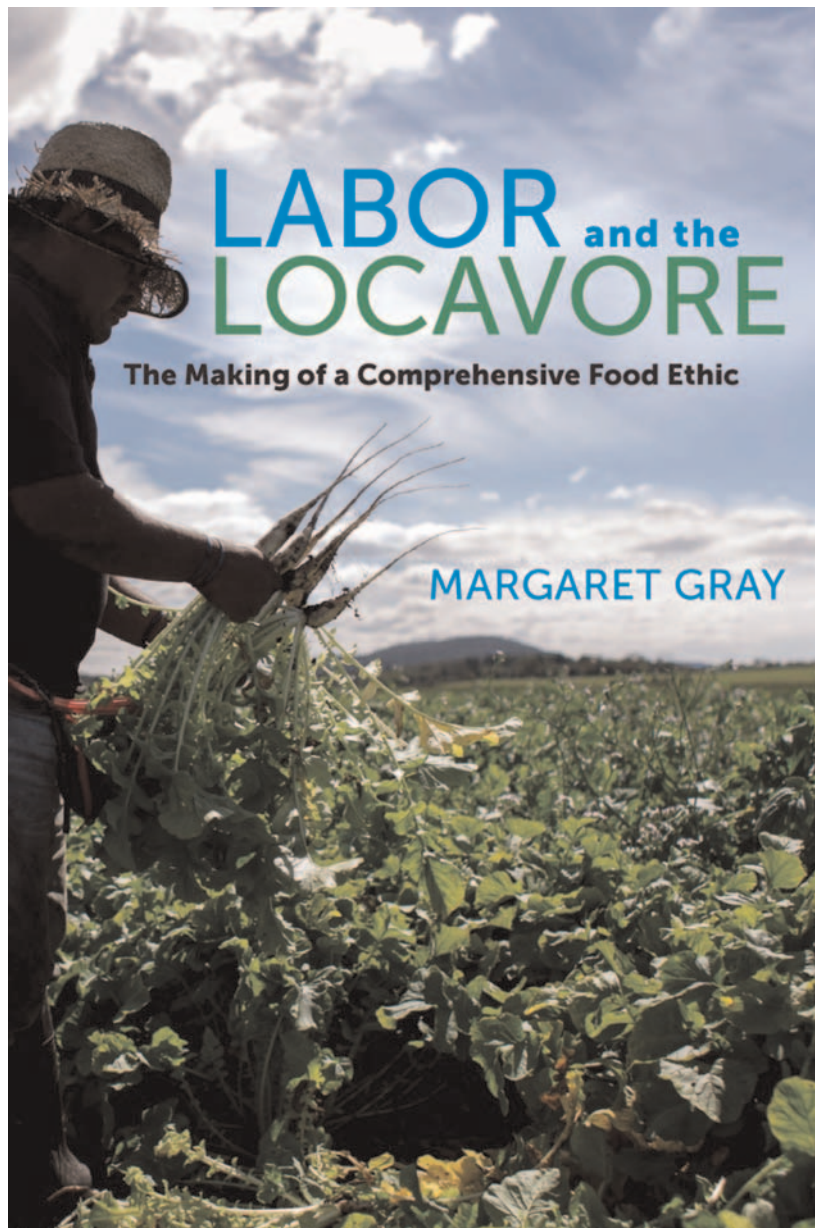
As an activist scholar, I both studied these social problems and sought to contribute to efforts to improve the situation of new and veteran poultry workers in some of the most dangerous and lowest paid jobs in the country. The book explores how black, white, and new Latino Mississippians have lived and understood the transformations of their neighborhoods and the chicken plants where they work. It draws connections between the area’s long history of racial inequality, the industry’s growth and drive to lower labor costs, labor unions’ struggles to organize in the chicken plants, immigrants’ contested place in contemporary social relations, and, ultimately, workers’ prospects for coming together in mutual construction of a more just future.

### Gray, *Labor and the Locavore*

*Labor and the Locavore* investigates labor conditions on smaller, local farms and finds them remarkably similar to those on monoculture, factory farms where farmworkers’ experiences have been well documented. My book asks us to question whether sustainable farming also offers sustainable jobs. There is little research on farmworkers in the Northeast or on local farms, and none of it intersects so directly with the food movement as my book does.

I thought it was important to include farm owners’ concerns and offer insight into their management practices. By interviewing farmers and discussing the same topics that I did with workers I could better analyze the relationships among farmers and their employees. This led to one of the main findings from my research—there exists an intricate form of paternalism that guides labor-management relations on smaller farms. One of the promises of local food is that it fosters intimacy between the farmer and the consumer. The paternalism that I saw play out on Hudson Valley local farms is the flip side of this same intimacy coin. Because the farms usually don’t have contractors acting as middlemen, farmers are directly supervising and disciplining their workers through familiarity.

In a paternalistic setting, employers typically extend benefits to workers in return for good behavior and loyalty on the job. Such benefits revolve around individuated relationships that address workers’ material and psychological needs. Almost all lived in employer-owned housing—their homes were tied to their jobs; this sets the stage for paternalism. The system of paternalism in place was relatively complex: there were varying degrees of benefits, implicating different levels of involvement in and control over worker habits and behavior, depending



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upon what was on offer from the employer. For example, some farmers offered free farm products to workers and vehicles for personal use; others allowed family members to live in worker housing; and, more extreme yet, were the farmers who promised to try to secure a green card or give land to workers. In paternalistic settings, the recipient is well aware that they can never pay back such debts, except with their hard work and docility. While some of the paternalism appeared to stem from employer generosity, it is difficult to separate that sentiment from the impulse for labor control.

