

# *Introduction*

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CORPORATE POWER. Taming its relentless influence in our political systems, markets, and communities has been described as the “key political issue of our age.”<sup>1</sup> Corporate power has grown rapidly over the last seventy years, first sparked by market deregulation and privatization in the decades following World War II, and then accelerating with President Ronald Reagan’s “trickle-down” economics in the 1980s.<sup>2</sup> Today, corporations wield unbalanced power over our democracy, winning the right to operate as legal persons,<sup>3</sup> spend enormous amounts of money on political campaigns to curry the favor of politicians,<sup>4</sup> and use revolving doors in which corporate leaders influence or even control the very agencies that are intended to regulate them.

The food system is no exception to the advance of corporate power. In the last seventy years, as we have witnessed the industrialization and globalization of the food system, agrofood corporations have progressively expanded their reach and solidified their influence. Today nearly every food sector from farm gate to dinner plate is dominated by a handful of corporations that have restructured food production, reshaped markets, and radically altered what we eat.<sup>5</sup>

Like other multinational corporations in the United States, agrofood firms enjoy the protected constitutional rights of legal persons: they can sue and be sued, enter into contracts, make donations to political action committees, and even exercise some of the same religious freedoms that are granted to individuals. These rights and freedoms have allowed food corporations to protect their own interests and those of their shareholders over public goods, such as protecting workers and the environment. Indeed, food firms have a fiduciary *responsibility* to benefit their shareholders first.

In decades past, a clear vision of the corporate takeover of our food system was sometimes obscured by efforts to hold corporate power in check, through the enforcement of antitrust legislation, labor laws, environmental regulation, and campaign finance rules. Claiming to be “good corporate citizens,” food firms also trumpeted their contributions to economic growth and “corporate social responsibility.” McDonald’s touted its recycled packaging, Starbucks its green-friendly cups, and Monsanto its climate-smart agriculture. Debates among scholars and activist groups focused on whether such efforts represented meaningful reform or simply proverbial lipstick-on-a-pig rebranding.

Now, however, such debates appear pointless, even naive. Pro-corporate tax giveaways have made it abundantly transparent not only that corporate elites hold the reins of economic and political power in the US and globally, but also that they do so *unapologetically*. While the current US political administration epitomizes unapologetic corporate elitism, the political and economic power grab of the Trump administration represents only the latest of a longstanding series of onslaughts to our democracy and our food system that have been documented by analysts for decades. Indeed, when David Korten first published the seminal contribution *When Corporations Rule the World* in 1995, he was referencing a longstanding series of economic trends that had been set in motion by the Bretton Woods institutions fifty years earlier.

As scholars and activists have extensively documented, corporate control and consolidation in the agrofood system is the norm, not the exception.<sup>6</sup> How have corporations typically consolidated their power in the US agrofood system? Most scholarly analyses of corporate concentration and power have examined discrete sectors to attempt to answer that question. For example, William Heffernan and Mary Hendrickson’s foundational studies revealed how the concentration and vertical integration in the poultry, hog, and beef sectors completely transformed the meat industry, gradually eroding the decision-making power and freedoms of individual farmers.<sup>7</sup> More recently, our coauthors in this book, Wenonah Hauter and Phil Howard, have expanded upon these analyses of agriculture and food systems consolidation into extensive studies of many components of the agrofood supply chain—from seeds to grocery retailers to soda to beer to wine to the organic sector to dairy consolidation and more.<sup>8</sup> One important contribution these studies have made is demonstrating the ways in which concentration and vertical integration create conditions that allow corporate power structures

to thrive. If a corporation controls an entire supply chain, it effectively creates a powerful monopoly or an oligopoly.

New trends in financial speculation, as well as an unprecedented number of corporate mergers and acquisitions, mean that food corporations are also increasingly entangled with one another, and even across food sectors. The boundaries between, say, Smithfield Foods and Perdue, or between Tesco and Walmart, or between Monsanto and Syngenta and Bayer, are increasingly blurry. While such firms may ostensibly compete with one another, their control of markets through the horizontal and vertical integration of their respective supply chains fosters oligopolies in which actual competition is extremely limited.

