

Class Politics and Agricultural Exceptionalism in California's Organic Agriculture Movement

CHRISTY GETZ, SANDY BROWN,
AND AIMEE SHRECK

Opposition within the organic agriculture community to a state regulatory initiative intended to close a loophole on the prohibition of stoop labor in California agriculture illuminates critical tensions around the "labor question" underpinning California's rapidly expanding organic sector. Through an exploration of the contradictions between the political economic realities of organic agriculture, the lived realities of farm workers, and the ideological framework of "agricultural exceptionalism" espoused in the organic community, this article challenges widely held assumptions that organic agriculture embodies a more socially sustainable form of production. We conclude that these tensions must be confronted if any progress is to be made toward the incorporation of social justice into definitions of agro-food system sustainability.

Keywords: *organic agriculture; farm labor; social sustainability; certification; governance*

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I. INTRODUCTION

When the state of California finally banned the short-handled hoe as an occupational hazard in 1975, it was perceived as an important victory for farm workers—one that would lead to significant improvement in working conditions. Using the tool, known to farm workers as *el cortito* (the short-one), required workers to remain in a stooped position for extended periods of time and it was banned because of the debilitating back injuries it caused. Utilized as a mechanism for controlling labor and increasing productivity, the hoe was also a symbol to many workers of the oppressive nature of stoop labor.¹ Despite the thirty-year ban, stoop labor persists on many California farms because of a loophole in the original legislation that continues to allow practices like hand weeding. As one farm worker testified, “hand weeding started the day ‘*el cortito*’ was banned.”²

In response, labor advocates led a decade-long charge to close the loophole, filing a petition with the state to restrict hand weeding, thinning, and hot capping, practices that involve workers moving along rows in a stooped position for extended periods of time to remove weeds, thin plants to ensure efficient spacing at maturity, or install covers on seedlings to protect them from cold weather.³ Their campaign ultimately led to the introduction of Senate Bill (SB) 534 in 2003. Given the political support behind it, the legislation would have likely been adopted had the organic sector not intervened in opposition, which likely led to the bill’s demise.⁴

The critical question is not so much why the organic industry would oppose such a regulation. Rather it is how and why the organic agriculture community was mobilized to mount such vociferous opposition to legislation from which it would have largely been *exempted*. In fact, the legislation’s stated intent was to “limit unnecessary hand weeding, thinning, and hot capping,” and included multiple exceptions where alternatives were unavailable.⁵ How, then, did the issue get framed as being one of “labor against the organic industry,” particularly when initial opposition had come from the Western Growers Association and the California Farm Bureau Federation, the state’s primary conventional agribusiness lobbying groups?⁶

In this article we argue that answers to these questions are to be found within the political economy of organic agriculture, the sociopolitical construction of the agricultural labor market, and the discursive and ideological framework of “agricultural exceptionalism” adopted by the organic agriculture movement and widely accepted in the popular imaginary. This framework of “agricultural exceptionalism” serves to elide structural differences between farmers and farm workers, to obscure the central role of California’s immigrant agricultural workforce to organic production, and to reinforce misconceptions that organic agriculture represents a “holistic” approach to sustainability, which would involve

social measures in addition to ecological practices. Characterizations of organic agriculture as more socially sustainable, or better for the people involved in the production and distribution of food, emanate from an agrarian ideology. However, this image is seriously weakened by the organic sector's historical patterns of ignoring labor questions and, more recently, its very public resistance to regulation of the social relations of agricultural production.⁷

In the case of SB 534, organic growers' interest in protecting themselves as *employers* from potential regulatory burdens led them to adopt a reactionary position and to garner political support based on a misrepresentation of the legislation's intent. Growers opposed the bill regardless of production scale or philosophical orientation. In fact, smaller-scale growers argued that they would be made uniquely vulnerable because large-scale growers would have resources to develop alternatives or absorb increased costs. Interviews and transcripts of administrative hearings suggest that it was not so much the restriction itself, which had actually been on the books since 1993, but augmentation of the state's authority to prosecute violations (by requiring growers to demonstrate a lack of alternatives) that led growers to portray the bill as a "total ban."

