

Food sovereignty and Fair Trade: a link between alternatives to the neo-liberal food regime

By Andreas Bieler and Jacklyn Cock

The multiple global economic, financial, food and ecological crises are deepening. And yet, neo-liberal capitalism continues to reign supreme. Every crisis is responded to by further marketisation and commodification. 'Free' trade is deepened in negotiations of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) and the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA), emission trading systems are one of the main strategies for mitigating climate-change. We suggest that the links between the concepts of 'food sovereignty' and 'fair trade' could promote connections between labour and community struggles and foster labour solidarity at both the transnational and local levels. Both concepts present challenges to the neo-liberal food regime.

The expanded free trade regime and tensions in the global labour movement

Since the completion of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) Uruguay Round in 1994, the expansion of the 'free trade' agenda into areas of trade in services, public procurement, trade related investment measures, intellectual property rights and agriculture as well as the highly controversial investor-state dispute settlement mechanisms has led to tensions within the global labour movement. Trade unions in the north especially in export sectors have tended to support free trade agreements, assuming that new markets will secure jobs for their members. By contrast, labour movements in the global south have generally voiced opposition since expanded free trade often means deindustrialisation and job losses for their countries (Bieler, Ciccaglione, Hilary and Lindberg, 2014).

This does not imply that co-operation between labour movements from the global north and south would be impossible. Trade policy which asserts *the centrality of state sovereignty* can be supported by labour movements all over the world, regardless of their position within the global economy. State sovereignty is based on the principles of 'fair trade' which refers to a more comprehensive, alternative trade regime governing the exchange of goods at the global level in a way which allows countries to emphasise national development based on social justice with the rights of citizens to water, food, housing and so on, prioritised.

The global food crisis and the concept of food security

Although the global situation has improved in recent years in comparison with the 2008 crisis, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations stated that 'about 805 million people are estimated to be chronically un-

dernourished in 2012–14' (FAO, 2014). Pushed by big agricultural producer countries such as the USA, the EU and Brazil, large food corporations (e.g. Monsanto, Cargill) as well as international organisations including the WTO and IMF, the concept of food security based on a free market understanding has been put forward as a solution to the problem.

According to critics, the neo-liberal emphasis on 'food security' and 'free trade' has resulted in the following consequences:

- the removal of state capacity to build and/or protect national farm sectors;
- the intensification of export dumping by northern agricultural producers especially in the USA and EU on markets in the global south and a growing dependence and vulnerability of Southern countries on food imports;
- a shift to export crops in the global south, further intensifying the dependence on imports of staple food;
- a strengthening of the role of agribusiness and corporate power in global agriculture at the expense of small farms and subsistence farmers.

In short, 'food security' is based on the same faulty assumptions as the neo-liberal understanding of 'free trade' in general. Due to their competitive advantage industrialised countries benefit disproportionately at the expense of developing countries.

Climate change and the illusionary promises of the green economy

Climate change threatens food security, especially the more extreme weather events such as droughts and floods which affect crop production. Despite 21 years of international negotiations there is no binding global agreement on the reduction of carbon emissions. In fact they are rising (61 per cent since 1990) which means climate change is intensifying and having devastating impacts – especially on the working class – in the form of rising food prices, crop failures, water shortages and so on.

Capital's response to the climate crisis is that the system can continue to expand by creating a new 'sustainable' or 'green capitalism' bringing the efficiency of the market to bear on nature and its reproduction. Green capi-

talism rests on technological innovation and expansion of markets while keeping existing capitalist institutions intact. Underlying all these strategies is the broad process of commodification: the transformation of nature and all social relations into economic relations, subordinated to the logic of the market and the imperatives of profit (Cock, 2014).

The green economy, thus, includes the 'financialisation of nature' in the form of carbon offsets, and the costing of 'ecosystem services' such as the ability of wetlands to clean water and soil to sequester carbon. "Nature' is reduced to 'natural capital' which represents a sharp contrast to the principles of working with nature that are enshrined in agroecology, one of the foundational principles of the alternative of food sovereignty.