If we consider that the food movement is, at its heart, an educational campaign, it has had great success teaching consumers about the environment, animal concerns, healthy eating, and how our food grows. Such efforts have influenced consumer habits and policy change, including food labeling. Now is the perfect time for foodies to consider the laborer. The movement has also influenced an academic field—food studies—which is taking off as a new analytical tool in college classrooms across the country. Food is an incredible pivot point for introducing students, and consumers, to new

ideas, and the four books profiled in this article are a testament to that.

### Horton, *They Leave Their Kidneys in the Fields*

My book focuses on a disturbing casualty of the way we harvest our fresh fruit—farmworkers’ deaths at work due to heatstroke. Farmworkers die from heat at a higher rate than workers in any other industry—including construction—and the majority of such deaths are among foreign-born Latinos. Scholars of natural disasters suggest that their very excessiveness provides a rare opportunity to diagnose the social pathologies producing death that normally remain obscured from public view. Thus deaths by heatstroke serve as a useful site in which to conduct a “social autopsy” (Klinenberg 2002) of the sociopolitical circumstances that place Latino immigrant farmworkers in harm’s way.

While policymakers and the media often tend to portray farmworkers’ heatstroke as the unfortunate result of rising temperatures, *They Leave Their Kidneys in the Fields* investigates the roles played by labor, immigration, health care, and disability policies—as well as the food safety rules devised by the produce industry—in facilitating farmworker deaths. I argue that farmworkers’ historic exclusion from the usual labor protections offered workers in other industries forces them to be “exceptional workers,” even as punitive immigration reforms over the past two decades have deepened immigrants’ vulnerability at work. In addition, I show that associations of growers have created food safety policies that protect their public image at the price of compromising workers’ safety in the fields. Thus I use my analysis of heatstroke among farmworkers as an opportunity to make visible the oppressive social and political structures that constrain their everyday lives.

My book is based on sixteen months of fieldwork I conducted in a small, predominantly immigrant farmworking community in Fresno County, California, in which I have worked for more than a decade. By documenting the changing health and work circumstances of a core group of fifteen farmworkers over this period of time, it captures the cumulative toll of being a migrant farmworker. It suggests that the stresses that migrant farmworkers face as legal minorities may help explain the high rates of hypertension documented among this group, even as such untreated chronic disease then interacts with heat exposure caused by the sociopolitical organization of work. County coroners and state medical officials have used farmworkers’ high rates of chronic disease to discount the role of heat in farmworkers’ deaths, ruling them as due to “natural causes” alone. Yet recent insights from critical medical anthropology recognize the synergistic interaction between disease states like hypertension and heat illness, suggesting that autopsies undercount the true extent of heat mortality in the fields.

QUESTION 2. HOW DOES YOUR BOOK ENGAGE THE WAY THAT IMMIGRATION POLICIES CONTRIBUTE TO WORKPLACE INJUSTICES, AND WHAT PROPOSALS FOR IMMIGRATION/LABOR REFORM DO YOU ADVANCE?

### Gray, *Labor and the Locavore*

*Labor and the Locavore* challenges the traditional narrative about workers who show up and take American jobs away from citizen workers. Instead, I show the role of employers and the industry in increasing immigration. One of the chapters in my book documents the shift from black workers (African American and Afro-Caribbean) on Hudson Valley fruit and vegetable farms to Latino workers. This shift was a purposeful strategy on the part of farmers and the state to secure “good” workers. Former black farmworkers I met discussed being let go before they expected and recounted how difficult it was for them to find farm jobs. Latino workers explained how farmers asked them to recruit family and friends from their home countries to work on the farm. Moreover, the New York State Department of Labor played an important role in placing Latino workers on Hudson Valley farms while limiting opportunities for those with non-Hispanic sounding names.

When farmers talked to me about “good” workers, they were described as having a strong work ethic, not resistant to fast-paced, hard labor, and willing to tolerate crowded living conditions. More than one farmer also said that workers who learned English quickly became Americanized and lazy. That is not the narrative you hear on the eleven o’clock news. Angela Stuesse heard the same rhetoric from the owners of Mississippi’s poultry plants.

The superior “work ethic” of Latinos is directly related to the power imbalances they experience. First and foremost, the vast majority (92 percent) of those I interviewed were not citizens. Workers themselves acknowledged that this status made all the difference in their ability to speak out. Their vulnerability to deportation makes them easily exploitable, as Angela Stuesse also shows in depth. One worker I interviewed said that hiring undocumented workers was part of the “game of capitalism.” Aside from legal status, many other factors reinforce the power hierarchies: English language proficiency, level of education, work skills, race, and family and community support. For example, Vanesa Ribas found that even documented Latino workers experienced similar treatment and a lack of power. These hierarchies are part of the structural violence that Sarah Horton discusses, and they result in what one of my interviewees described as economic brutality.

In addition, we need to consider not only immigrants’ role in transforming rural areas, but also the employers’ role. One farmer whose business has taken off since the early 2000s is probably responsible for a few hundred Latino immigrants

coming through his small town, some of them settling full time and finding other jobs in landscaping, construction, restaurants, and cleaning. The children of his current and former workers attend the local schools as well. It's not often the employer who is described as responsible for this demographic shift in communities.

### **Stuesse, *Scratching Out a Living***

Like Maggie Gray's work, my book explores a racial transformation of a workforce, abetted in part by employers. My intervention in the realm of immigration policy is where it intersects with employment law and, ultimately, economic and racial justice.

The book tells the story of how Latin Americans first arrived in Mississippi, beginning with one Chilean champion tennis player in the 1960s who went to work for a local chicken processor and eventually recruited immigrants from over a dozen countries across the continent to work in his plants. As the poultry industry consolidated and production was "deskilled" and sped up, management sought to reduce costs and maximize profits by increasing the supply of available workers and ensuring they were as exploitable as possible. In addition to filling vacancies on the expanding production lines, their presence also helped companies keep black workers' labor organizing efforts at bay.