At the same time that the organic sector has opposed efforts to regulate labor practices, as with SB 534, many actors within the organic agriculture community, including practitioners and activists, have advocated for the incorporation of labor standards into organic agriculture. However, most assert that such standards should remain separate from the definition of organics. Instead they have embraced a "beyond organic" discourse, channeling calls to adopt better labor practices into separate, voluntary certification and labeling initiatives. Such programs are intended to further differentiate between growers who meet the minimum requirements for organic certification and those who espouse broader, although somewhat vague, definitions of sustainability. The final section explores this emergent strategy, which growers have embraced, for the most part, as a preferable alternative to traditional modes of regulation. In contrast to regulatory initiatives, voluntary certification and labeling initiatives allow growers to respond to mounting critiques of organic production without actually having to relinquish control of the labor process.

II. THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF ORGANIC AGRICULTURE: AGRO-INDUSTRY GROWTH, FARM LABOR, AND SUSTAINABILITY

Over the past decade, remarkable growth rates have transformed organic agriculture from a fledgling niche market into one of the most dynamic of agro-food sectors, sparking increased demand for farm labor and leading to significant consolidation within the sector. In this section, we provide an overview of organics' recent growth and consolidation and locate the organic industry within the broader

framework of California farm–labor relations, in preparation for a discussion of the challenges facing the organic agriculture community vis-à-vis the labor question.

The Rise of Organics

Throughout the 1990s, global growth rates in the organic sector substantially exceeded those of conventional markets, averaging 20 percent or more annually.⁸ By 2001, global sales reached US \$26 billion,⁹ with sales in the United States reaching \$15.7 billion, or 2.5 percent of total food sales.¹⁰ National data demonstrates significant increases in organic production. Between 1997 and 2005, total certified organic acreage increased by 200 percent, to encompass 4 million acres of field and row crop and pasture and range lands, at 1.7 and 2.3 million acres, respectively. Although certified pasture and rangeland increased at a faster rate (370 percent), suggesting significant expansion in less labor-intensive sectors, certified organic cropland also doubled during this period.¹¹ Labor-intensive fruit and vegetable crops now represent the highest percentage of organic land, at 2.5 and 4.7 percent of total U.S. organic acreage, respectively. The fact that the vast majority of organic land has been certified within the past ten years underscores the astonishing pace of growth in the sector.

California has arguably been the leader in organics' expansion as a result of its historical dominance in commercial agriculture and its location as the birthplace of the U.S. organic movement. As of 2005, California had more certified cropland than any other state, or 13 percent of the U.S. total, and significantly more certified operations than its nearest competitor, Wisconsin.¹² However, variation across crop categories underscores the limitations of acreage data and the need to also look at labor intensity and revenues across crop categories to understand relative scales of operation. For example, the average 39-acre berry farm is likely to generate revenues greater than the average 414-acre field crop farm. Much like conventional agriculture, the organic industry is characterized by polarized land-tenure patterns. Although land concentration does vary across commodity groups, a small percentage of growers control the vast majority of acreage, and numerous small growers control a minimal percentage in all cases.¹³ Overall, as shown in Table 1, the top 5 percent of certified operations control 70 percent of certified pasture and croplands in California today.

Historically, California has led the way in intensification of agricultural production and the shift toward high-value specialty crops, and the organic sector has followed a similar growth trajectory. Data on organic sales, depicted in Table 2, suggest that this strategy has paid off for California's organic growers. Gross sales of organically grown commodities tripled between 1992 and 2002.¹⁵ Over the following three years, sales increased by an average of 28 percent annually.¹⁶ Comparing organic operations registered with the California

Table 1¹⁴
Certified Organic Operations in California, 2006

Crop Category	Total Number Operations	Total Certified Acreage	Average Size (Acres)	Largest Operations (Top 5% =)	% of Acreage Controlled by Largest Operations	Smallest Operations (Bottom 50%)	% of Acreage Controlled by Smallest Operations
Pasture, dairy, poultry	114	127,118	1,115	5,000 + acres	60	Under 250 acres	4
Field crops*	169	69,960	414	1,350 + acres	45	Under 135 acres	6
Other vegetable and fruit**	874	82,458	94	300 + acres	71	Under 10 acres	2
Grapes (raisin, table, wine)	229	15,917	70	275 + acres	40	Under 30 acres	8
Tree and nut (excluding citrus and avocado)	355	14,739	42	150 + acres	40	Under 20 acres	10
Berries	46	1,787	39	250 + acres	32	Under 15 acres	5
Citrus and avocado	390	10,157	26	100 + acres	60	Under 6 acres	5
Total	2,177	322,136	148	500 + acres	70	Under 15 acres	2

* Includes wheat, rice and other grains; dry beans; canning tomatoes.

