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Moving beyond awareness to action and food system transformation: prioritizing labor in food systems governance work

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The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare many of societies' existing social and economic inequalities, one of which is illustrated in the challenges facing food and farm workers across the food chain. Despite this upsurge in public recognition, the circumstances facing food and farm workers remain unchanged, and this lack of action is reflected within the work of food systems-focused civil society organizations (CSO) in Canada. Several authors have noted the lack of recognition of labor issues within food systems work. This paper further explores the nature of this disengagement, particularly in food systems governance work, and identifies barriers to more meaningful engagement and possible avenues to overcome these challenges. Findings draw from a set of 57 interviews conducted from 2020 to 2023 with a range of food system CSO representatives across Canada, examining their understanding of, and engagement in, food systems governance work and their involvement in labor issues (or lack thereof). The paper concludes that though there exists widespread awareness of the challenges facing food and farm workers, and a desire to engage in a more sustained fashion, many food system CSOs have not yet found the tools or pathways to do so on an organizational level. Several discursive openings are identified that offer an opportunity to leverage the heightened awareness of food and farm workers during the pandemic into concrete collective action.

KEYWORDS

labor, food systems governance, food work, food system transformation, food labor

1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare many of societies' existing social and economic inequalities, bringing to light the various ways in which particular groups and communities face complex and persistent injustices. One of the more notable instances was the increased attention paid to the challenges facing one of these groups, food and farm workers across the food chain. News headlines denounced the conditions of migrant farm workers, made all the worse by the pandemic induced restrictions and travel delays (Baum and Grant, 2020; Harris, 2020; Mojtehedzadeh and Keung, 2021). For one of the first times in recent memory, grocery workers and meat-processing plant workers were labeled as essential, and grocery store workers in particular, were lauded as part of the 'front-line heroes' continuing to work throughout the pandemic.

Despite this upsurge in public recognition, the circumstances facing food and farm workers remain unchanged, and this lack of action is reflected within the work of food

systems-focused civil society organizations (CSO) in Canada[1]. The working conditions and social relations through which food is grown, harvested, processed, packaged, transported, marketed and disposed of, have long remained secondary to concerns of sustainable food and consumer well-being (e.g., organic, non-GMO, healthy foods, and local foods; Gray, 2013; Lo, 2014). While several authors have noted the lack of recognition of labor issues within food systems work (Minkoff-Zern, 2014, 2017; Sbicca, 2015; Weiler et al., 2016), this paper furthers this discussion by exploring the nature of this disengagement and identifies barriers to more meaningful engagement and possible avenues to overcome these challenges.

In particular, we are interested in questions of labor as they pertain to food systems governance work. By governance we mean the various policies, laws, and regulations that shape food systems. This includes formal rules as well as informal practices and assumptions that structure both who and what are included in food systems and in what ways (Andree et al., 2019; Levkoe et al., 2023). Governance is best understood as a dynamic process of negotiation, tension and collaboration. Fundamentally, these are questions of power and representation within decision-making, which cultivate or inhibit particular manifestations of food provisioning relationships and activities. A focus on governance moves beyond individual projects or initiatives, and directs our attention to broader systems change and transformation of our food systems.

The findings shared in this paper draw from a set of interviews conducted with a range of food system CSO representatives across Canada, examining their understanding of, and engagement in, food systems governance work, including their involvement in labor issues (or lack thereof). Their responses, and the explanations given for the level of involvement, offer valuable insight into the state of engagement in food labor issues within related governance work in Canada, and food systems work more broadly. The interviews suggest that despite wide-ranging awareness of the challenges facing workers within the food system, food and farm labor continues to be sidelined within CSO-led food movement and food systems work. Further, the majority of work that is being done by food system actors appears to be largely focused on labor access from an employer's perspective rather than interrogating the conditions of work or realities of food system workers. We reflect on why individual sympathy and awareness has yet to translate into organizational action and offer suggestions on possible discursive and material openings to bridge the gap.

2 Current literature on food system civil society organizations and labor

Food systems governance is an important area of consideration for food and farm labor as it centers questions of power and representation in decision making. Despite a growing recognition of the importance of labor issues in food systems and food movement work (Minkoff-Zern, 2014; Levkoe et al., 2016; Perry, 2019), the literature that considers food systems governance is limited in its inclusion and analysis of matters relating to food and farm workers. This may be explained in part through terminology, as the specific language of "governance" is not commonly used, even when discussing matters that could be easily understood as governance-related, such as issues concerning labor policy, laws, or labor unions and collective bargaining.

Several guiding questions were applied to the literature discussing food systems governance to better understand how labor issues are explored. We specifically wanted to identify what strengths and limitations were observed regarding CSO engagement with labor issues, what governance mechanisms (if any) were discussed in relation to labor, and what roles CSO actors or groups had. An analysis of the literature that focuses on labor within the food system, particularly from a North American perspective, reveals several focus areas, notably migrant labor policy such as the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP; McLaughlin and Weiler, 2017; Weiler et al., 2017); health and safety of migrant workers (Preibisch and Otero, 2014; Weiler and McLaughlin, 2019; Weiler and Grez, 2022); migrant worker residency status, worker education, and worker organizing (Grez, 2006; Jayaraman, 2014; Perry, 2019); labor exploitation (Coplen, 2018; Klassen et al., 2022; Reese and Sbicca, 2022); and collective bargaining and unionization (Foster, 2014; Hall, 2015; Sbicca, 2015). Much of the literature identified migrant labor and specifically migrant farm labor. In addition, some literature discusses the food movement slowly broadening its focus to look beyond the goal of 'sustainable food' and include workers across the food chain and sustainable food production (Gray, 2013; Lo, 2014). Beyond these focus areas, several themes emerged in the literature, including the invisibility of food and farm workers in food systems discussions (Jayaraman, 2014; Hall, 2015; Coplen, 2018; Lozanski and Baumgartner, 2020); a lack of direct engagement by CSOs with food and farm workers (Lo, 2014; Weiler et al., 2016); initiatives and opportunities for including labor in CSOs food systems work (Lo and Jacobson, 2011; Perry, 2019; Klassen et al., 2023); tensions that influence CSOs in their engagement with workers (Myers and Sbicca, 2015; Perry, 2019); and finally how governance spaces may provide an opening for meaningful action (Klassen et al., 2022).