There are many factors that put immigrant poultry workers in a structurally vulnerable position, including limited English proficiency; unfamiliarity with U.S. systems, rights, and norms; their racialization as Latinos in the United States; and their isolation in rural areas. But as the work of this issue's contributors clearly shows, the single most important factor in many workers' lives is their undocumented legal status. Their illegality and deportability (De Genova 2002) is a condition that results in extreme vulnerability—in their lives generally, but especially at work.

In 1986 the Immigration Control and Reform Act (IRCA) criminalized the act of hiring the undocumented and implemented a system that would punish employers who knowingly hired these workers. Employers would be required to check documents to verify the identity and work authorization of all new hires, record this information, and archive the completed form in their records. But instead of holding employers accountable, IRCA has given them undue power over undocumented employees, who face threat of job loss and deportation should they question, resist, organize, or get injured at work.

The book focuses on several stories to illustrate this problem. One revolves around the mass firing of hundreds of immigrant workers who were organizing a union in their plant. Another tells of line workers forced to work through a third-party labor

contractor so a local chicken plant could avoid the liability of hiring undocumented workers. And there are several people in the book who were fired when they tried to access workers' compensation following gruesome amputations and crippling back injuries.

In the book I call for a decoupling of immigration policy from employment law. Doing so would afford immigrants the dignity of working out of the shadows and de-incentivize the underground economy in identity documents, which Sarah Horton details extensively. More importantly, it would ensure that *all* workers—immigrant and native-born—could advocate for a safe and healthy workplace and a life-sustaining job.

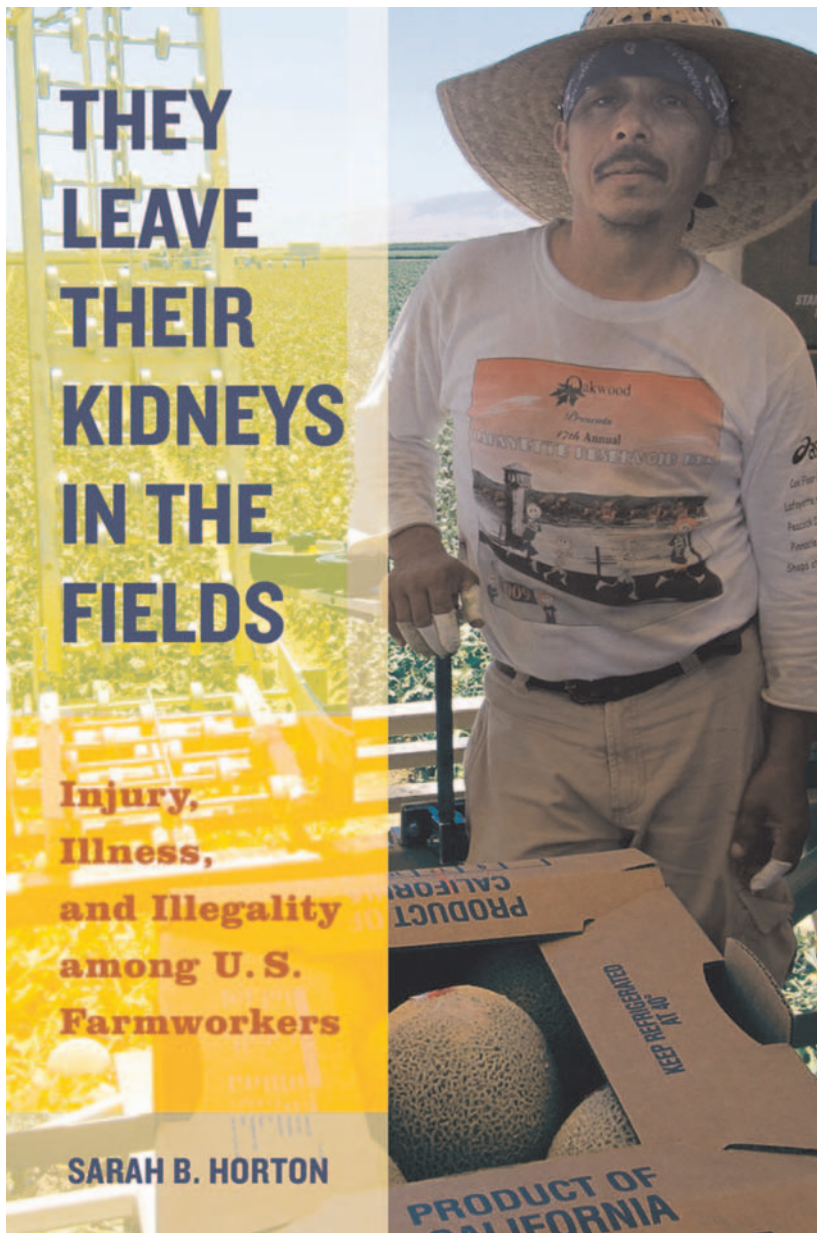
### **Ribas, *On the Line***

At the slaughterhouse, all workers labor under difficult conditions, but immigrant workers face unique vulnerabilities. At Swine's, Latina/o immigrant workers represent a variety of national origins and immigration statuses. Although in theory only some kinds of immigrants—those lacking authorization—would seem to be especially vulnerable to oppressive exploitation given their deportability at large, and disposability within the workplace, ethnoracial identification as "Hispanics" subjects all to similar treatment. This is not an inevitable state of affairs, nor is the solution to be found in employer sanctions that penalize the hiring of unauthorized workers. In fact, the implementation of the latter as part of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, together with the Supreme Court decision in *Hoffman Plastics v. NLRB* that effectively nullified the workplace rights of unauthorized migrants, have made immigrants' labor market position more tenuous, and have therefore reduced the workplace power of all workers. Universal labor rights (along with remedies to violations of these rights) must be legislated—immigration reform alone, while urgent, will not diminish the appeal that unprotected workers have for the insatiable appetite of capital.