The result is that a mere ten companies now control the products on our grocery store shelves.<sup>9</sup> Three firms control nearly two-thirds of the market share of seeds.<sup>10</sup> Four corporations control over 60 percent of all chicken consumed in the US, dictating the terms of production for hundreds of contract poultry producers who can no longer compete with larger firms.<sup>11</sup> Four packing firms control over 70 percent of the pork market, while the top four beef-packing firms control roughly 85 percent of the market.<sup>12</sup> Ten corporations control over 50 percent of the fertilizer market globally.<sup>13</sup> Four companies control around 80 percent of cereal sales, even though nearly 250 varieties can be found in a typical cereal aisle.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the illusion of consumer choice is carefully crafted through nearly limitless product offerings. From restaurants to soybean fields, from lettuce warehouses to factory hog farms, and from seed companies to supermarkets, corporate power increasingly determines what happens throughout our food system.

Members of the corporate elite often make their decisions from arm's length. Most leaders of food corporations, for example, do not trudge through muddy cow pastures, but those investors today are nevertheless catalyzing a blizzard of rural land reorganization through new forms of farmland speculation. Leaders of the National Restaurant Association do not wait tables for a living, but they nevertheless benefited when the Trump administration in fall 2017 declared tips the property of restaurant owners, not workers. Policymakers who decided that certain cancer-causing pesticides are legal and safe—after being lobbied by the manufacturers of those same pesticides—do not apply those chemicals to vegetable crops with backpack sprayers. And unlike the farmworkers of Earlimart, California (whom Jill Harrison describes in this book), elites typically live safely distant from pesticide drift. Such decision-making dominance in the food system is an

exercise in *sovereignty*—one that has been methodically wrested from farm-workers, wait staff, and eaters.

To quell any resistance to this system, corporate messaging pervades nearly all media, as companies work to create loyal consumer acolytes. Most people in America are lulled into acquiescence through exposure to over 350 advertisements and approximately five thousand corporate messages daily.<sup>15</sup> Sloganeering—“Have it your way,” “Eat fresh,” “Lovin’ it!”—keeps us primed to consume. Objections to this messaging are met with reminders of what Jack Kloppenburg, an organizer for the Open Source Seed Initiative, has called the “planetary patriotism” of agribusiness firms: promises of grand solutions to global crises ranging from climate change to hunger.<sup>16</sup>

This process—one in which corporations now have widespread control over most aspects of human sustenance—has been presented as natural, desirable, and inevitable. We contend that it is not.

In this book, we present a vision for disrupting corporate power through food democracy—a vision in which people affected by decisions made about their food system have voice, power, and agency to collectively influence those decisions. This vision is not new. We share it with countless advocates for food system change: labor organizers battling for workplace equity, anti-hunger advocates disrupting corporate charity, farmers protesting petrochemical regimes, public plant breeders combatting germplasm privatization, and nearly two hundred million smallholder peasants worldwide who are fighting for food sovereignty.

We argue that achieving a democratic food system—one characterized by justice and sovereignty for producers, workers, and consumers—is not a trickle-down proposition. Rather, it fomented up. Impolitely. It is nothing short of a rebellion.

We contend that such a rebellion involves interrogating three prevailing narratives often perpetuated about corporate power in the agrofood system. The first is what we term the “inevitability” narrative. In this familiar canard, corporations figure prominently as modern-day economic Goliaths—giants that march throughout the globe, crushing all who stand in their path. While it is true that many corporate monoliths now dominate, to assume the *inevitability* of that power overlooks history. It fails to account for the hundreds of ways that social movements have organized to powerfully combat myriad injustices—from slavery to structural racism and sexism to environmental destruction to workplace abuses. It also treats corporations like forces of nature to which immutable laws of physics apply. But as Jane Collins has

incisively reminded us, there is nothing natural or inevitable about globalized corporate economic power, and viewing it “as an abstract force lets real actors off the hook. Globalization is not a ghost, and it is not like gravity. It is made up of decisions and actions, struggles and negotiations carried out in a large number of specific places where people live and work.”<sup>17</sup> This inevitability myth misleads through cynicism, ignoring the ways that the targeted organizing of social movements can achieve, and has achieved, social and environmental change.