CSOs engaged in food system governance work across North America demonstrate concern for a range of social justice, well-being, and sustainability issues in relation to food systems. However, food and farm workers across the food system have often been invisible in these discussions (Hall, 2015; Coplen, 2018). This invisibility may be due to several factors. Wakefield et al. (2015) note that US based academics have described an enduring romanticized image of the white rural farmer; an image that ignores the displacement of Indigenous nations from their lands, the enslavement of African Americans, and the historical and continuing reliance on underpaid migrant workers (Guthman, 2008; Alkon and McCullen, 2011; Hall, 2015). Canadians' perceptions of a rural farming history have also been distorted and romanticized in similar ways. Cairns et al. (2015) provides an example using Manitoba's Family Behind the Farm campaign, highlighting pork farmers. They note that the campaign presented "farmers as ubiquitously white, "home-grown" Manitobans, the campaign obfuscates current labor practices in the pork industry, which rely heavily on migrant labor … the campaign works affectively to convert the shame of harmful production practices into the pride of the white family farm imaginary" (p. 1185). Weiler et al. (2017) add

1 We define a food system civil-society organization as a non-governmental and non-profit organization or community group working in the public realm in a food-related area. This could include advocacy groups, membership-based associations, charities and community development organizations.

that there is a long history of "Agrarian exceptionalism" within understandings and discussions of food systems in Canada, whereby structures of settler-colonial violence and oppression of workers are rendered invisible in favor of romanticized notions of agricultural abundance. Wakefield et al. (2015) assert that this representation of abundance also ignores the significant food insecurity within Canada. Finally, the enthusiasm for 'local' food and drink further perpetuates the invisibility of food and farm workers. In their work on migrant agricultural workers in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, Lozanski and Baumgartner (2020) describe how the narrative of local food and wine presents an image that attracts tourists to the area but is inconsistent with the reality of agricultural production in the region, which is "entirely dependent upon a globalized labor force" (p. 73). They further assert that the farm-to-table discourse prevalent in the region and the structure of migrant labor programs in Canada work to worsen the precarious and invisible situation of workers. Extending this invisibility beyond the farm, Sachs et al. (2014) interviewed both farm and restaurant workers and found that the intersection of gender and race-ethnicity result in inequalities impacting the spaces workers are employed within these two industries. They noted that female and or racialized workers are often invisible in the 'back' kitchen of restaurants or away from the consumer's view on farm fields. This invisibleness of workers, unseen by customers in restaurant dining rooms or at farmers' markets, allows consumers to be unaware of the "faces of marginalized workers" making it "hard to empathize and to be motivated to change inequality regimes in food work" (p. 16). Coplen (2018) notes that the focus on rural agricultural workers results in the majority of food workers, including those employed in various jobs along the food chain, becoming essentially invisible.

There is some criticism in the literature that CSOs have often failed to engage directly with workers and worker-led organizations (Weiler et al., 2016). Lo (2014) outlines how race and class differences between low-income food workers and those leading the sustainable food movements have been key to the lack of attention paid to labor issues across the food system. Minkoff-Zern (2014) also connects this to a broader omission within food systems literature of failing to critically analyze power and privilege within alternative food movements and spaces (See also Alkon and Guthman, 2017). Speaking specifically of alternative food movements, Minkoff-Zern (2014, 2017) argues that these spaces and initiatives have typically overlooked food and farm labor issues, despite the presence of persistent low wages and poor working conditions for both migrant and domestic workers. An explicit engagement with governance is thus a useful way to surface questions of power within food systems and food systems work.

There are indications that this is beginning to shift, as food movement actors have begun to connect their interests in sustainability and food quality with the issues labor activists have long been engaged with (Levkoe et al., 2016; Klassen et al., 2023). This has predominantly taken the form of awareness raising and/or public education initiatives, drawing attention to issues of labor exploitation or seeking support for a particular policy change. Hall (2015) describes a food labor movement that "conscientiously aims to avoid many of the mistakes made by the alternative food movement by intentionally building an inclusionary coalition that confronts multiple axes of inequality, places workers in leadership roles, and represents a diversity of worker interests in the food system" (p.92). Food movement actors have also engaged in campaigns that transfer responsibility for food system change away from individuals (e.g., 'vote with your fork') toward corporations. An example is the 'Fight for $15' campaign led by the services workers union, which included US-wide strikes to draw attention to low wages and the need for improved working conditions (Schlosser, 2001 cited in Hall, 2015, p. 92). The Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) pressured corporate buyers and growers to enter legal agreements for fairer wages and working conditions (Hall, 2015). Activists have also worked with local media to expose labor abuses, which resulted in increased attention by government and buyers, and possible further intervention (Fransen, 2012 cited in Toffel et al., 2015, p. 208).

Sbicca (2015) argues that alternative food movements should "open their spaces to voices traditionally marginalized" such as workers, and Minkoff-Zern (2014) emphasizes that alternative food movements should accept workers as leaders and join food and farm worker-led initiatives. In the Canadian context, CSOs have supported campaigns around migrant farm workers, particularly around access to health care and permanent residency. An example is the overwhelming endorsement of the 2022 call by the Canadian Migrant Rights Network (a migrant-led coalition) to grant permanent residency status for all migrant workers. Nearly five hundred CSOs, including several food focused groups, such as Food Secure Canada and FoodShare Toronto, supported this call by writing organizational letters of support for regularization and #StatusforAll (Migrant Rights Network, 2022).