### **Horton, *They Leave Their Kidneys in the Fields***

My book focuses on the way that the recent convergence of immigration and criminal law—which sociologists call "legal violence" (Menjívar and Abrego 2012)—has deepened the workplace vulnerabilities of all immigrant workers, regardless of legal status.

Maggie Gray, Angela Stuesse, and Vanesa Ribas all document the role of employers in recruiting immigrant workers and eroding worker solidarity. I examine another way that employers ensure the vulnerability of their workforce by analyzing a strategy commonly used to disguise their violations of immigration and labor laws. In industries like agriculture



COVER IMAGE COURTESY OF SARAH HORTON.

that are dominated by large numbers of undocumented workers, labor supervisors often attempt to disguise their hire from federal authorities through a practice I call “identity masking”—that is, by giving such unauthorized workers the valid work documents of third parties. This unsettles common portrayals of “identity theft” in the media, in which immigrants—not employers—are portrayed as committing the “theft.” Yet I show that labor supervisors use this practice to not only hide their violation of immigration laws, but also their violation of labor laws (such as their hire of minors and their not paying overtime). In short, labor supervisors often ensure that legal residents and

citizens may work under loaned documents alongside their undocumented peers in order to avoid government fines and reduce their labor costs.

I show that a series of punitive changes in immigration laws have intensified the immigration-related consequences for such document-related crimes. The 1996 Illegal Immigrant Responsibility and Immigration Reform Act (IIRIRA) expanded the list of “aggravated felonies” for which legal residents are deportable to include nonviolent offenses such as document fraud. IIRIRA also imposed extended bars on the legal reentry of undocumented immigrants convicted of felonies such as

“identity theft.” In short, the convergence of immigration and criminal law has created penalties far greater than deportation alone. As labor supervisors leverage the power they have to denounce immigrant farmworkers for document-related crimes, IIRIRA has deepened the vulnerability of the entire migrant labor force.

Whereas Angela Stuesse and Maggie Gray document the particular workplace vulnerabilities of undocumented workers, I show that changes in immigration laws affect legal residents as well. To break the hold that legal violence has over all immigrants, I side with the Immigrant Justice Network in arguing that we need to repeal IIRIRA, the flywheel in the U.S.’s deportation machine. And we need to provide immigrant workers with the security of a U-Visa to protect them from employer retaliation if they reveal coercive practices such as “identity masking.”

QUESTION 3. HOW DO RACE AND RACE RELATIONS SHAPE THE NARRATIVES/EXPERIENCES/POSSIBILITIES IN YOUR BOOK?

### Stuesse, *Scratching Out a Living*

How race and racism operate in the U.S. South is one of the central threads in *Scratching Out a Living*. The influx of immigrants into the poultry industry was not accidental; it was calculated, strategic, and intimately tied to deeply rooted structures of white supremacy and labor exploitation in the region.

Until the late 1960s the industry refused to hire African Americans. But thanks to the momentum of the civil rights movement, the plants eventually ceded to black demands for work opportunities. At one Mississippi plant, within a week of opening to African American workers, the white women who had staffed the area’s processing lines since WWII had abandoned their jobs, refusing to work alongside black folks. By the end of the decade, Mississippi’s poultry workforce had become majority African American.

It was precisely when these workers began to organize that their employers started looking farther afield for labor. But rather than acknowledging their investment in keeping the unions out, during a time of expansion management justified their search in terms of a “labor shortage.” I examine this term carefully in the book, because in the context of immigration it is often coupled with discourses around “lazy” black folks who “don’t want to work” and “hardworking” immigrants with a strong “work ethic.”

In fact, I argue that race serves as the principal lens through which people in Mississippi are living out the changes around them. When they talk about immigration, they talk in terms of

race, and their racialized subject positions often shape their understandings of and experiences with the area’s newest residents. White folks tend to see immigrants as a response to black folks’ perceived unwillingness to work. Latinos, too, embrace this notion, championing their identities as “good workers,” even while they identify the structural inequalities that put them in this position. They are generally quick to distance themselves from blackness and from their black coworkers. Black Mississippians, in contrast, have a more critical view, suggesting that immigrants are being recruited in order to reinforce the racist misperception of black “laziness” and justify lower wages and higher levels of mistreatment in the plants. Some see the immigrant presence as an impediment to building power to define the conditions of their work, while others empathize, drawing parallels between the historical experiences of African Americans and those of the newest class of exploitable labor.

Critical race theory is crucial for understanding the conditions outlined in *Scratching Out a Living*. I use it to make sense of how Latino immigrants in the South identify and are identified racially, how they are positioned within a system of white supremacy, and to think through the implications this has for workers’ prospects for collectively improving their lot in this industry.

### Ribas, *On the Line*

Like *Scratching Out a Living*, the narrative of *On the Line* pivots on race. A major question that arises is: Given the distinct place of the South in the legacies and continuities of racial domination, might this new immigrant element portend a radical reconfiguration of “race” in the United States? Such a question invokes aspects of race as both a web of structures and constellation of meanings. Social relations are, in my view, a crucial nexus between the two, and therefore an important focal point through which to analyze questions about the changing character of race in the U.S. In the book, social relations between Latina/o migrants and African Americans—their chief counterparts in the labor force—therefore take on major importance. I pay close attention to the kinds of symbolic boundaries drawn between these groups—the substance and style through which they give expression to their sense of group position. The nature of symbolic boundaries, in turn, reflects the social boundaries between the groups—their (perceived and objective) positions in various systems of domination—and sometimes reinforce, challenge, or undermine these.

