



## Editors' Introduction

# Farm Work, Migration and the Diverse Forms of Struggle for Social Justice

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This themed issue was conceived during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, when border closures, temporary measures adopted by most countries to contain the spread of the virus, impeded the arrival of migrant farm workers and consequently highlighted the essential contributions migrant labour made to food production, while simultaneously shedding light on the deplorable conditions and lack of protections for most migrant workers employed in agriculture. Many of these appalling conditions had already existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic but they became particularly visible during the global health crisis.

In many countries throughout the globe, the employment of migrant workers has become a structural element of agri-food systems built around the increasing integration within long supply chains and characterized by extreme market concentration and global competition among producers for a favourable place within this global industry (Kinga et al., 2021; Palumbo et al., 2022; Rogaly, 2008). The marketization and financialization of the global food production (Simeone et al., this issue) generates extreme power imbalances, and employment of poorly paid migrant workers deprived of rights and protections has become a widely popular practice within this global agri-food regime, not only in agriculture but in other food industries such as fishery (e.g., Vandergeest & Marschke, 2021) or meat packing (e.g., Bragg & Hyndman, 2022).

Farm work is considered one of the most hazardous, arduous yet poorly remunerated occupations (e.g., Décosse, 2013; Preibisch & Hennebry, 2011). Labour shortages prevalent in agriculture are often filled by migrant workers on temporary contracts, or by migrants who lack legal authorization to stay or

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work in a country (commonly known as undocumented migrants, a term that many researchers reject in favour of such concepts as illegalized migrants). Both groups of migrants have precarious legal statuses (Goldring et al., 2009), and as such they are often denied access to workplace and social rights (such as healthcare) and protections from unhealthy and abusive workplace conditions. As a result migrant agricultural workers, especially women, have experienced workplace abuse, exploitation, wrongful dismissals and workplace pressure under threats of deportation, as has been widely documented by researchers worldwide (e.g., Basok & Bélanger, 2016; Cohen & Caxaj, 2018; García-Colón, 2020; Gertel & Sippel, 2014; Griffith, 2006; Güell & Garcés-Mascreñas, 2020; Hennebry & Preibisch, 2012; Melossi, 2021; Palumbo & Corrado, 2020; Sok, 2019; Vosko, 2018, 2019). Migrant workers often reside in substandard accommodations and lack adequate access to health care or other social services (Hennebry et al., 2016; Rojas, 2018). COVID-19 has impacted both labour supply and migrants' working conditions. States and employers adopted special measures to recruit and manage these "essential workers," yet very little was done to protect their health and safety during the pandemic. Furthermore, migrant farm workers have faced intensified labour exploitation, mobility restrictions, and increased xenophobia during the pandemic (Palumbo & Corrado, 2020; Vosko et al., 2023).

Although these socially unjust conditions are well documented, insufficient research has been done on attempts by migrants, pro-migrant activists, labour rights and human rights grassroots organizations, as well as international organizations to resist injustice, advocate for changes, and engage in activism to claim the rights of these workers to dignity, security, higher wages, and healthier living and working conditions (but see Basok & López-Sala, 2015; Cohen & Hjalmarson, 2020; Dias-Abey, 2018; Gabriel & Macdonald, 2014; Mešić & Wikström, 2021; Vosko, 2019). This special issue addresses this gap by bringing together researchers analyzing these struggles in different countries and regions (i.e., Costa Rica, Canada, Spain, Italy, Central America, and Mexico) as well as by drawing attention to the global policy sphere and the role of international organizations. It includes papers, written from different disciplinary angles, that focus on campaigns, actions and visions for social justice for migrant farmworkers before and during the pandemic.

In analyzing visions and struggles for social justice, it is important to recognize that the "what" of social justice is contextual, and specific claims for social justice are tied to forms of injustice, the nature of groups seeking redress, as well as the specific time and space that engender mobilizations and other forms of resistance. The specific objectives and claims related to social justice, namely (a) access to protections, benefits, and privileges; (b) democratic political participation; and (c) recognition and acceptance of cultural diversity (Basok & Ilean, 2013), are articulated uniquely under different circumstances. In this volume, we approach the "agriculture-migration nexus" (to borrow the phrase from Kinga et al., 2021) holistically, including the circumstances in home countries that propel migration among

small farmers and farmworkers, migratory journeys, migratory patterns (including various facilitation and recruitment mechanisms), and the diversity of migratory statuses. Depending on the specific time and location within the agriculture-migration nexus that is at stake, the specific meaning of social justice many include the right to not migrate and remain in one's home community, the right to a safe and unimpeded journey, the right to a secure legal status, and the right to workplace protections. Our understanding of social justice, therefore, recognizes both the *time* (particularly in relation to specific opportunities and challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic; see in this issue, Basok et al.; Candiz et al., Voorend et al.) and *space* (i.e., specific locations in migratory trajectories) of the agriculture-migration nexus (see in this issue, Álvarez Velasco & De Genova; Candiz et al.).