Openings can also be seen in the cross-sectoral linkages being made by coalitions and solidarity alliances that bring together workers from across the food chain to address labor abuses from a broader food systems perspective (Lo and Jacobson, 2011; Sbicca, 2015; Jayaraman and De Master, 2020). Jayaraman and De Master (2020) note that food worker organizations and unions have had impressive successes in their fight against corporate power, low wages, and sexual harassment. As an example, through collective organizing and direct action food workers in restaurants across the US have influenced policy change impacting their rights and wages. The authors suggest other food movement stakeholders can learn from these successes and voice a hope to collaborate with food system transformation activists across class, race, and diverse issues. Several scholars note that opportunities to encourage collaborations and shared points of struggle between farmers and food and farm workers is an important area of further research and presents possibilities for meaningful transformation within food systems (Minkoff-Zern, 2017; Klassen et al., 2022).

Despite these positive steps, challenges remain. Myers and Sbicca (2015) contend this bridging work, referenced above, may be more complex: "Given the often precarious economic dynamics that shape small-scale farming and the health and environmental reasons for why consumers buy local or organic, trying to fuse local food with just food for all food chain workers has had limited gains" (p. 25). Speaking specifically of migrant farm workers, Perry (2019) argues these public awareness initiatives must go further to tackle the structural barriers that prevent many migrant workers from engaging in these movements: "Educational interventions designed to encourage migrant farm workers' contribution to social movements must … tackle the socio-cultural obstacles that constrict migrant farm workers' opportunities to participate as full members of their communities" (p. 627).

Beyond education and advocacy initiatives, some CSOs are also directly engaging with labor activists, seeking to shift power and raise the voices of workers (Grez, 2006). Klassen et al. (2022) examine the evolving relationship between a provincial organic farming association and a Canadian migrant justice collective and

find "nascent efforts towards redistribution of power and the re-centering of [migrant worker] voices in a way that could be transformative" (p. 169). Considering the organic farmer community in Canada, Klassen et al. (2022) also note that the priorities advanced by organic farmers do not necessarily align with the main concerns of migrant workers and their allies. A deeper understanding and focus on the manifestations of racism, capitalism, and patriarchy within food systems structures, which can disadvantage both workers and organic farmers, could engender stronger collaboration and solidarity between farmers and farm workers. Sbicca (2015) makes a similar observation, speaking of food movement organizations: "labor struggles for many food chain workers emerge out of a set of raced, classed, and gendered experiences that inform their responses and those of their allies. Yet, we have less of a sense of these same processes in many [Alternative Food Movement] AFM organizations" (p. 677).

Indeed, there are several tensions noted in the literature that may prevent or limit CSOs from engaging with labor issues in food system governance discussions and spaces. Weiler et al. (2016) note that CSOs may be hesitant to take a stronger stance on labor issues for fear it might alienate some of their membership or run counter to their funding parameters. Weiler and Grez (2022) observe that during the pandemic, the heightened awareness and support for farm workers' rights was nonetheless framed from the interests of Canadians, positioning farm workers as "essential" for putting "food on Canadian tables" (p. 45). Thus, support for farm worker's rights is not valued in and of itself, rather it is seen as a tool to address Canadian interests of food security, health and access to local foods. Food justice activists and scholars assert that though tensions and challenges persist, engaging with migrant workers is essential for ensuring a food movement that is inclusive and equitable (Perry, 2019).

Several authors note that governance is in fact an effective avenue through which to move beyond awareness or education initiatives, to meaningfully engage with food and farm labor issues in their own right. As Minkoff-Zern (2014) argues: "To make lasting changes to the food system, there must be more cooperation among food and labor movements, workers' rights must become central to food movement discourses, and false conceptions of rural and urban divides must dissolve. Farmworker-led food movements, working in coalition with movements for food justice, with deep analyses of agrarian power, class relations, and the struggle over controlling food, are primed to take this step" (p. 95). Hammelman (2019) echoes this point, insisting that "the transition to more just and sustainable food systems will not occur through individually focused efforts. Instead, it will require collaboration among the many sectors and actors that produce and reproduce food systems on a daily basis" (p. 83). Klassen et al. (2022) are even more specific, suggesting that rethinking governance is an important avenue through which the organics community can take meaningful action to support migrant workers: "If the organic community is to take seriously the demands for improved representation of migrant justice organizations in planning and decision making, more formal representation in governance may be the most logical place to start—for instance, inviting and providing appropriate supports for migrant justice organizations to sit on the [Canadian General Standards Board] CGSB Technical Committee as a voting member" (p. 166).

Drawing on these conversations in the literature, this paper delves deeper into the rationales and perspectives of food system CSO representatives, to better understand the current state of CSO engagement in food labor, and to highlight what obstacles and opportunities may exist.

3 Methods

The research undertaken for this paper is part of a multi-year research project exploring the role of CSOs in food systems governance in Canada and the possibilities for developing more collaborative forms of governance. Understanding gaps such as the ones identified in this paper, and how more collaborative, participatory forms of food systems governance might help to address them, is one of the key objectives of the broader research.

The findings draw on a group of 57[2] interviews conducted with representatives of food system CSOs in Canada between June 2020 and May 2023 (in both French and English). The interviews were semi-structured and included several themes related to participants' understanding of governance and the nature of their involvement in food systems governance. A specific set of questions were asked about whether labor issues was something they actively worked on in the context of their food systems governance work or food systems work more broadly.[3]

The interviews were informed by an earlier survey with representatives of food system CSOs in Canada conducted between November 2019 to March 2020. The survey indicated that labor was not identified as a priority area for most organizations surveyed. Only 5% of respondents listed food labor as one of their top policy priorities. In comparison, improving and strengthening healthy food access, Indigenous food systems, local food procurement, and natural resources and environment were each listed as priorities by 25% of respondents (see Levkoe et al., 2023 for a more detailed discussion of the survey findings). Given this, we wanted to further probe the inclusion of food labor within food systems governance work, to understand the nature and scope of this engagement (or lack thereof).