One central theme of the book traces the ethnoracial (trans)formation of disparate national groups of Hondurans, Mexicans, Salvadorans, and others into “hispanos”—the term

# On the Line



Slaughterhouse Lives and the Making of the New South

Vanesa Ribas

COVER IMAGE COURTESY OF VANESA RIBAS.

these migrants typically use to refer to themselves collectively. This collective identity is forged in the United States, and for people who work twelve to fifteen hours a day, five or six days a week, it is no exaggeration to say that this identity is forged at the factory. My study reveals that the fraught labor (and broader social) conditions in which “hispanos” emerge, together with the global system of racialized stratification, that in both their origin countries of Latin America and especially the U.S. retains white domination and the devaluation of blackness at its core, converge to generate resentment directed at African Americans.

## Horton, *They Leave Their Kidneys in the Fields*

Maggie Gray, Angela Stuesse, and Vanesa Ribas all document employers’ active recruitment of Latino immigrants as they sought to replace African American workers on small farms and in the meat processing industry on the East Coast with a more docile population. My book instead examines the intra-ethnic dynamics that flourish once ethnic succession is firmly in place; the legacy of the U.S. Bracero Program—a guestworker program that granted temporary legal contracts to 4.6 million Mexican laborers to work in the



U.S. Southwest between 1942 and 1964—is that California’s farmworkers today are 99% Latino and 95% foreign-born (Aguirre International 2005). In short, in California, the federal government facilitated this transition years ago. My book examines the intersections of immigration and labor policies that facilitate heat deaths by forcing immigrants to work through illness: their hefty migration debts due to heightened enforcement, their poverty due to farmwork’s exclusion from standard labor laws, and their vulnerability at work created by the convergence of immigration and criminal law.

Yet I also examine the way that more established Latino immigrants—who had the good fortune to adjust their legal status under the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 and apply for state and federal *mayordomo* and contracting licenses—prey off the vulnerability of their more recently arrived peers. As others have shown (Mahler 1995; Menjivar 2000), when immigrants are excluded from social mobility within the mainstream economy, more established arrivals find a profitable niche as “ethnic entrepreneurs.” So rather than focus on race relations, I examine how immigration laws abet such intra-ethnic exploitation.

### **Gray, *Labor and the Locavore***

Race has played a central role in farmworkers’ predicament today. It was the mentality of the Jim Crow era that sealed the exclusion of farmworkers from important labor laws during the New Deal. Today’s new immigrant workers need a better understanding of the trajectory from that history to the *Juan* Crow moment today—there’s a direct relationship here in how both systems created vulnerable and exploitable workers.

Among the most remarkable responses to the forces that keep workers divided is the formation of the Food Chain Workers Alliance. The FCWA has twenty-nine member organizations—all of which are addressing the needs of food workers. This organization brings together workers and their advocates from across the country and in rural, urban, and suburban areas. The FCWA holds workshops and trainings, and the annual meeting is a multi-day conference for workers to learn from each other. The twenty-nine organizations all bring something different to the table and all play a role in facilitating the work of the FCWA. There are also urgent action alerts that FCWA sends out—a recent email urged recipients to make a call on behalf of a detained worker (he was subsequently released). This organizing model has a lot of promise, particularly with ever-increasing numbers of new immigrant workers able to secure smartphones.

4. WHAT DOES YOUR WORK SUGGEST IN TERMS OF THE RELATIVE EFFECTIVENESS OR VIABILITY OF VARIOUS MODELS, VEHICLES, AND AGENTS FOR POLITICAL CHANGE?

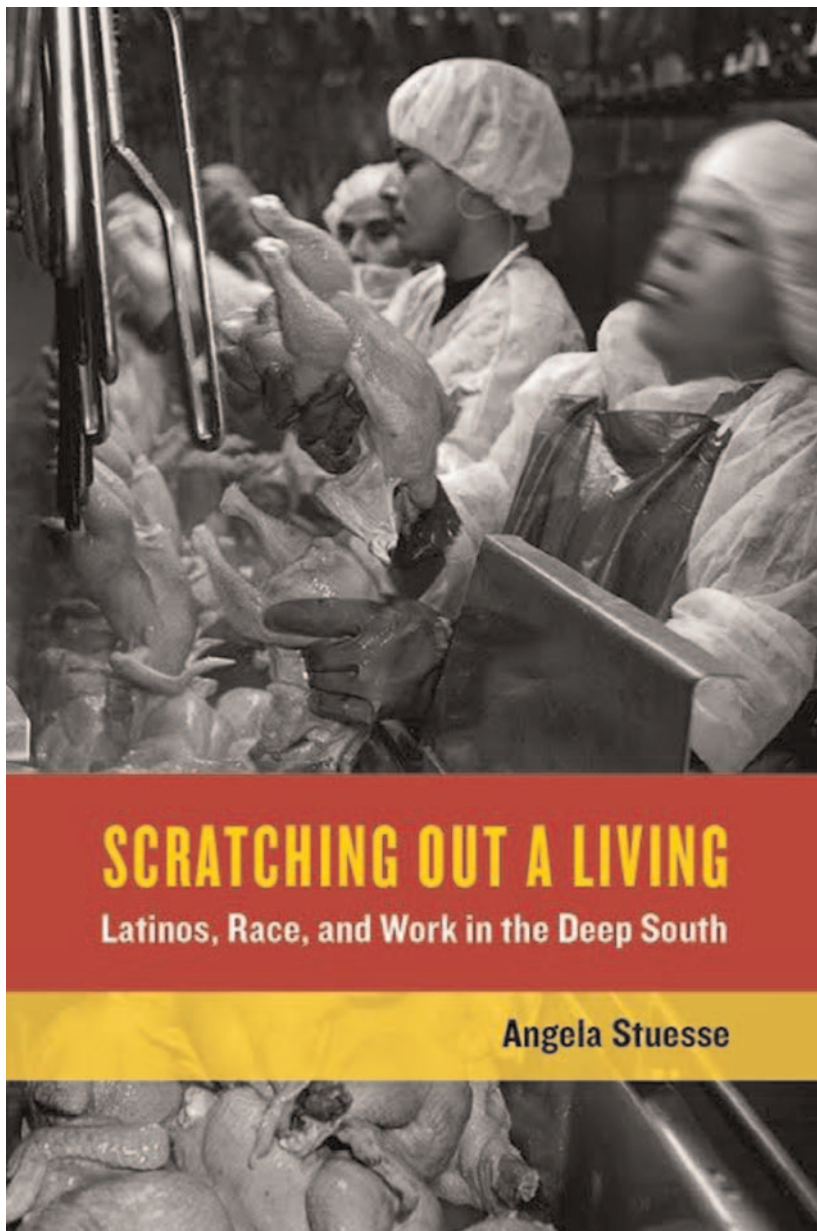
### **Stuesse, *Scratching Out a Living***