** Significant crops in this category include lettuces, spinach, broccoli, cauliflower, carrots, and growers identified as mixed.

Table 2¹⁸
California Organic Operations by Sales Class

Sales Class (\$ per year)	1996–1997		2000		2005	
	% Growers	% Sales	% Growers	% Sales	% Growers	% Sales
0–4,999	40	1	39	1	37	<1
5,000–9,999	19	1	15	1	8	<1
10,000–49,999	22	6	20	5	22	3
50,000–99,999	7	6	9	7	10	3
100,000–249,999	6	11	7	11	10	8
250,000–499,999	3	11	4	15	5	8
500,000–999,999	1	11	3	19	3	11
1,000,000 and above	2	53	1	41	4	67
All		100		100		100

Department of Food and Agriculture by sales class over time, Table 2 confirms that large-scale growers with more than \$500,000 in annual sales are driving this phenomenal growth. By 2005, 7 percent of operations accounted for 75 percent of sales, while 75 percent of operations account for just 7 percent of sales.¹⁷

Recent combined data for California farms suggest that organic and conventional agriculture have followed similar distribution patterns, with 46 percent of all farms earning under \$10,000 and 10 percent of all farms earning over \$500,000 annually.¹⁹ Like their conventional counterparts, organic growers are bifurcated into large and small operations. Conventional wisdom holds that labor issues are salient in large but not small operations, which tend to rely on family labor. Yet, as we will see in the discussion that follows, the distinctions made based on production scale may be less significant to understanding labor relations in organic agriculture than is often implied. In addition, distinctions made based on the family farm as an organizational form are also problematic. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, only 1 percent of California farms are classified as nonfamily corporations, while 80 percent are classified as individually or family-owned.²⁰ The critical point here is that the family farm category is ill defined and therefore open to interpretation. As a result, it holds little explanatory power for understanding production relations, nor can it be considered as being in opposition to agribusiness.

Farm Labor and Organic Agriculture

A largely immigrant workforce has sustained California's organic boom. Although agricultural wage and employment figures do not differentiate between

organic and conventional operations, responses from the authors' survey of organic growers suggest that at least two-thirds of certified organic growers in California employ hired labor.²¹ These workers are likely to be immigrants lacking legal resident status. Of the total agricultural workforce, estimated at eight hundred thousand workers hired each year in California, 95 percent are foreign-born, primarily from Mexico, and anywhere from 50 to 90 percent are unauthorized to work in the United States.²² Annual turnover rates in the workforce may be as high as 20 percent or more because of poor wages and working conditions.²³

Wage and employment data for farm workers underscore a sharp devaluation of agricultural labor power. Following gains made during the 1970s and 1980s at the height of United Farm Workers' organizing, California farm workers experienced a 32 percent decline in inflation-adjusted wages between 1991 and 2001.²⁴ Workers hired directly by growers earn approximately \$8,500 per year, while those hired through farm-labor contractors (FLCs) earn an annual average of \$5,000.²⁵ Not surprisingly a study of one thousand farm workers in California indicated that their number-one concern was low pay, followed by insecurity of working through FLCs, while working conditions, including exposure to pesticides, ranked third.²⁶

Furthermore, aside from a reduced exposure to synthetic chemicals, workers on organic farms are not necessarily better off than those working in conventional agriculture.²⁷ Recent studies suggest that all-organic growers, particularly those with diversified cropping patterns and direct sales, are more likely to provide above-average wages and benefits.²⁸ Yet 57 percent of organic growers surveyed reported paying the minimum wage, and almost half rely on FLCs, allowing growers to externalize responsibility for wage and employment conditions.²⁹ Within the organic sector, larger growers (calculated in terms of annual sales) are more likely to provide workers with some fringe benefits (i.e., either health, dental, life, or vision insurance, paid vacation, pension, or sick leave) than smaller ones.³⁰