The *right not to migrate* in the context of the agriculture-migration nexus is related to struggles to protect small producers from land grabs by extractive industries or agri-food conglomerates (Harvey, 2010; Sassen, 2014). *La Via Campesina* and other national and transnational civil society organizations have mobilized small agricultural producers to defend their lands and combat global trade policies that undermine their livelihood by turning food into a volatile commodity (Desmarais, 2021). Migrant rights organizations have also targeted global governing actors to draw attention to conditions in the countries of origin and the destabilizing impacts that marketization and financialization of food has had on rural producers (Simeone et al., this issue). The right not to migrate has been linked by labour activists and national and transnational advocacy groups to access to sustainable development and global trade policies that protect rural and urban poor, and guarantee them adequate means of survival (Bacon, 2014; Bassoli, 2013; Piper & Rother, 2014).

Furthermore, there is growing evidence that climate extremes are having a devastating impact on agriculture. The livelihoods of millions of farmers have been impacted as both droughts and floods have imposed serious financial costs on farming in many rural areas (WFP, 2019). Environmental devastations have become an important driver of migration (Falco et al., 2019; IOM, 2018; Álvarez Velasco & De Genova, this issue), and therefore struggles for the right not to migrate are (or should be) entwined with global climate change action.

For those whose lands and livelihoods cannot be protected from encroachment by corporations and devastation by climate-change-related processes, migration is almost inevitable. Many displaced farmers and farmworkers have been able to participate in guest worker programs in such countries as the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Spain, and UK (Basok, et al., this issue; Candiz, et al., this issue; Consterdine & Samuk, 2018; Griffith, 2022; Güell & Garcés-Masareñas, 2020; Petrou & Connell, 2018), and some European countries have recently launched new programs for agricultural workers (Palumbo et al., 2022). Those displaced from agriculture who lack opportunities to participate in guest worker programs (or choose not to join them), may journey towards other countries without legal authorization (Álvarez Velasco & De Genova, this issue). The dangers and obstacles they

encounter en route toward their desired destinations are well documented (e.g., Álvarez Velasco & De Genova, this issue; Basok et al., 2015; Schapendonk & Steel, 2014). The right to a safe and unimpeded journey requires that migrants adopt certain creative strategies to resist border violence and assert their right to mobility (Álvarez Velasco & De Genova, this issue). Migrants recruited to work on farms on a guest worker contract as well as those who find jobs on farms on their own without work authorizations or contracts, often face the dismal conditions as a result of their precarious legal status. While guest workers on temporary programs have legal authorization to work on farms, employer-tied contracts make their employment insecure (Vosko et al., 2023). The main struggles for these migrant workers involve the right to a secure legal status (Basok et al., this issue), the right to dignity, and work environments protected from occupation risks, abuse, and intimidation (Vosko et al., 2023). These struggles are often combined with informal acts of resistance (Candiz et al., this issue).

In addition to the *what* of social justice, this volume also addresses the *who* of social justice claims. Lacking full legal status, agricultural workers on temporary contracts and those who lack authorization to live and work in a specific county are less likely to claim rights than legal residents and citizens (Varsanyi, 2008). It is well recognized that for migrants without secure status, the risks of engaging in visible political acts are far greater than for those who have access to at least some form of documentation, no matter how insecure. (Nordling et al., 2017). The disposability and “deportability” of migrant agricultural workers as well as the temporariness of seasonal contracts make it particularly difficult for these migrants to engage in political action (Basok & Bélanger, 2016; Gansemans & D’Haese, 2020; Vosko, 2018). Under these circumstances, the role of solidarity organizations in assisting migrants to overcome obstacles, obtain aid and protection, and frame and claim rights is particularly vital (see e.g., Basok et al, this issue; Candiz et al., this issue; Ataç et al, 2017; Schwiertz & Schwenken, 2020; Voorend et al., this issue). Labour unions, in particular, have contributed to the struggles for the rights of migrant farmworkers (e.g., Basok & Lopez, 2015; Dias-Abey, 2018; Gabriel & Macdonald, 2014; Russo, 2018).

Furthermore, the role of international organizations in regulating working conditions and attempting to extend internationally-accepted rights to migrants is essential. Global standards provide local advocacy organizations and transnational networks with legitimacy for their claims making, and are the product of transnational advocacy networks (Grugel & Piper, 2007). The application of rights-based approaches and the evolution of the global architecture to implement these rights is a topic that has been of rising interest to migration scholars, with particular focus in recent years on domestic work eclipsing the agricultural sector. In this context, it is the particular role of the International Labour Organization (ILO) as *the* UN organization at the forefront of developing standards for labour migrants that requires scholarly analysis. ILO has been an important forum for advocacy to be shaped and

networks to be forged. Unfortunately, the literature on the global governance of migration has so far tended to focus more on the role of the IOM and UNCHR (Geiger & Pécoud, 2020), to the detriment of paying more attention to the important role of the ILO in the governance of labour migration (Piper, 2022), and particularly the migration of agricultural workers.