My work paints a rather grim picture of the possibilities for change. Resonating with Ribas’s work, *Scratching* underscores that race, gender, and citizenship serve as axes through which people’s days and nights in the chicken plants become embodied. The industry augments perceptions of difference and incompatibility by stratifying work shifts, departments, and job duties. Management organizes production regimes through practices of plant-floor segregation, uneven reward and opportunity, discipline and exclusion, and bodily punishment in order to maximize labor control. So, while many of poultry’s dehumanizing practices cut *across* lines of difference, its leveraging of workers’ differences—both real and perceived—mean that these practices are experienced in distinctive ways by different groups. And even when people *do* experience oppression similarly, relations are structured such that they may not recognize the similarities they share or respond to their lived experience in the same ways. Language barriers, prejudices, and fear inhibit communication and present further obstacles to workers’ collective mobilization, as do different histories, experiences, subject positions, and divergent ideologies about the relationship between hard work and prosperity in the United States.

I end the book by looking at some collaborative efforts between unions and worker centers, and in particular the work of the Mississippi Poultry Workers’ Center of which I was part, to think about potential paths forward under the conditions of advanced capitalism. Programs that brought black and Latino workers together to consider the workings of capital, race, and power in their lives built upon the notion that we need to see people not just as workers, recognizing how other pieces of their identities shape the ways they live in the world. Analyzing these experiments in popular education and intergroup dialogue, I argue that worker movements today need to reach beyond class politics and across difference to build multiracial, cross-gender, transnational, and intercultural coalitions. Only by valorizing difference and building empathy will we be able build viable coalitions for better wages, working conditions, and dignity.

### **Gray, *Labor and the Locavore***

There are some promising initiatives to help New York farmworkers—the most I’ve seen in my seventeen years researching this population.



COVER IMAGE COURTESY OF ANGELA STUESSE.

The Justice for Farmworkers Campaign promotes a farmworker bill of rights in New York State and targets the state legislature to put agricultural laborers on the same playing field as other workers by granting them the right to a day of rest, overtime protections, and collective bargaining and the right to organize without retribution. A very brave farmworker, Crispin Hernandez, is at the heart of another effort. He was fired from his job after meeting with worker organizers and is a plaintiff, along with the Workers' Center of Central New York and the Worker Justice Center of New York in a case filed by the New York Civil Liberties Union. The case argues that

the state labor laws conflict with the state constitution, which guarantees all workers the right to organize without retribution.

In addition to these efforts, the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Young Leaders have been supporting worker meetings and advocacy in Orange County, New York, and have published a few newsletters for farmworkers. New York's Rural and Migrant Ministry is a driving force behind the legislative campaign and conducts worker political education around the state.

Currently, one of the most successful farmworker efforts is the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) and its Fair Food Program, a certification plan that obliges huge corporate

buyers (McDonald's, Walmart, Trader Joe's, and more) to buy only Florida tomatoes from farms that have agreed to a fair code of conduct. The program has dramatically improved the lives and tomato workers. The CIW has also partnered with Migrant Justice in Vermont to shape the Milk with Dignity campaign—modeled on the Fair Food Program. Migrant Justice is in discussions with that state's largest milk buyer, Ben and Jerry's, to secure improved working conditions for Vermont dairy workers.

### **Horton, *They Leave Their Kidneys in the Fields***

My book tells a story about heat illness in California that complements Angela Stuesse's and Maggie Gray's arguments. In particular, it documents the important role that unions can play in strengthening labor regulations and enforcement.

In 2005, after the deaths of four farmworkers of heatstroke that summer, California implemented emergency regulations to protect outdoor workers: granting them rest, water, and shade. Yet the United Farmworkers union (UFW) sued the state in 2009 and 2012, charging that the state's heat illness law was inadequate and poorly enforced. The state's 2015 settlement with the union granted the latter significant power in enforcing the heat illness standard: the state must allow the UFW to help report and refer employers who violate the law and must permit the union to review its own internal audits of its enforcement activities. In light of the scaling back of state and federal labor enforcement agencies since the recession, this partnership between the state and labor advocates offers an interesting model to follow. Now, the UFW, the UFW Foundation, and California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation, Inc., all assist the state in conducting "heat sweeps" of fields in California and referring violators to the agency.

And yet, as we know, changing the situation on the ground for farmworkers occurs much more slowly. Even with farmworker advocacy organizations augmenting the enforcement power of Cal-OSHA, farmworkers continue to die in the fields of heat. As of this writing in August 2016, the state is investigating the possible role of heat in the deaths of three grape pickers during the last week of July (ABC 30 2016).