Interview participants were recruited in several ways: survey respondents who indicated a willingness to participate in interviews, individuals who were named by survey respondents, individuals known by the research team to be actively involved in food systems governance, and snowball sampling. The aim was to include a diverse representation of individuals across geographies, organizations, and scales of work. Of the 57 interviews, 44 responded on behalf of organizations and 13 responded as individuals. Of those representing organizations, each participant represented a distinct organization. This included individuals that

2 A total of 71 interviews were conducted. However, 5 organizational representatives were not asked the labor question as part of their interview, and 9 of the elder interviews did not include the question of labor. This was due to a lack of time, or in some cases participants were given the option of answering one of several thematic questions, and they elected to answer a different one.

3 The primary question was "Are labor issues in the food system something you actively work on or engage within the context of your food systems governance work?" Additional probing questions followed depending on their initial response (e.g., If no, why not? If yes, what are some examples?).

were considered food movement elders as well as food system researchers that have been active in food system advocacy and governance work. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives from a range of CSOs across Canada. Interviews were transcribed and coded by the research team using Nvivo software. For the purposes of confidentiality, names of participants are not included unless they explicitly requested to be named, but we offer some basic description of their organization, if relevant, and if it would not compromise their confidentiality.

Respondents represented a diversity of organizations in terms of location, scale, and scope of work. The greatest number (29%) operated at the municipal or regional level, with 24% at the provincial level, 18% at the national level, and one at a global level. Several (15%) of organizations also worked across scales. While the sample included organizations from 8 provinces and 1 territory, over half of the organizations represented in the sample were in Ontario (27.5%) and Quebec (27.5%) operating at the municipal or provincial level. There were notable differences in organization size in relation to the number of staff (between 2 and 70), annual budget (e.g., small project-based vs. annual funding of millions per year), funding sources (governments, donations, grants, sponsorship, membership), and governance structure. Finally, our sample included organizations that worked within food systems, but not necessarily exclusively in food systems. Examples include community food centers, producer associations, educational centers, and research institutes. These categories may play an important role in determining an organization's ability and capacity to engage with food systems governance issues such as labor.

Following the interview, participants were asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire. Of those who responded[4] ($n = 50$), 86% identified as female, 14% as male, and 2% as non-binary. 4% identified as Indigenous, 12% as a member of a racialized minority, and 8% identified as belonging to the LGBTQ2+ community. This information is reflective of the broad make-up of food system CSOs, which tend to be dominated by white women. These demographic details were intentionally separated from the interview responses to protect confidentiality; thus, we cannot offer interpretations of how these identities and social locations may have informed participant's responses.

Following a first round of coding and analysis of the interview data, we made the decision to conduct two additional interviews with food labor scholars. These interviews were approached as a form of data-checking, and enabled us to refine and deepen our analysis. While this is admittedly an unconventional methodological choice, we felt it was important to engage in a shared reflection process with peers and colleagues deeply engaged in scholar-activism work in this area. Our objective was to gain additional insight and perspective on our findings, and in a way, put the interview data in conversation with these two scholars. These participants are identified by name, with their explicit consent. These interviews are not included in the Findings section, and are only introduced in the Discussion section of the paper.

4 Note that this demographic and organizational data is for the interview sample as a whole (n=71), not just those who answered the question on labor.

4 Findings

4.1 "We're very aware of that … but we do not spend a lot of time on it"

The majority of organizations interviewed had limited engagement with food labor issues within their food governance work, or within their food systems work more broadly. What was particularly insightful was how respondents characterized and explained their lack of engagement, coupled with how they understood the meaning of labor in the context of food systems work. Further, while the vast majority of respondents did not actively engage with labor or labor issues, there were several exceptions that offer insight into the nature of existing work, and how deeper and more intentional collaboration between food and labor might be encouraged.

Out of 57 interviews, the vast majority ($n = 40$) of participants did not believe their organization actively worked on these issues. The following quotes illustrate common responses from interviewees:

"It's something that we care about, but it's not a central focus of our work."

"No…We cannot do everything…you have to pick stuff, right?"

"It obviously comes up all the time, whether we do anything specific about it, no. That's not really the main focus of our organization."

"We're very aware of that…but we do not spend a lot of time on it."

"..a bit, not as much as we probably need to."

"labor is central, but I would not say we actively work on labor issues."

A couple were even more direct, simply stating "Nope" or "No."

Fifteen participants answered affirmatively and provided specific examples or illustrations of this work in practice. Two additional respondents gave examples but they were speaking to their own individual work, rather than organizational activities, and were thus excluded from the analysis. Of the 15 affirmative responses, six of these examples are classified as minor or stand-alone activities, rather than a deep or continued engagement. For instance, one participant described an upcoming webinar they were organizing that they were hoping would include a representative from the migrant worker community. Another respondent mentioned having written letters in support of migrant farm workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, while two others described training or resources developed for workers. One participant noted they regularly tried to connect workers and volunteers to local farms to address labor shortage issues, and another mentioned advocating for a change to a government program aimed at encouraging Quebec residents to work on farms when migrant farm workers were barred from entering the country due to COVID-19 travel restrictions.

The remaining nine described a more sustained or significant set of activities. Most of the examples provided were not clearly linked to questions of governance, however, there were a few notable exceptions. This included representation of labor issues or voices within policy building and advocacy work, for instance, advocacy at the United Nations in support of the Declaration on the Rights of Peasants. One participant spoke of their involvement in creating Ontario's Food and Nutrition Strategy, noting that labor issues and perspectives were actively included in the policy-building process. Another respondent

spoke of the inclusion of a labor representative on the Food Policy Advisory Council, a multi-stakeholder group established as part of the federal government's Food Policy for Canada.

Several participants mentioned specific projects their organizations had initiated, such as a research project on farm labor within small and medium sized farms in Ontario, and a project to connect the food and farm industry's labor needs with the employment needs of marginalized communities. Eric Chaurette, from InterPares, described the sustained direct support they provide to organizations both here in Canada and internationally that represent and advocate on behalf of migrant farm workers in Canada. Finally, one of the national farm associations, the National Farmers Union (NFU), has taken several concrete actions to include farmworkers in their organizational structure and governance. Cathy Holtslander, Director of Research and Policy for the NFU, shared that they recently created a new "farmworker" member category and established a farmworker action committee, and plan to hire a farm worker organizer position.

