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Coalition of Immokalee Workers: farmworker-led popular education and performance

Susan Haedicke

Theatre and Performance Studies, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

ABSTRACT

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), a Florida-based human rights organisation, has significantly improved working conditions for migrant farmworkers on large-scale produce farms in the United States, in part, through its adaptation of applied theatre strategies used in its worker-to-worker popular education programme. The farmworker-devised performances themselves are not the drivers of social change. Yet, these seemingly agit-prop skits (*teatro*) initiate a process of 'collective learning', politicisation, and activism that results in a Worker-driven Social Responsibility model that mobilises direct action and affects social change.

KEYWORDS

Migrant farmworkers;
Coalition of Immokalee
Workers; applied theatre;
worker-driven social
responsibility; Fair Food
Program

Food production processes, globally, raise concerns around balancing both increased crop/livestock yield with protection of the environment and low cost food with food justice all along the food chain. Unsustainable farming and exploitative labour practices occur in fields across the global North and South. In the twenty-first century, a leading voice for social justice in the American agricultural landscape is the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), a Florida-based human rights organisation that has improved working and living conditions for migrant farmworkers on large-scale produce farms from Florida to New Jersey and on dairy farms in Vermont (Estabrook 2018; Giagoni 2011; Marquis 2017; CIW website; 'One of the great human rights success stories', 2014). Through its direct action campaigns and effective protest art, CIW is eliminating abusive conditions, including lack of rest breaks or clean drinking water, wage theft, physical and sexual violence, and forced labour, experienced by migrant farmworkers as they harvest crops that feed the nation. CIW's human rights paradigm of Worker-driven Social Responsibility (WSR) is currently being adapted to other industries around the world. This brief article looks at only one aspect of this complex and multifaceted approach to protecting workers' rights in corporate supply chains: the adaptation of applied theatre strategies in its popular education programme that ensures that farmworkers understand their rights, provides them with leadership training, and encourages them to take control of the organisation of direct action campaigns and the accompanying protest art.¹ CIW's approach to human rights activism is worker-led, so popular education is a cornerstone. In 1993, Greg Asbed and Laura Germino joined with other activists to devise activities to engage

migrant farmworkers in Immokalee, Florida in improving their plight. They began offering Wednesday night entertainment, including skits (what they call *teatro*), films, music, community radio broadcasts, and street theatre lighted by car headlights, as a stimulus to initiate or 'animate' post-performance discussions about the issues. Inspired by the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire, the *teatro* and the ensuing 'animation' enable the farmworkers to understand how one's social reality is constructed and how that awareness can lead to political action to change the construction (Freire 1994, 98–101). Farmworkers Lucas and Ramiro Benitez became active participants in these early discussions, and they soon began animating the evening community conversations about how to improve the safety and just treatment of the workers. Others soon became animators guiding newcomers, and Worker-driven Social Responsibility (WSR) was born in Immokalee.

At one of the early Wednesday night animations, CIW members had a 'lightbulb moment' that enabled them to change their strategy and to affect large-scale social change. In the 1990s, CIW followed tactics of strikes and protests against growers used by other labour unions, particularly the UFW, but the agricultural landscape had radically altered in the years since the UFW began its labour organising in the 1960s. At an evening meeting in 2000, the farmworkers discussed an article published in *Packer* in which Taco Bell had bragged about 'negotiating' a lower price for tomatoes from their suppliers—the growers. One farmworker asked if Taco Bell could force prices down, could CIW pressure Taco Bell to force prices up. They realised that today it is not the individual growers, but rather the large grocery store and fast food chain corporations that 'negotiate' (or force) reduced prices from their suppliers (the growers) in the interest of low cost food. These reductions have an impact on the growers' income and, going down the food chain, on farmworkers' wages. As the farmworkers looked up the food chain, they could see that their poverty wages could only be addressed in dialogue with the corporate buyers, and that dialogue could be imposed on the large food chains and grocery stores since they had a brand to protect (Marquis 2017, 48–51; McMillen 2015; 'Modern Farmer article', 2015). CIW's realisation that the retailers were complicit in farm worker poverty initiated the national farmworker-led Campaign for Fair Food in 2001 and the subsequent Fair Food Program in 2011 that have transformed the industrial agriculture landscape on the East Coast of the United States. By educating farmworkers and consumers about abuse all along the food chain, the Fair Food Program has developed alliances between the farmworkers and the general public and has convinced fourteen (at the time of this writing) multi-billion dollar retailers— both large fast food chains, like Taco Bell, McDonald's, Subway, Chipotle, and Burger King, and huge supermarkets, including Whole Foods, Trader Joe's, Walmart, and Ahold (managing six grocery store chains generating a revenue in 2017 of more than \$43 billion) — to join the Fair Food Program and to end exploitation and abuse. Retailers who sign on to the programme commit to buying crops only from growers in good standing with the programme. In contrast, CIW exposes retailers who do not sign on with negative publicity about their support for exploitation, sexual abuse and even modern-day slavery in the protests the farmworkers bring to the streets and to social media.