I end my book with a discussion of the importance of policy change on multiple fronts to reduce the economic insecurity and legal vulnerability that motivate farmworkers to work through illness. Clearly, we must implement legislation to end the agricultural exceptionalism that has long exempted farmworkers from paid time-and-a-half overtime and from collective bargaining rights. We must implement policies to reverse the detrimental effect of subcontracting on workers' labor conditions, and provide immigrants with protection from employer retaliation if they report labor violations and seek

redress. And lastly, we must address a key contradiction created by the privatization of food safety—the disproportionate resources the produce industry has to devote to ensuring produce safety as compared to those the state has to ensure workers' health.

### 5. IS "FOOD JUSTICE" POSSIBLE UNDER U.S. CAPITALISM? WHAT MIGHT IT LOOK LIKE?

#### **Gray, *Labor and the Locavore***

When Upton Sinclair wrote *The Jungle* (1906) he was hoping to sway public opinion about the plight of immigrant workers. Instead he ushered in a new era of food regulation and consumer protection advocacy; lamenting this, he said, "I aimed at the public's heart, and by accident I hit it in the stomach." Today, the opposite scenario is possible. With the public's growing interest in food and the push for sustainable growing practices, we have an opportunity to aim at stomachs and hit hearts. Even Michael Pollan, the doyen of the movement, has argued that labor is the next issue for foodies to tackle (Dean 2014).

A larger coalition of supporters can give voice to voiceless workers. As Sarah Horton mentions, grower associations can be quick to organize and stymie farmworker organizing and advocacy—they have a strong interest in making sure that the exclusionary labor laws remain the same. In light of this, workers need to know they have allies, as they are well aware that their employers have powerful support networks. Workers are highly motivated when they learn that they have support from labor unions, university students, religious groups, and food and environmental groups. This is critical for laborers who, as Vanesa Ribas points out, believe that the hogs they process are given more public attention than the workers themselves.

Not that it's a simple task, but we need to push foodies not to fetishize food and to accept that sustainability includes a lot more than eating healthfully. We need to plug foodies and food movement actors directly into campaigns and instigate discussions on what's possible—third-party certification, buyer boycotts, high-road efforts to promote businesses, or policy change. We also need to remind them that "where should I buy my food?" is the wrong question and "how can I help create change?" is a more sustainable approach.

#### **Stuesse, *Scratching Out a Living***

Capitalism in the twenty-first century is failing all but the 1%, and globally that's a tiny sliver of a percent. So when I think about the possibilities of "food justice," I think about what it means to have a food system—as part of a much larger system—that more equitably distributes resources

across all people. As Gray expertly illustrates in her own work, the piece that is often overlooked by “food justice” advocates are the workers who produce, package, sell, and serve what we eat.

In other words, “food justice,” in addition to concerns about the environment and public health, needs to bring labor more centrally into the equation. How can we ensure that workers in the food system can afford to feed their own families nutritious food? That they can go to work and come home with their bodies and spirits intact? That they can organize collectively to negotiate the conditions of their employment?

Poultry workers made news in 2016 as the media caught wind of a new report detailing the difficulties they have in getting permission to take bathroom breaks (Oxfam America 2015). In an editorial on the topic I suggested that while of course poultry workers need bathroom breaks, they also want employers to recognize their humanity and treat them with dignity and respect (Stuesse 2016). This requires that industry leaders like Tyson, Perdue, and Sanderson Farms create and enforce policies to accommodate breaks as needed.

But it also requires that elected officials tune in to these problems, passing legislation to support working families and providing the funding necessary for underresourced government agencies like OSHA, the NLRB, and the EEOC to better enforce worker protections that already exist.

As consumers, we can withhold our purchasing power from companies that violate workers’ basic human rights, and there is a growing movement of people who care about labor in the food chain who are doing just this. Readers, I invite you, when you eat, think about the hands and hearts that brought that food to your table. Learn more, and join the Poultry Worker Justice Campaign (see Learn More section, below). Follow the lead of worker-led organizations like the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and the Food Chain Workers’ Alliance, to help ensure that they, too, can benefit from the fruits of their labor.

### **Horton, *They Leave Their Kidneys in the Fields***

My work on heat illness in the Central Valley reveals the implications of a capitalist system that privileges corporate profits over worker health, illuminating ways in which the state agencies charged with protecting farmworker health have instead systematically abetted their neglect. Until state and federal governments adequately fund the enforcement of labor and safety laws—and until the penalties on employers are stiff enough to create compliance—our food system will continue to tolerate heat deaths as but the price of summer cantaloupe.

Ensuring food justice must begin with frank acknowledgment of the fact that our current system compromises worker

health in the name of protecting consumer safety. In my book, I document the fact that the nation’s largest retailers began demanding new measures of accountability from the food industry in response to consumer outrage following large, multi-state outbreaks of foodborne illness in the 1990s and 2000s. A vast industry of private auditors developed to fill this niche, offering a number of certifications based on a variety of different audit schemes. Now food safety supervisors at produce companies testify to the fact that they face multiple audits for each crop in a single season—often to receive different certifications—to assure the public of the safety of their brands and secure their profits. These supervisors report that many audits prohibit workers from taking their private water supplies with them into the fields, contradicting the very premise of the state’s heat illness protection law. Yet the likelihood of a company receiving a single audit by Cal-OSHA to ensure that supervisors are adhering to the law—and providing workers with rest, water, and shade—is exceedingly small. My website explains in greater detail the implications for workplace safety of this disparity in enforcement resources between private industry and Cal-OSHA (Horton 2016). Given that there are an estimated 35,000 farms in the state, if Cal-OSHA continued inspecting farms at the fast pace it did in 2013, it would be able to audit each farm only once every thirty-one years.