Evelyn Encalada, long-time member of Justicia for Migrant Workers (J4MW), spoke of meeting with government officials and participating in policy recommendations, such as the federal government's plan to develop federal guidelines for migrant farmworker housing. They also spoke of organizing against the 4-in-4-out rule, which forced migrant workers to leave Canada for 4 years after having worked in the country for 4 years. Describing the approach of their organization as "multi-pronged," J4MW's work also included organizing a march with migrant farm workers and taking cases to the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal. Though the subset of participants working on or engaging in labor issues was rather small ($n = 15$) compared to the total interviewees asked about this issue ($n = 57$), these results are still meaningful. Those who answered affirmatively recognized the importance of labor issues within food systems discussions and had made at least some effort to bring labor into their work. Several respondents demonstrated a deeper understanding and analysis of this gap and were engaged in actions to bring labor issues into food systems governance spaces in a more significant way.

4.2 Ready to follow but not lead: "We are ready to collaborate if we are asked"

Overall, the prevailing work of CSOs engaging in labor issues could be characterized as "promoting and supporting," drawing on the response of the Executive Director (ED) of a regional farm organization, or as the ED of a regional development organization put it, "validating and amplifying." As one participant reflected, "there's definitely an awareness, but not great action." Another participant who has been involved in the farming community and farming organizations for decades made a similar observation, noting that while it is indeed a 'food policy issue" it mostly flies under the radar.

In their explanations as to why their involvement was more limited, several participants made reference to the fact that they believed there were other organizations more focused on labor issues, or other organizations better suited to lead in these areas. Several exhibited a willingness to act if called upon, but were unwilling to take the initiative themselves. For instance, the coordinator of a regional food system roundtable remarked, "There are organizations that work on these issues. Not us, necessarily, but we are ready to collaborate if we are asked" (translated from French by authors). Another participant, who works with an association of community kitchens explained, "This, it's not something that we do, we leave it to others" (translated from French by authors). A representative of another regional food system roundtable noted that their activities were limited to sharing the work of others: "We know that there are labor problems, but we are not really associated with this, other than sharing opportunities" (translated from French by authors).

This lack of sustained engagement is despite wide recognition of the importance of addressing labor issues within food systems work at an individual level. Many interview participants were very sympathetic to the circumstances of food and farm workers, in particular those of migrant farm workers, and many expressed a desire for their organization to make this work a greater focus. One respondent from a provincial farm organization stated: "We know labor's the biggest issue." "No conversation on food would be complete without talking about agricultural… workers' rights" added Faris Ahmed, who has worked on food policy at both the domestic and international level for many years. While a few respondents appeared relatively comfortable with their organization's level of engagement, many acknowledged the necessity of deeper and more sustained work in this area.

Evelyn Encalada from J4MW, one of the few organizations that works directly with migrant farmworkers, shared a sense of frustration in continually stalling at the point of awareness:

> But in this work, I've also been — sometimes I get frustrated with the fact that awareness almost seems like an endless, you know, activity or political project… I'm getting tired of shocking Canadians because this is not a shock for me. For me, it's something that I could be doing until I die, but it doesn't always mean that awareness leads to, you know, political change that way that we want it to. And so what I really feel in my work right now that what I'm doing, or what [their organization] has to get into as well, is figuring out, you know, what's beyond raising awareness.

This challenge of moving beyond awareness raising is one that is well-reflected in the literature. For instance, Myers and Sbicca (2015) have discussed the reluctance of the alternative food movement to move beyond issues such as sustainability and supporting small scale farmers, and actually confront the corporate agrifood system that continues to dominate the food system.

4.3 Understandings of food system labor

Beyond indicating whether, or to what degree, their organization actively worked on labor issues, the interview responses offered insight into how labor is conceptualized by food system CSOs. For instance, not all respondents spoke about labor in the same ways, suggesting there are different interpretations of labor and labor issues within the context of food systems governance work, and food systems work more broadly. This varied interpretation of labor contributed to a diversity of issues being identified by respondents as labor issues. Notably, most understood the question to be in reference to farm workers, as opposed to the myriad of other forms of labor involved in food systems work. A few spoke of labor in terms of volunteer labor, while others spoke of the labor of farmers. For example, in their responses to whether they worked on labor issues, one respondent highlighted the fact that their organization relies heavily on volunteer

labor, and another referenced the prevalence of volunteer labor within food system CSOs specifically. Multiple respondents interpreted the question to be in reference to farmers, not necessarily farm or food workers. This then generated examples such as efforts to ensure farmers received fair value for their products and their labor, wanting society to value farming as a profession, and the importance of farm renewal and supporting new entrants into agriculture. Additionally, one respondent spoke of unpaid internships and the evolving discourse surrounding the ethics of these positions within the food movement and the farming community.

Notably, several respondents addressed the issue of labor from the perspective of employers. This meant that labor issues were understood in terms of a shortage of labor, or a lack of trained or skilled labor. For instance, some participants referenced their involvement in, or support for, initiatives promoting career paths within the agri-food sector, such as training opportunities or job fairs to attract prospective workers. One participant from a provincial commodity association described a workforce development project that had the goal of connecting industry's labor needs with the employment needs of marginalized communities. Another participant referenced a program they run which promotes jobs in the agri-food sector.

Amanda Sheedy, long-time food systems researcher and consultant made a valuable intervention emphasizing that labor holds an entirely different connotation within Northern Indigenous food systems, an area in which they were actively working. Labor, as it has been discussed within this paper, is primarily framed from a settler-dominated food systems lens. This participant described how, in their work, the discussion around labor is not about the working conditions of waged work, or the role of workers within food systems, but about what role, if any, waged labor should have in Northern Indigenous food systems. They provided the example of the debate over how or whether to compensate hunters who provide traditional food for community freezers. A second interviewee also spoke about communities in their territory discussing support for local hunters. While being mindful of the dangers of generalizing from two examples, this signals an entirely different understanding of labor issues within Northern and Indigenous food systems that is not captured within most contemporary discussions. The importance of addressing setter-Indigenous relations within food systems governance is one of the key questions of the research project from which this paper originates (Littlefield et al. 2024).