The second prevailing food system narrative we interrogate with this book is the “vote with our fork” solution. This model for change suggests that corporate power can—and should—be addressed by simply opting out of the current morally bankrupt system. Eating differently. Scholars and activists have repeatedly offered impressively robust critiques of the inherent limitations of this approach, but this popular narrative is nevertheless remarkably persistent.<sup>18</sup> We see it in endorsements of the host of initiatives focused on producing and consuming locally sourced, healthy, and ecologically sustainable food, specifically when those endorsements fail to recognize the need for structural change. Celebrations of the “local food” or “good food” movement abound: in a spate of popular blogs, books, and articles; at farmers’ markets; in restaurants showcasing local foods; and on cooking shows. In the last twenty years, local food, organics, CSAs, and farmers’ markets have spread like wildfire, catalyzing enthusiastic popular support for an alternative food system. But while efforts to build alternatives are exciting and laudable, the cost of alternative foods remains out of reach for most Americans—including many of the workers who produce them. Many alternatives rely on a conscientious, well-heeled consumer culture. And in spite of enthusiasm for local, organic, and “good” food offerings, and the exciting growth of alternative food systems, thus far the impact of such alternatives remains relatively modest, with the market for alternative food still a small fraction of the overall food market in the United States. More importantly, those advocating for alternative food systems have little or no ability to regulate conventional food systems. In fact, conventional food system actors continue to wield so much power as to influence the legal definitions of concepts such as “organic” by lobbying standards-setting bodies such as the USDA. Also, in some cases—as we see, for example, with organic agriculture—alternatives can be frequently overtaken by the same corporate structures and systems they initially set out to oppose.<sup>19</sup> Absent meaningful structural change, well-intended alternatives can easily replicate wage inequities,

reproduce environmentally extractive farming practices, perpetuate racism and sexism, and create market oligopolies.

Importantly, vote-with-our-fork solutions can also too easily reinforce the idea that the only power people have to effect change in the food system is confined to *mere* consumption. This limiting narrative is one that many corporations will happily support. It reinforces what Korten in 1995 termed the “elitist ideology of individualism.” The more that people identify as mere consumers, rather than active, informed participants in society and policy, the more corporations can expand their reach. Indeed, through buyouts of organic and health food companies, corporations are already profiting from niche markets. But the collective power of people to rebel against the corporate status quo should not be reduced to buying organic arugula or cooking heirloom squash soup. Rather, balancing the scales of power between people and corporations will require a great deal more than shopping and eating differently. Achieving food justice will involve confronting powerful elite corporate actors who control our food system and demanding change through social movement organizing and political struggle.

The third prevailing narrative we interrogate with this book is the idea that the organizing and political struggle involved in attaining food justice can be confined to a “food movement.” We argue that the term “food movement” is often used easily and uncritically and has been too loosely conflated with shopping and eating differently. Moreover, we submit that building a social movement to combat corporate power in the food system will involve not simply changing prevailing food systems alone. Rather, it must involve diverse, intersectional alliances and coalitions with other groups that are also experiencing injustices and threats to their livelihoods by corporate power. In much the same way that we cannot reduce the food movement to changing what is on our individual plates, we also cannot confine a movement to challenge corporate dominance and achieve more democratic decision-making to food systems alone. We suggest that in this particular political moment, people engaged in changing the injustices of the food system must also ally and organize with social movement efforts to battle corporate power *outside* the “food movement.” These alliances necessarily involve centering the lived experiences of those who are most marginalized by corporate domination: Indigenous Peoples, persons of color, and people with limited financial means, to name only a few.

Many of these efforts have been successful and inspiring. From groups such as Occupy, to those engaged in Fight for \$15, to coalitions fighting

against the American Legislative and Exchange Council (ALEC), to critical battles for racial justice like Black Lives Matter and gender equity through #MeToo, people are standing up to corporations and the powerful elite who control them, and they are achieving victories. While not advocating the elimination of corporations, these groups have worked to reduce undue and unregulated corporate influence over our democracy and our lives in order to achieve greater collective prosperity. The successes described by the authors of this book aim to inspire advocates to work for more structural change *within* the food system, but in ways that also forge productive alliances with those outside of it.

With the examples they share in each “part,” or section, of *Bite Back*, the authors propose a counternarrative to the inevitability and vote-with-your-fork narratives, and we aim to add to the many early and incisive analyses of corporate power by presenting this counternarrative in detail. The case studies demonstrate success in *biting back*—winning policy or programmatic changes that balance the outsized influence of food corporations over our democracy. They also interrogate the notion that food systems organizers can attain policy or campaign victories without alliances that intersect with other efforts to impede corporate power. The descriptive accounts of each victory provide critical organizing tools for advocates. These successes provide a persuasive argument that the struggle against corporate power is not only possible—it has been successful. The case studies provided by the authors herein demonstrate how people who organize *can*, *have*, and *will* reduce corporate control over our democracy and our food system to increase equity, sovereignty, and sustainability.