In contrast, if consumers demanded an independent fair labor certification system—one that remained outside the control of growers—large retailers, who must bow to consumer demand, might well follow suit. As Gray mentions, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers’ Fair Food Program is one such certification program that remains in the hands of workers. Yet we must remember that farmworkers’ workplace suffering is shaped not only by employer practices but also by multiple and intersecting government policies—labor, immigration, health care, and disability—that grant them little economic security. Thus policy reform outside the workplace is also necessary to ensure food justice.

### **Ribas, *On the Line***

I might be less optimistic about the possibility of food justice than my fellow authors, at least with respect to one currently popular mode: consumer-driven change. I do believe that three or four of its biggest components—worker issues, food safety/wholesomeness, environmental concerns, and animal welfare—are interconnected and urgent matters. Simply stated, the prevailing economic system of production degrades the condition of workers, animals, the environment, and our food, and it does so via a set of common logics. It is difficult to envision achieving a version of “food justice” that leaves out any of these concerns. However, I also see some

incompatibilities in the bundling of these concerns. Generally speaking, this incommensurability has to do with what social movement scholars call the discursive and political opportunity structures for advancing challenges to the status quo on these four fronts.

More specifically, I worry about the unanticipated and unintended consequences of actions along one dimension on the others. Whereas the cause is more or less concordant across problems, the solutions are not necessarily so. Let me be blunt. Several times, my meatpacker coworkers remarked that people cared more about the hogs than about them. Human injuries, even death, were seen as intolerable disruptions to the mission of production, and any stoppage was limited to the time it took to sanitize the lines. If my coworkers ever visited a Whole Foods and contemplated the meat counter with its animal welfare scale, they would probably recoil at the peculiar calibration of today's politically minded consumer. And they would certainly be perplexed if they knew that the first question I ever get when I mention my research is: Do you still eat meat?

Moreover, food safety regulatory schemes do not currently align with workers' interests. In fact, the practices by which food safety is monitored and enforced sometimes work directly against workers' interests, and therefore undermine their important public health mission. Sarah Horton's social autopsy of heat-related deaths among farmworkers illustrates this point as well.

At the meatpacking plant where I worked, I observed the clash between the interests of workers and food safety regulations directly. Workers were given disciplinary "write-ups" or even fired for such things as letting boxes touch the floor or picking up knives or sharpeners that had fallen—if they were busted by a USDA inspector. One evening, my factory coworkers and I were *fourteen hours* into our shift when supervisors gathered us to make an announcement. A new food safety rule was being instituted, whereby all meat that fell to the ground would be disposed of rather than washed and processed. Our supervisors also berated us for going to the bathroom outside of designated break times, which amounted to less than one hour a shift. They threatened to bring in a whole new crew of workers who would follow the rules if we didn't. Of course, workers also understood that they had now better make sure that meat—which came down the line at superhuman speeds—didn't drop to the floor. Knowing that fallen meat would now get them into trouble (because it was now considered waste), they now probably felt pressured to do the magic of making meat disappear from the ground (and reappear on the line—now unwashed). When food safety regulations and the unrelenting mission of production

ensured through oppressive exploitation weigh down on workers, they are left with bad alternatives, and perverse consequences are likely.

It strikes me that a key difference between labor issues and the other dimensions of food justice I mention is that it has to date been the least amenable to market co-optation. By this, I mean that market entrepreneurs have found ways to turn the blistering critiques against the degradation of environment, food quality, and animal welfare into profitable new ventures. Think of "sustainable," "eco-friendly," "organic," non-GMO, "free-range," Whole Foods' animal welfare scale, and so on. The same cannot be said for workers issues. Maybe it is possible to imagine a consumer who buys products that have been certified as environmentally sustainable, healthy, animal welfare-friendly, *and* labor-sanctioned, but this seems as yet remote (notwithstanding producer-focused initiatives like fair trade certification of products such as coffee and quinoa). Even these, in large measure precisely because they have been made objects of capital, present clear limitations to food justice.

In short, perhaps there are opportunities for consumer activism. But clearly the fate of workers in the U.S., and certainly the fortunes of immigrant workers, depends on what happens at the national level of policy and legislation: an expansion and updating of the National Labor Relations Act and Fair Labor Standards Act, including passage of EFCA (the Employee Free Choice Act), immigration and migration policy reform, and more. If my analysis is correct, this may not be sufficient to ensure the solidarity between Latinas/os and African Americans, but it is a precondition to the possibility.

## Learn More

California Rural Legal Assistance, Inc.'s Heat Stress Training Initiative

[www.crla.org/crla-heat-stress-training-program](http://www.crla.org/crla-heat-stress-training-program)

Coalition of Immokalee Workers

[www.ciw-online.org](http://www.ciw-online.org)

Farmworker Justice

[www.farmworkerjustice.org](http://www.farmworkerjustice.org)

Food Chain Workers Alliance

[www.foodchainworkers.org](http://www.foodchainworkers.org)

Immigrant Justice Network's #Fix '96 Campaign

[www.immigrantjusticenetwork.org/resources/fix96/](http://www.immigrantjusticenetwork.org/resources/fix96/)

Intergroup Resources

[www.intergroupresources.com](http://www.intergroupresources.com)

New York's Justice for Farmworkers Campaign  
[www.ruralmigrantministry.org/en/justice-farmworkers-campaign](http://www.ruralmigrantministry.org/en/justice-farmworkers-campaign)

Poultry Worker Justice Campaign  
[www.oxfamamerica.org/livesontheline/](http://www.oxfamamerica.org/livesontheline/)

United Farm Workers' settlement with Cal-OSHA  
[www.ufw.org/\\_board.php?mode=view&b\\_code=heat\\_news&b\\_no=17192](http://www.ufw.org/_board.php?mode=view&b_code=heat_news&b_no=17192)

United Farmworker Foundation  
[www.ufwfoundation.org/](http://www.ufwfoundation.org/)

Workers' Center of Central New York  
[www.workerscentercny.org](http://www.workerscentercny.org)

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