4.4 A tension in perspective?

Building on this tendency to view labor from the perspective of employers, several participants named a deeper tension at play within food systems work between seeing farmers as agents of change and victims of an unjust food system, and seeing farmers as business owners and employers, often the source and cause of grievances. While this tension was present implicitly in many responses, three participants named this challenge explicitly as part of their explanation for their organization's level of engagement on labor issues, or their desire to be more active. As Debbie Field, Coordinator of the Coalition for Healthy School Food, observed: "I think it's time for us to address it in a more systemic way, but it raises, of course, the question of the price of food. And [it's] very complicated as we build alliances with the farm organizations because of all their issues about migrant farmers." Katie German, then Director of Advocacy and Programs at FoodShare, noted they received "pushback" from some farmers for their decision to highlight the challenges facing migrant farm workers in one of their large annual education events. Another participant referenced this same event, explaining that someone from a growers association was supposed to participate and speak, but changed their mind, saying "we are not prepared to withstand [organization]'s critique of migrant workers." Finally, Gisele Yasmeen, former Executive Director of Food Secure Canada, noted that they try to amplify labor voices and issues as much as possible, but acknowledged the complexities of doing so within the context of food systems and small businesses: "labor issues are a little complex in there."

4.5 Discursive openings to build food and farm worker solidarity

In their responses, several participants offered suggestions for how levels of engagement might be improved, and how some existing barriers might be addressed. We have conceptualized these suggestions as a series of discursive openings, shifts in how food systems are talked about and understood, both within food system CSOs, but perhaps more importantly, within the general public. In particular, participants spoke of new ways to talk about or frame the issue that might build a stronger sense of solidarity between workers and farmers.

Multiple respondents believed the increased public awareness of the conditions of migrant workers brought on by the pandemic had the potential to galvanize a more active involvement by food system CSOs. The framing of food and farm workers as essential, along with the increased concerns of the negative consequences of long food chains were seen as strategic openings. Faris Ahmed reflected that the pandemic pushed the discussion on food labor "over the top": "when it started to become connected with health workers and COVID … They were never called essential before and now, when you say central workers, people say yeah yeah I get it, I understand, bus drivers, people who picked our food, people who worked in slaughterhouses, etc. So yeah, it's really broken through because of COVID." Another respondent echoed this perspective, believing that discussions about migrant workers were really elevated during the pandemic, noting they "really came into being right around COVID because that's really what sort of shone a light on migrant work. Certainly, they were always there, but for many of us it became more of an issue."

In some cases, this discursive opening led to concrete actions. One participant described the creation of a provincial alliance of three food and farm organizations during the pandemic, and explained that the impetus for collaboration was their joint advocacy against the travel restrictions facing migrant farm workers. The participant noted that these were groups that would not typically agree on most things, but they found common ground on this issue. Evelyn Encalada spoke of "new relationships and networks of support" that developed in response to the pandemic. However, not everyone was optimistic about the long term impact of this opening: Cecilia Rocha, a food system researcher involved in policy advocacy at the international level cautioned: "I'm concerned this idea of 'going back to normal' is so strong that people are missing this opportunity of building a new normal, but it should be an opportunity for a lot of changes at all levels of the food system. Even though it is an opportunity at the same time, I see the push to 'going back' being stronger than the building, or building something new."

A second discursive opening highlighted by participants was the connection between food insecurity and labor, particularly the links between low income and food insecurity, as many food and farm workers are paid minimum wage. One participant referenced a grocery workers strike at Dominion stores (a subsidiary of Loblaws) in Newfoundland during the pandemic in 2020. Workers walked off the job after Dominion took away the $2 top-up many grocery workers had been receiving during the pandemic. However, after a grueling 12 weeks, the workers were unable to get that money back (CBC News, 2020). What was interesting is that participants from organizations focused on food security and food access did not identify this link, rather it was respondents from other food system CSOs or respondents speaking as individuals. Given that this discursive opening was not identified by those directly working on food security, this raises some questions as to its possible impact.

Finally, one participant suggested connecting farm and food worker issues with the farm income crisis to build solidarity between farm workers and farmers:

> "I think the big thing to recognize … is that if we want to work with farmers and owner operators and workers, recognizing that the farm labor crisis is an income crisis, and it's inseparable from the farm income crisis, [this is] I think, really key in terms of creating solidarity between farm operators and workers … I was surprised [by] the amount of farm workers who shared their awareness of the farm income crisis and vice versa, the amount of farm operators who recognize that wages and farm incomes for farm workers were horribly low was clear that there was a level of solidarity."

Several other participants implicitly referenced this discursive opening by highlighting the tension in advocating for living wages for farm workers when many farmers do not themselves earn a living wage. Mara Shaw, Executive Director of the National Farmers Union, remarked, "so many of our farmers cannot pay a living wage because food is so undervalued, right?" Another participant spoke of school food campaigns, and noted the importance of making connections between the need to properly compensate workers in the school food context, and the many issues facing migrant farm workers.

Though the struggle for a fair income and food insecurity are concerns shared by small-scale farmers and farm workers alike, this also presents a tension and potential challenge to working in solidarity. Given the structural restraints of the dominant capitalist food system, where small-scale farmers are struggling to receive a fair price for their products and make a living in the shadow of larger-scale corporate farms and corporate distributors and retailers, paying living wages to farm workers can directly impact their own income. As we discuss below, these discursive openings are just that, openings, an invitation to consider further action and structural change.

5 Discussion

5.1 Getting beyond "promoting and supporting"

In this next section we reflect on what we can learn from participants' responses in terms of the current state of engagement in food labor issues, as well as possibilities for deeper connections and a more active engagement on food and farm labor moving forward. Here, we incorporate the additional reflections shared in the two interviews conducted with scholars working on food labor, Anelyse Weiler and Susanna Klassen.