'Food sovereignty' as an alternative

Food sovereignty 'is a common struggle against corporate, industrialised food systems and a common determination to achieve socially, ecologically and economically benign models of production, processing and distribution in all societies' (Mulvany, 2007: 19). The demand for food sovereignty questions the neo-liberal understanding of free trade. As outlined above, a joint demand by labour movements from around the world could be for state sovereignty in relation to an alternative, fair trade system. This could be further specified in that all countries should have the right to food sovereignty, i.e. determine themselves what to grow in which way and which crops to trade and which to protect against foreign competition. Again, it helps to address the climate crisis: the food sovereignty approach contrasts with industrial agriculture, which exhausts the land and contributes significantly to global warming and climate change, through its reliance on oil-based chemicals and fertilisers as well as long 'food miles'. Food sovereignty, in contrast to industrialised agriculture, presents a real alternative that is in harmony with nature.

Food sovereignty and the balance of power in society

Finally, food sovereignty does not only offer an alternative way out of the multiple crises, it is also a way of addressing the balance of power in society. By questioning free trade in relation to food production, it counters the neo-liberal understanding of free trade and challenges the role and power of 'the 40 transnational corporations who effectively control the global food regime' (Hilary, 2013: 121). 'Food sovereignty' has emerged as a foundational concept in many struggles in the global south especially those connected to La Via Campesina. 'It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations' (Angus, 2009: 53).

Food sovereignty is gaining support in the global north and south. For example in South Africa, where 14 million people

go hungry on a daily basis despite 'the right to sufficient food' that is enshrined in the post-apartheid constitution, mobilisation is spreading around this concept. The Co-operative Policy and Alternative Centre (COPAC) and the Solidarity Economy movement stated recently that 'we need to build food sovereignty which is about people and communities taking back control of our food systems. Only by having control and power over our food system can we end hunger in the long term' (World Food Day Statement 2014). In 2015 over 50 mainly grassroots organisations gathered to plan the initiation of a South African Food Sovereignty Campaign 'which will challenge the current unjust, unsafe and unsustainable food system ... and advance food sovereignty from below' (Declaration of South African Food Sovereignty Campaign, 2015).

The notion of food sovereignty is explicitly anti-capitalist: 'a common struggle against corporate, industrialised food systems and a common determination to achieve socially, ecologically and economically benign modes of production, processing and distribution in all societies' (Mulvany, 2007: 19). In short, linked to the notion of 'fair trade', food sovereignty could be a unifying force, promoting both transnational and local solidarities in forms which are deeper and wider than anything which has gone before.

Andreas Bieler is Professor of Political Economy and Fellow of the Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice (CSSGJ) at the University of Nottingham/UK.

Jacklyn Cock is Professor Emeritus in the Department of Sociology, University of the Witwatersrand, and Honorary Research Associate of the Society, Work and Development Institute (SWOP).

Works Cited

- Angus, I. (2009) *The Global Fight for Climate Justice*. London: Resistance Books.
- Bieler, A., B. Ciccaglione, J. Hilary and I. Lindberg (eds.) (2015) *Free Trade and Transnational Labour*. London: Routledge.
- Cock, J. (2014) The 'Green Economy': A Just and Sustainable Development Path or a 'Wolf in Sheep's Clothing?', *Global Labour Journal*, Vol.5/1: 23-44. Available at (<https://escarpmentpress.org/globallabour/article/view/1146/1202>); accessed 16/06/2015.
- Declaration of South African Food Sovereignty Campaign (2015) *Declaration adopted in Johannesburg/South Africa*, 1 March; available at (<http://climateandcapitalism.com/2015/03/05/declaration-south-african-food-sovereignty-campaign/>); accessed 16/06/2015.
- FAO (2014) The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2014; available at <http://www.fao.org/publications/sofi/2014/en/>; accessed 16/06/2015.
- Hilary, J. (2013) *The Poverty of Capitalism*. London: Pluto Press.
- Mulvany, P. (2007) 'Food sovereignty comes of age: Africa leads efforts to rethink our food system', *Food Ethics*, Vol.2/3 (Autumn); available at <http://www.ukfg.org.uk/docs/FoodSov17Dec2007.pdf>; accessed 17/12/2014.
- World Food Day Statement (2014) 'Build Food Sovereignty to End Hunger!' Food Sovereignty Campaign Statement on World Food Day – Issued by the Solidarity Economy Movement (SEM) and Cooperative and Policy Alternative Centre (COPAC); available at (<http://www.copac.org.za/news/2014/food-sovereignty-campaign-statement-world-food-day>); accessed 15/06/2015.