

Local Rules for Local Food

By Jim Tarbell

Small farmers have long formed the backbone of popular democracy. The Diggers displayed this fact 350 years ago during the English Civil War when they planted vegetables on privatized commons declaring to the agribusiness elites of their day that “we are resolved to be cheated no longer, nor be held under the slavish fear of you no longer, seing [*sic*] the Earth was made for us.”

Small farmers in Western Massachusetts began the American Revolution by throwing the British authorities out of their towns, months before Lexington and Concord. Then these same farmers rose up as Shay's Rebellion when monied interests usurped the American Revolution. They instituted a long debate in American politics — who decides, an elite aristocracy or the common people?

Yeoman farmers spread American democracy across the continent over the next century. Then, after the Civil War, when the robber barons of the corporate railroad and industrial trusts used their money to commandeer American economics and politics, small farmers rose up in protest again.

Using a series of institutions beginning with the Grange and moving on to the Farmers' Alliances and finally the People's Party, farmers coalesced into the Populist Movement. Forming the largest organized stance against money power in American history, they instituted regulations to countermand the power of the railroad corporations. Then, in an attempt to redesign the oppressive financial system of the New York Banks and their middlemen, Populists suggested a whole new currency system based on the value of a farmer's crops. They elected governors and congressmen, and their 1892 Presidential candidate received over a million votes.

As Populist power threatened to instill a democracy in America that would look after the common good rather than corporate profits, Wall Street bankers and their industrial allies literally bought our democracy. Led by Rockefeller's friend and Wall Street speculator Mark Hanna, who inaugurated big corporate money in politics by collecting \$3.5 million from his Wall Street cohorts, monied interests outspent their popular competition 5 to 1 in the presidential election of 1896. That effort instituted a campaign finance model that still dominates our politics today.

Over the last hundred

years small farming communities have been destroyed by this political system. They have seen predatory agribusiness co-opt the regulatory system and use it to put small farmers out of business.

Once again, however, small farmers are fighting back. This issue of Justice Rising tells their story. It is based on the experiences of courageous small farmers in Maine whose survival is threatened by corporate-driven regulations. In response to this threat, these farmers developed the Local Food and Community Self-Governance Ordinance (see pages 18-19) that rejects corporate use of the regulatory system as a mechanism to put small farmers out of business. They eschew the corporate-controlled regulatory system and instead promote a system that depends upon the farmer/customer relationship.

Their enthusiasm and creative approach to subverting corporate power caught the attention of the global food sovereignty movement and globally-known activists like Raj Patel and farmer Joel Salatin rallied behind their effort. Their wisdom as well as that of engaged academics, allied legislators and the inspiring farmers of Maine all contribute to making this a *Justice Rising* you will want to read.

They highlight the ethos and rationale behind this new food movement, which aims to: regain democratic participation and “voice” in our political system; promote the survival of small-scale farming; institute scale-appropriate rules around food production; build community resilience; strengthen local economies; and expand personal freedom of choice about food.

Heather Retberg and Bonnie Preston spent hundreds of hours putting this issue together. We thank them for their spectacular effort.

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Then & Now

Maine Ag Commissioner Walt Whitcomb says the current food sovereignty activists remind him of earlier radical farmers' movements, saying, “I think the difference now is that it's consumers and farmers fighting together to benefit consumers and farmers.... Consumers want better local food and farmers want enough income to survive. The whole idea of eliminating the middle man, that's kind of age-old.”



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