As the previous section notes, 26 % of participants indicated their organization engages to some degree with food labor issues, and nine of those (16 % overall) indicated more sustained or meaningful levels of engagement. These participants represent organizations predominantly at the provincial or national level (as opposed to the municipal or regional level), and a majority are farmer-led or agriculture-focused organizations.

At first glance this may seem like a reasonable level, given the myriad of issues bound-up in food systems. However, we argue that labor is an essential and determining component of food systems. If we are to take seriously the need for a food systems lens (which we believe we should, and an increasing number of food-based organizations have purported to do so), then labor and workers are an inextricable component of this, not an optional additional lens of analysis. Additionally, the fact that, as reported in the literature, labor continues to be underrepresented within food systems and food movement discussions and activities, further underscores the importance of directly engaging on this issue. While we are not arguing that every organization needs to address every food-related theme, we are arguing that food labor is one theme that all food organizations should address or engage with in some way.

In much of the discussion and examples of actions provided by participants, labor is recognized as an essential ingredient to the food system, yet workers themselves are not positioned as important actors or agents of change. For instance, one participant describes that in their work "we cannot change policy, we cannot improve food safety … we cannot do anything unless we have a skilled workforce that's there." This "skilled workforce" is required to enable other goals and activities, it is not treated as an issue in and of itself. This perspective glosses over the fact that, in the words of another participant from the farming sector: "we have made them into these horrible jobs."

There is a signaling toward the importance of food and farm labor within the responses of participants, yet it is not followed-up with organizational action or prioritization. In our interview with Anelyse, she made a similar comment in reflecting on the degree to which she has seen progress in how labor issues are acknowledged or taken-up by CSOs engaged in food systems work:

> I think the desire is there. I think there have been kind of one-off initiatives of solidarity. Like a willingness to sign a petition or to attend a film night, those kinds of things, which are important. Absolutely. I think when it comes to really pushing for political changes, there's still a long way to go there.

This pattern puts the onus on the small number of organizations who are prioritizing labor to do the legwork of reaching out and inviting collaboration. It assumes that these organizations have sufficient capacity to effectively engage in this work, and further perpetuates the assumption that labor is not central to food systems. Food labor is consistently seen as secondary, adjacent to the core work of CSOs engaged in food systems work.

As seen in the participant responses, the perceived tension between farmer and farm worker perspectives may in fact be limiting

and inhibit a more active engagement of food system CSOs in labor issues and prevent them from really prioritizing the perspectives of food and farm workers. Anelyse framed this dynamic as a form of "farmer centrism" and a pattern of "romanticizing entrepreneurialism" within food system spaces, which she suggested acts as a key barrier to building worker power and creating spaces where food and farm workers can participate as peers in food systems governance activities. As Susanna observes, the core of the issue is not identifying "good" or "bad" employers, it is shifting the conversation to a deeper, structural level. The changes that migrant farm workers and their allies are calling for are not "tweaks at the farm level"; they are looking for systemic change to immigration policy, most importantly, permanent status. Susanna suggests that this actually provides an opening, in that it shifts the conversation away from solely the individual farmer: "It takes the onus off. It takes the blame away a little bit from the individual and sort of takes the problem up a step and acknowledges that we all have a responsibility." This is not to suggest that navigating structural racism is an easy conversation, but perhaps it can create more constructive spaces of reflection and collective action.

5.2 From discursive openings to concrete collective action

The discursive openings raised by participants offer useful ways in which to reframe our conceptualization and discussions of labor within food systems. The third discursive opening, highlighting a shared struggle between workers and farmers, is particularly promising as it has the potential to address that paradox of farmers as change makers, and farmers as problematic employers. Rather than pitting farmers and food business owners against workers, these discursive openings might offer ways for food system CSOs to work alongside food and farm workers in their efforts to challenge and transform the food system. As a staff member of a farmers' organization noted, many farmers are hurt by the same structures that harm food and farm workers. The second two discursive openings in particular appear promising in building stronger relationships of solidarity with food and farm workers, as they position farm workers and farmers as allies in a common struggle. Klassen et al. (2022) acknowledge this possibility: "we can see processes of interstitial transformation at work in the social movement spaces convened by organizations like Organic BC, which are reinforcing links between migrant struggles and the alternative enterprises and labor relations that the organic movement seeks to foster" (p. 167).

While we find promise within the discursive openings, it is clear these shifts in discourse must go further to name and acknowledge the structural conflict inherent in food systems, which primarily operates within capitalist relations of production. In addition, they must also be accompanied by concrete action that positions food and farm work as central to the health and sustainability of food systems. In describing the state of current food systems governance, one participant argues "it's all tied to the interests of growers. It's all about the produce being more important than the people behind it — than the workers behind it." At its heart, this speaks to a broader question, of how and whether food system CSOs incorporate a critical analysis of systems and structures into their work, namely a critique of capitalism, colonialism[5] and white supremacy. Our decision to focus on questions of governance within this research is in part driven by a desire to create spaces for reflection on these critical issues, and map out possible avenues for action. Food system governance initiatives create the space in which different food systems actors can work alongside one-another, to build relationships and collaborate on shared objectives. These discursive openings may help food system CSO actors appreciate the potential benefit and opportunity of participating and investing in food systems governance work as a means to build stronger engagement in labor issues.

Anelyse made an important connection between the decline of organized labor and the lack of prominence of labor issues within food systems work, suggesting that "the dissolution of organized labor in the non-profit and civil society sphere" has negatively impacted the role and place of labor and workers within food systems work:

> It's hard for people to think of labor struggles now as part of a collective struggle. And I think the way that that shows up in the food system is farm workers, for example, or gig food delivery workers … [they] are kind of seen as like special interest groups in a way, as opposed to seeing it as part of a collective struggle for conditions that benefit everyone … thinking about food system organizing… as groups of workers supporting other workers could go a long way in terms of transformative change. And that, really, seeing solidarity in those points of connection as shared sets of interests could be potentially quite transformative.

The erosion of organized labor across the CSO landscape has left food system CSOs with few common points of reference to see labor struggles as inherently their struggle too. Rebuilding the collective organizing capacity within food system CSOs would facilitate the shift from awareness to concrete action, and recognizing that we are all workers could encourage a sense of shared, collective struggle among all workers in the food system.