As we highlight these examples, we endeavor to make several contributions with this book. First, each part of the book unites scholars and activists in a format that invites productive, collaborative conversations between the two groups. We seek to highlight both the voices of those who study and analyze the food system and the voices of those directly engaged in changing it. Importantly, we also recognize that the categories of “scholar” and “activist” are not tidy, narrow identities. Instead, we see exciting potential for breaking down often-entrenched boundaries between academics and communities through new conversations in which scholars also advocate for change and advocacy groups engage in robust research and the dissemination of knowledge. In this book, we celebrate the fact that the authors do not speak with a single, uniform voice. Rather, each of the nearly two dozen contributors to this book offers a rare and irreplaceable perspective on food



systems, reflecting the diverse set of skills, abilities, insights, and commitments that will be necessary to achieve food democracy.

Second, this book is structured topically to highlight particular agrofood sectors where corporate influence is evident and victories have been achieved. With the topical arrangement of the book—seeds, pesticides, extraction, labor, health, hunger, and trade—we intend to show a range of strategies for combatting corporate power throughout food systems. While this case-study approach presents an overview of several key food system sectors, the subjects highlighted herein are not intended to be comprehensive. For example, some of our topics represent timely, specific challenges to food and farming—such as the rapid trends in seed industry consolidation or the swift advance of unconventional natural gas drilling (a.k.a fracking) into rural communities in nearly half of the states in the US. Other topics represent broad, ongoing challenges to food justice—such as the corporate influence in international trade and anti-hunger efforts. We have prioritized sharing cases for which there are key successes in combatting corporate power while also recognizing there is no standardized prescription for success. Social movement organizing is not a one-size-fits-all proposition. Moreover, though we highlight some food sectors where significant gains or successes have been achieved in combatting corporate power and influence, we recognize that there are many food system sectors in which successes are forthcoming, or for which the fight against corporate domination is particularly challenging and entrenched and will involve sustained efforts or new approaches.

Finally, each part of the book is structured in a unique call-and-response style. The first chapter in each part is devoted to presenting problems and injustices linked to corporate power in a particular part of the food system: wage inequities, environmental destruction, and corporate bullying, to name a few. The authors of these chapters detail ways that corporations have influenced the very boards and bodies intended to regulate them. They describe new forms of corporate collusion and consolidation resulting from now-widespread takeovers and rebranding, as well as the consequent illusion of choice and competition perpetuated by food firms. But the story does not end there.

The second chapter in each part highlights a particular story of success—how organizers, activists, and community members have combatted injustices—and describes strategies that have been successful. Within these case studies there are also lessons that show how people can effectively oppose this corporate power, even without the financial clout and privileges enjoyed



by powerful corporate elites. The authors of these chapters share successful stories of resistance and strategies that people in coalitions have employed to organize together and win.

So, for example, in the first of the two chapters focusing on seeds, Phil Howard details how agribusiness firms have increasingly and methodically consolidated the seed sector through buyouts and takeovers, resulting in the mere appearance of choice for farmers seeking diverse seed inputs. In the second chapter on seeds, Kiki Hubbard of the Organic Seed Alliance describes how alliances supporting organic seed and public plant breeding are working to combat the trend of corporate privatization of genetic resources.

In the next section of the book, on pesticide drift, Jill Harrison describes the way that corporations control the decisions about what, how, and where pesticides will be applied to our food crops, such that they frequently drift into nearby communities, sickening residents. Emily Marquez, Marcia Ishii-Eiteman, and Kristin Schafer with the Pesticide Action Network then describe the organized citizen science work of those who document pesticide drift using the Drift Catcher air-monitoring device in an effort to hold corporations accountable for the way that these chemicals pollute vulnerable communities.

Next, Kathryn De Master and Stephanie Malin tell the story of Pennsylvania dairy farmers—one echoed in many agricultural communities today—who face a “devil’s bargain” between two corporate sectors, energy and agriculture, as the widespread march of unconventional natural gas extraction fuels a rapid transformation of rural landscapes and livelihoods. Wenonah Hauter and Seth Gladstone then describe their successful campaign to keep fracking companies out of New York State just across the border. They show how farmers and community organizers mobilized to effect political and regulatory change in spite of powerful opposition.