Key to their success is the worker-to-worker popular education programme that uses the *teatro* form to expose exploitation and abuse experienced by the farmworkers and the lively 'animations' or discussions among the farmworkers that immediately follow. This *teatro*-animation model, resembling Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy and Augusto

Boal's forum theatre, relies on the formula: Consciousness + Commitment = Change. This formula identifies the three tools that still make up the core of CIW's pedagogical approach: consciousness through popular education and commitment through leadership training leading to change through direct action and protest art. Freire calls popular education a 'pedagogy of hope' enabling 'the popular classes to develop their language: not the authoritarian, sectarian gobbledygook of 'educators,' but their own language—which, emerging from and returning upon their reality, sketches out the conjectures, the designs, the anticipations of their new world' (1994, 39). This pedagogy of hope flourishes in CIW's education sessions, both on Wednesday nights and in the fields of farms in good standing with the Fair Food Program, as veteran farmworkers educate newly-arrived farmworkers about their rights, often through farmworker-devised performance and subsequent animation, and together they create a grassroots worker-led organisation where farmworkers sit at the negotiating table with corporate leaders to design their 'new world'.

The *teatro* form has been very successful in CIW's popular education process as it encourages participation and dialogue among newcomers. One *teatro*, *Door of Fear* ('Off Broadway ... in Immokalee' 2017) explores the fear to resist exploitation that many undocumented workers feel, a fear that paralyses them into inaction. Here the 'king' offers one worker after another a choice between execution for a minor crime or going through a closed door that hides what is on the other side. Each of the farmworkers, paralysed by fear, accepts death. After several farmworkers have been shot with rubber tipped arrows and fall clumsily to the ground, the executioner asks what is so dreadful on the other side of the door that all would choose death. The ruler indicates for her to open the door. When she finally gets up the courage to push open the door, she discovers a sunny and bountiful world—a world of social justice. When she asks the ruler why he did not just tell the workers what was on the other side or open the door for them, he replies that the farmworkers must do that for themselves for the 'new world' to be successfully theirs—the core theme of CIW's 'worker-driven social responsibility' strategy. In the discussion afterwards, a CIW staff animator asks the audience of farmworkers to think about times when they 'hesitated to do something out of fear. Because you did not know what would happen? And how many times have you overcome that fear, and taken a step into the unknown?' He continues, 'The people who cross over a frightening threshold do so because they have hope. Their hope overcomes their fear. They are carrying a dream. So they go forward, even when the door may appear frightening'. Discussion quickly brings up public protests. As one participant shared, 'I have never seen a single police officer block our way [on a march or boycott] — they help to keep us safe. We should not be afraid. No, we felt pride, instead of fear, and grateful for the support of hundreds of people, right there with us. We felt calm, safe, and joyful' ('Popular Theatre Education', 2017). Another farmworker's response reveals the Freirian efficacy of the process: 'At the beginning, you unlearn what you know about the world and start seeing it from a different perspective. You start examining the system' (Marquis 2017, 22).

Another *teatro* follows the life of Don José from a child in his home country following his family into the fields at a very young age to his death in the Florida tomato fields (Author's personal interview with CIW animator Nely Rodriguez, 5 October 2018). The *teatro's* goal is to raise awareness of the significant impact activism can have on the quality of the farmworker's life. After Don José enters the US as an undocumented migrant, he chooses to be as invisible as possible, to work hard and not to participate

in political action. A fellow worker invites him to a CIW meeting, but he responds, 'I am young. I am strong. I know how to handle this'. After decades in the fields, he dies broken and as poor as when he arrived. The *teatro* explores the idea that youth and strength will not protect a worker from exploitation, and the post-performance animation confirms that only Consciousness + Commitment = Change can. Only banding together and fighting for one's rights will transform the agribusiness landscape, not just for the current farmworkers, but for their children and grandchildren. This skit is often repeated at the start of each growing season for newcomers as a way to raise awareness of the issues on a systemic level and to offer ways to combat them.

The *teatro* and follow-up discussion in CIW's farmworker-to-farmworker popular education process enable the farmworkers to analyse and alter their working conditions. Rather than emphasising aesthetic polish, they aim to educate newly-arrived farmworkers of their rights and provide them with tools to change their working conditions. Popular education galvanises farmworkers to become leaders of large direct action campaigns where they use performative protest art to politicise consumers by exposing both abusive labour practices hidden from the consumers' view and the retailers' complicity in that abuse. That, in turn, shames retailers into taking responsibility for an ethical food chain. CIW's applied theatre practices in their popular education programme are, as Boal would say, 'not didactic in the old sense of the word and style, but pedagogic, in the sense of collective learning' (1995, 7). The performances themselves are not the drivers of social change. Yet, these seemingly agit-prop skits start a process of 'collective learning', politicisation, and activism that results in a Worker-driven Social Responsibility model that mobilises direct action and affects social change. CIW is sharing this model with exploited workers in multiple industries around the world and thus helping to establish networks fighting for social justice all along corporate supply chains.

Note

1. A chapter in my forthcoming book, *Performing Farmscapes*, analyses CIW's wide range of performative protest art, coupled with worker-led activism, to change the living and working conditions of migrant farmworkers.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Susan Haedicke is Associate Professor/Reader in the Department of Theatre and Performance Studies at University of Warwick. Her current research looks at performance and agriculture in several journal articles, a practice-as-research project on women in UK agriculture entitled *Who's Driving the Tractor*, and a forthcoming book, *Performing Farmscapes*.

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