Engaging in governance processes can in and of itself be an organizing tool. Evelyn highlights this when she discusses advocating for status for all as the key policy change needed to support migrant farm workers:

> It's an organizing tool. It's a way to also discuss who is disposable, and why, and how racialized that is, and how coercive that is among people that are so important and essential. We know that now more Canadians use that terminology when thinking about migrant workers, but if they're so essential, why are they still able to be deported and discarded by the Canadian state?

Ultimately, Anelyse argues that in order to get beyond simple awareness raising, we need to stop centering morally-compelling narratives as the way to get people to act: "I do not think that guilt

5 Here we are invoking colonialism both in terms of the settler colonial state that is Canada, as well as colonialism in a more global sense, including subsequent waves of neo-colonialism and imperialism that have created the underlying conditions that spur migrants to seek employment in Canada through these temporary worker programs.

alone is enough to build a kind of political will to realize real change." Instead, we should explicitly organize events and activities that are premised on engaging in a particular collective action, even small ones. This can create a "joint experience" of what solidarity feels like.

In reflecting on the literature and our interviews, we are left with a sense that there are promising openings, yet much work is still needed to make good on those possibilities. As Susanna emphasized, labor has been "so absent from even just conceptualizing food systems that there's just such a long way to go in terms of what the landscape is." Similarly, Anelyse acknowledged there has been a "marked change" in the degree to which labor issues are acknowledged within food system or food movement spaces, but there is still a lot of work left to do, particularly around "skill building around collective organizing." Rather than seeking to add labor to the list of issues taken-up by food systems CSOs, a more fundamental transformation is required in how food system CSOs view and understand food systems, and how they conceptualize and implement theories of change. The fact that the overwhelming majority of respondents spoke to labor in reference to farm workers is indicative of this need to adapt a more holistic and integrated understanding of food systems, to make visible the full scope of labor within food provisioning activities and relationships, and the various systems and structures that shape the conditions of work.

Susanna was optimistic about future possibilities. In her interviews with organic farmers, the overwhelming majority were in favor of granting status to migrant farm workers when asked (See also Klassen et al., 2022). The challenge is creating the conditions for the political organizing necessary to make it a reality. Paralleling the observations of Anelyse, for Susanna, the path forward is one of collective action and harnessing collective power to put ideals into action.

6 Conclusion

This paper has illustrated that there exists widespread awareness of the challenges facing food and farm workers, and a desire to engage in a more sustained fashion, yet many food system CSOs have not yet found the tools or pathways to do so on an organizational level. For some organizations, this may, in part, be due to different ways of understanding and naming labor within food systems, and a hesitancy to adopt a more critical lens of farmers and food entrepreneurs. Several discursive openings were identified that may help to build a stronger sense of solidarity and commonality between food and farm workers and other food systems actors, particularly farmers. However, real progress to address the injustices facing food and farm workers will require more than individual awareness and sympathy. Building the collective organizing capacity of food system CSOs, as well as organizational literacy around the structures of oppression that shape and are shaped by food systems are two important considerations for organizations interested in moving this work forward.

Regardless of the level of attention received at present, food and farm workers play essential roles across the food system and are thus central to any conceptualization of, and experimentation in, more collaborative and participatory food systems governance. Evelyn, drawing on her learnings from the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, notes that "movements are built out of relationships." An important question to consider moving forward is how to create the conditions in which food system CSOs can build meaningful relationships with food and farm workers and the organizations that support and represent them, in ways that do not further burden these organizations and do not tokenize their perspectives and experiences. From our interviews we can see examples of these emerging, where CSOs are shifting from awareness to collective action, and taking steps to build relationships that position food and farm workers as valued actors within food systems. Future research exploring those instances of deeper, more sustained examples of engagement and collaboration would offer a valuable contribution to the literature in this area.

While we do not offer precise solutions or tangible next steps, the insights drawn from this research help orient us toward possible futures in which food and farm workers are treated with respect and dignity, and are valued partners in building more just and equitable food systems. The discursive openings offer an opportunity to leverage the heightened awareness of food and farm workers during the pandemic into concrete collective action. Ultimately, both discursive and material shifts are required to ensure that food system CSOs do not remain on the sidelines of food labor struggles.

There are notable references to the unique context presented by the COVID 19 pandemic within the responses of participants. As the interviews took place during the pandemic, this is not surprising. In some cases, the crises and challenges posed by the pandemic also created new possibilities and partnerships, as highlighted within the first discursive opening described in the previous section. At the same time, the pandemic will no doubt have long lasting impacts on the social fabric of communities and civil society organizations. An important question of future research will be whether these pandemic openings translate into longer-lasting collaborations or a change in focus areas among food system CSOs.

As mentioned in the introduction, this research stems from a larger project exploring more inclusive and participatory approaches to food systems governance. While food systems governance was a key element of the framing going into the interviews, many of the interview participants did not necessarily use this framing in their responses, speaking instead to the broader set of food systems or food movement experiences and activities. Nonetheless, we see great potential in exploring ways in which governance spaces and processes can be a vehicle for stronger links between food and labor, as questions of power and positionality are more easily rendered visible and explicit within processes of deliberation and decision-making. We would characterize the connections between food systems governance and labor as still in emergence, something we hope to further cultivate through this project.

Building more equitable and participatory governance spaces and initiatives that center the voices and perspectives of food labor, alongside other stakeholders and rights-holders, is one path through which to rebuild the collective organizing capacity of food system CSOs and build more just and equitable food systems for all capable of meeting the next crisis and beyond.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because only those listed on the Ethics Review have access to the raw data. The dataset is not currently publicly available, but the research team is exploring options to have the recordings available through a publicly-accessible online repository (for those participants who consented). Requests to access the datasets should be directed to awilson@ustpaul.ca.

Ethics statement

This study involving humans was approved by Lakehead University Research Ethics Board. The study was conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

AW: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. KT: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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