The right to claim rights may be disconnected from national citizenship as per international human rights and labour standards, and enshrined in the fundamental rights to collective organising on the basis of “worker status,” rather than citizenship status. Transnational advocacy networks and “networks of labour” (Piper & Rother, 2022; Zajak et al., 2017) are evidence of advocacy and claims making being disassociated from national citizenship. The agricultural or plantation sector has also been subject to such type of activism (Pye 2017). The transnational struggles based on international human rights and labour standards are addressed in this issue by Simeone et al. (this issue).

Finally, this issue also considers the “*how*” of social justice struggles, or the specific mechanisms used to bring about change. Contentious action theorists have drawn attention to discourses and actions by grassroots activists and the significant role political context plays in creating or stifling opportunities for mobilizations (Goodwin & Jasper, 2012; McAdam & Tarrow, 2019). Paying particular attention to political opportunities that may have arisen during the COVID-19 pandemic to improve the working and living conditions of migrant agricultural workers, several article in this issue (e.g., Basok et al.; Voorend et al.) present analysis of contentious action by migrants, grassroots activists who struggle to advance migrant rights and have organized rallies, engaged social and mainstream media, and petitioned the states to address the injustices migrant farmworkers face.

This special issue is comprised of five articles. The *first* provides a macro-level discussion of the link between a growing reliance on temporary migration schemes worldwide and other economic and institutional trends, such as the financialization of global agriculture. The authors (Simeone, Piper & Rosewarne) explore the implications of this trend for social justice work by highlighting the divide between global institutions that are rights-based and the key institutions of global economic governance. The disjointed arena of global actors is replicated by global advocacy organizations that face enormous challenges navigating the complexity and interconnections of global policy areas such as food, migration, and labour justice.

The *second* article, by Alvarez Velasco and De Genova, features an interview with a Honduran journalist, and situates the interview in an analysis of disposessions and displacements in the Honduran countryside and the perilous journey of a migrant caravan from Honduras through Mexico. The interview and analysis vividly depict how displaced people defy the border control regime by marching through Mexico. The authors, along with the migrant journalist they interviewed, see this rebellious movement of people as an undeniable force that forges socially just alternatives that permit an unstoppable movement of people despite rancorous barriers.

*Third*, Voorend, Alvarado Abarca and Sáenz Leandro shift our attention to conditions at Costa Rica's northern border, where farmers benefit from Nicaraguan migrants as key labor. Drawing on a novel database on protest and collective action, the authors utilize opportunity structures that arose in the context of COVID-19 to analyze demands put forward by migrants as well as those who opposed the presence of migrant workers in their communities. As their findings suggest, the state responded predominantly to market concerns and anti-immigrant interests, while marginalizing most demands presented by the migrants.

The struggles for secure status for migrant farmworkers, both on temporary contracts and working without authorization, are presented in the *fourth* article, by Basok, López-Sala, and Avallone. Focussing on the analysis of contentious action frames, the authors shed light on the discourses advanced by activists (both migrants and grassroots solidarity actors) calling for secure status for migrant farmworkers in Spain, Italy and Canada. The authors demonstrate that the discursive frames adopted by the activists produced no more than "ambivalent resonance" among the policymakers in these countries. As a result, policy changes approved by state authorities during the COVID-19 pandemic were inconsistent, and inadequate to address the root causes of migrants' vulnerabilities.

*Fifth*, in the article by Candiz, Basok and Bélanger, the authors turn attention to migrant farmworkers recruited under Canada's temporary employment programs for agricultural workers who were working in the province of Quebec during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors document informal acts of citizenship adopted by migrant farmworkers to assert their rights to dignity and safety. One of such acts that became particularly prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic was an escape from abusive conditions. In their analysis of these acts, the authors draw attention to two particular conditions and opportunities that arose at that time in Quebec emphasizing the *temporal* and *spatial* dimensions of migrant struggles.

This special issue on migrant and pro-migrant activism and advocacy revisits the discussion started on the pages of *Studies in Social Justice* in 2009-2010. The 2010 special issue of *Studies in Social Justice* on migrant rights activism (Volume 4, Issue 2) documented how migrant and migrants' rights mobilizations can bring about social justice for migrants by disrupting political order that denies them existence, voices, subjectivity, and rights (Basok, 2010). The present issue continues the discussion initiated in earlier years by focussing specifically on migrant agricultural workers, and how struggles for social justice for these marginalized people can (or cannot) enhance their rights, social inclusion, and dignity.

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