

When It Comes to Hunger The Worst is Yet to Come

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The food system in the U.S. is holding together in the early weeks of the COVID Crisis - aside from the price spikes that come with panic buying, the supply chain of commodity crops looks fairly solid. But an overabundance of commodity crops doesn't solve our country's hunger problems. And doubling down on this flawed system won't just fail to fix hunger - it'll spawn new disease.

US Farmers Cover Their Production Costs
America's robust production of corn, wheat, soy and meat comes at a financial, social and ecological cost. Much of that cost was shouldered by farmers themselves. Before COVID, farmers faced debt levels comparable to the 1980 farm crisis. In Nebraska, for instance, the average farm debt was \$1.3 million in 2017. What this leverage paid for was a food system filled with expensive machinery, crops and animals engineered for productive efficiency.

Monocultures Eliminate Diversity
Look to fields or factory farms, and what you'll find are concentrations of genetic uniformity. These monocultures eliminate natural diversity and vigor. They are terrific incubators of profit and of disease; output has never been higher, and modern zoonotic diseases, from hepatitis E to methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA), have their origins in our food system. By shunning nature's tendency for interdependent diversity, we have gone all-in for economic profit



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based on millions of acres of a few crops grown to feed millions of animals confined indoors, and we are asking for the next transfer of disease from animals to humans.

Farms are Petri Dishes for Disease
In addition to creating farms that are Petri dishes for disease, the modern food system needs a supply chain dependent on systematic exploitation. Farm workers are exposed to horrific conditions without basic rights to organize or any means of someday owning their own land. Those farm workers are right now at high risk of exposure to novel coronavirus, with many living in the kinds of crowded and unsanitary conditions ripe for contagion.

Hunger Will Deepen in America
It is certain that with job losses and crashing incomes, hunger will deepen in America this year. Recall that

in 2007, before the Last Great Recession and amid robust harvests, 36 million Americans were food insecure, according to USDA. We've not seen a number that low ever since that nadir of American hunger that happened in 2011, with 50 million food-insecure people, three years after the crash. Food supply chains were producing well - but too many people skipped meals because they couldn't afford them. A multi-trillion dollar bailout failed to get us back to where we started: 37 million Americans were food insecure in 2018.

Bailouts Update
Bailouts from the last Great Recession certainly didn't decrease food insecurity. They didn't even begin to stem the loss of small farms. Most farmers and ranchers in the U.S. would agree that there is currently a crisis in agriculture. The current agricultural model values only the tonnage from the soil, not the meals in bellies. Production is king; the nutritional quality, human health, rural communities, food security and the environment are paupers.

If the stimulus last time failed to return us to merely outrageous levels of hunger in this country, perhaps it's time for a package that doesn't compound the errors of our food, fuel, financial and social systems. Rather than double down on an industrial system that will, inevitably, spawn new disease and compound it with hunger and climate change, we can and should do better. *Continue on pg. 15*

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Farm Justice Equals Fair Price
The solution to low farm prices is farm justice - farmers getting paid a fair price for producing an ethical product. Just as during the Great Depression of the 1930s, we need neither subsidy payments nor bailouts, but a supply-management system geared toward fair farm prices and a stable, local food supply.

Justice for Food-Chain Workers
Seven out of 10 of the worst-paying jobs in America are in the food system. We can fix that by recognizing workers' right to organize, providing food-chain workers with hazard pay that they deserve, and securing the rights of migrant and permanent resident workers and their families to health care, food and shelter with prejudicing their pathways to future citizenship

This current crisis, even in its early stages, has made one thing very clear: the economic stimulus aims to support every part of our flawed economy, our health care system, our energy sector, and our food system. It is the status quo. At this point, transitioning to a more just and ethical society is not part of the plan, either as a short-term means to get past the crisis or to retool daily life into a more resilient society.

The food system is part of the fabric of modern capitalism. It can only be fixed systematically, addressing everything from the need for sustainable energy, transport and housing, to a just transition in the food system away from carbon-intensive monoculture of two crops, corn and soy, to a more sustainable, biodiverse, and agroecological farm systems.

Good News - The Green Stimulus
The good news is that the problems in the food system that have long been with us, as well as, those we see developing due to COVID-19, can be addressed through a Green Stimulus, one that recognizes the rights of all families to a just, healthy food system. The food system is part of the fabric of modern capitalism. It can only be fixed systematically, addressing everything from the need for sustainable energy, transport and housing, to a just transition in the food system away from carbon-intensive monoculture of two crops, corn and soy, to a more sus-

tainable, biodiverse, and agroecological farm systems. These systems are built on the recognition that there is an interdependence between the environment, food producers, and society in general. None of these can be exploited for the benefit of a few, or we can only expect a repeating loop of failure - until we decide to get it right.

Future Farming
The foundations of future farming prosperity also depend on a fair reckoning of past crimes and injustices through a commitment to reparations for black farmers and indigenous communities. One such policy is to stand up for a federally backed land trust to buy land from retiring farmer that would be then sold interest-free to farmers of color. An economy of care for one another and repair for the planet, is the opportunity that the pandemic presents. As a new phase of stimulus negotiation looms, a reasonable analysis of past failures ought to prompt a food system that is more just, robust, and equitable for everyone.