In the labor chapters, Joann Lo and Jose Oliva document worker exploitation in the food system, while Saru Jayaraman details how exploited workers are successfully pushing back against corporate domination by organizing for higher wages, benefits like paid sick days, and health and safety concessions on the job.

In the section on health, Kristine Madsen and Wendi Gosliner show how the industrial diet that corporations have created disregards the health of those who consume their products. Anna Lappé and Kelle Louaillier then show inspiring ways to combat the corporate diet, as they describe Corporate Accountability’s successful campaign against McDonald’s assault on America’s health, and in particular the “Happy Meal,” which targets children.

Next, Andy Fisher writes about the corporate production of hunger in America, showing how corporations through philanthropy have increasingly influenced anti-hunger organizations. Jim Araby then provides an inspiring example of how to bite back against corporate influence in anti-hunger work, describing the successful work of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union partnering with food advocacy and other community groups to achieve multiple statewide policy victories in California.

Finally, as Raj Patel and Maywa Montenegro de Wit detail in our concluding section, international trade agreements such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership reflect the enmeshed relationship between corporate power and global economic trade. Yet as small-scale farmer Ayumi Kinezuka and coauthor Montenegro de Wit show us, Japanese smallholder farmers—members of the increasingly powerful international food sovereignty movement—are mobilizing to resist corporate power's involvement in international trade.

It is notable that this final section is the only one describing challenges and organizing occurring outside of the United States. Of course, the growth in power and influence of multinational corporations is a global phenomenon that has resulted in the exploitation of people and the planet for corporate profit worldwide. However, this phenomenon is experienced differently around the world, and these differences are especially notable with regard to each nation's regulation of corporate activity. We focus mostly on the United States in this book not only because it is where we live and work, and where many agrofood corporations are headquartered, but also because the United States provides an extreme example of deregulation and corporate influence over democratic practice. Organizing to bite back against corporate power can be difficult everywhere, and is also growing increasingly difficult in the United States as corporations wield increasing power over electoral campaigns, the media, and public institutions. The examples provided here illustrate biting back against corporate power in the face of eroding democratic principles.

Not all of the authors in this book detail the same kinds of organizing campaigns. Some involve legislative policy advocacy. Others involve direct confrontation and focus on campaigns to change particular corporations' practices. Others show the importance of links to larger social movements, policy change, shifts in trade regimes, and efforts to transform entire agrofood sectors. But all reflect some form of social movement organizing practice as defined by a vast social movement literature: mobilizing a base of directly affected individuals with limited resources to engage in contentious

direct action (protest activity) targeted at those with power over their lives (in this case, corporations and the elected officials they control) for concrete improvements in the food system and in people's lives.<sup>20</sup> As the case studies in this book illuminate, subsequent steps toward agrofood system transformation will involve sustained, engaged, and targeted organizing efforts.

Historically we know that people create social movements to achieve transformational change through sustained, collective actions that target those in power. Effective social movements radically disrupt the status quo in our political systems, society, and economy. They often create coalitions with unlikely partners aligned in their dedication to intersecting values and priorities. People in social movements recognize that their power is collective and collaborative, not atomized. Social movements also *demand* change—and they *achieve* it.

What would organizing an effective social movement in food systems look like? If we revisit the Goliath analogy—inspired by the diverse campaigns described in this book—we imagine it will look like felling stones from countless slingshots. These stones may entail, for example, people organizing to increase antitrust regulation and then holding policymakers accountable for that enforcement through public pressure. This organizing could look like direct actions in front of corporations seeking to consolidate, or in front of meetings of regulatory bodies tasked with enforcing antitrust regulation in the moment of a proposed merger. It might look like large numbers of affected people—small producers, community members, workers, and others—engaging in direct actions against corporations that hurt people and the environment. These direct-action protest activities could occur in corporate boardrooms, at factory farms, and in the political spaces in which these corporations attempt to change regulations in their favor.

Ultimately, an organizing vision for food democracy would include a diverse coalition of affected peoples targeting corporate power collectively, with a unified set of demands. Each chapter of this book shows ways that some of this activity is already beginning to emerge and take shape. But much more sustained action is needed to bite back and rebel against the corporate status quo and to fight for equity, sustainability, and collective prosperity. As you read the stories presented here in *Bite Back*, we hope they will inspire you to join us in this effort.