With respect to stoop labor, conditions may be worse on organic farms, since the work of synthetic chemicals is often replaced by human labor. Reduced agrochemical exposure is a primary factor driving public perceptions that organic is more environmentally *and* socially sustainable than conventional agriculture. And indeed, organic groups, such as the Organic Trade Association and the California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF), have argued that buying organic products is a way to support farm workers. For example, a CCOF publication states that "field workers suffer the highest rates of occupational illness in the state" and goes on to argue that protecting farm workers through the prohibition of agrochemicals is one of the top ten reasons to buy organic.³¹

However, most serious occupational injuries are not related to agrochemical exposure, which represents approximately 1 percent of serious injuries, but instead to continuous stoop labor, climbing, lifting, and reaching.³² One study conducted over a five-year period during the 1990s found that 60 percent of acute

injuries suffered by farm workers were musculoskeletal injuries, with most affecting the lower back.³³ This situation persists despite formal acknowledgment by the California Supreme Court that stoop labor “would cause abnormal degeneration of the spine, resulting in irreparable back injury and permanent disability,” an opinion which led to the original ban on the short-handled hoe.³⁴

The negative health and safety effects of chemical fertilizers and pesticides on workers and consumers should not be underestimated, particularly with respect to cumulative effects of long-term exposure.³⁵ However, focusing on agrochemicals may also obscure the more common occupational hazards associated with agricultural employment, including exposure to extreme weather conditions, repetitive physical motions and uncomfortable body positions, as well as exposure to toxic organic materials (in particular sulfur) and dust. It also ignores the poverty-level wages, job and housing insecurity, social isolation, exploitative relations with supervisors, and high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression faced by farm-worker communities.³⁶

The question remains as to why conditions remain so precarious and exploitative for farm workers, particularly given tremendous growth in revenues and productivity. Put another way, how has California’s agricultural labor force come to be at once “indispensable and disposable”?³⁷ This question takes on added salience in the context of discussions within the organic agriculture community about its relationship to labor issues, which we explore in the following section of the article as a lead-up to the hand-weeding case. The presence of an agricultural workforce that has been consistently marginalized and devalued plays a fundamental role in shaping the terrain on which these debates play out. On the one hand, growers suggest that market imperatives prevent even those who want to provide better wages and working conditions from doing so. On the other hand, a majority of growers, regardless of their production scale or philosophical orientation, continue to rely on the degraded bargaining position of immigrant workers to operate.

While a full accounting of the matrix of processes, institutions, and symbolic systems shaping agricultural labor relations is beyond the scope of this article, we highlight several key points here. First, over many decades agribusiness interests have, often with support from the state, constructed a labor regime and workforce to meet the particular requirements of agricultural production, including intensification and unevenness of labor demand because of seasonality and crop variation. Second, this regime has developed alongside the highly successful expansion of commercial agro-food production, of which organic agriculture can be seen as a recent iteration. Third, it has been based on political, social, and ideological exclusion. As Walker argues, California’s cheap farm-labor regime has been realized through repeated commodification of new groups of immigrant workers in a process that has “precluded claims for good wages, political rights, and economic justice.”³⁸

This marginalization has relied on the mobilization of ideas, not only of class, but also of ethnic and national difference. The significance of border and immigration politics in mobilizing anti-immigrant sentiment and undermining the bargaining position of workers cannot be overstated. The state has played a major role in maintaining a vulnerable workforce, through policies such as the exclusion of agricultural workers from the 1935 National Labor Relations Act, the Bracero guest-worker program, and restrictive immigration policies, including the more recent border militarization.³⁹ Nevins argues that “nationalism—at least in the context of the U.S.–Mexico boundary—is the most salient form of difference and, as such, embodies and helps to mask other forms of difference.”⁴⁰ However, he also points out that “one cannot have the national without the racialized alien.”⁴¹

While the racial dimensions of agrarian class dynamics are critical to understanding questions of how social justice is understood within the organic agriculture community, debates over labor regulation have not been explicitly about race. In fact, the organic agriculture community has largely overlooked issues of race and class, preferring not to interrogate these differences within its own ranks and instead mobilizing images of small or family-scale farms with no hired labor. Because hired labor on organic farms is largely “the immigrant other,” it is much easier to obscure labor’s role and presence, thus reinforcing the agrarian ideology on which the organic movement thrives.

III. THE AGRARIAN IMAGINARY: EXCEPTIONAL OR EXCEPTIONALISM?

The organic boom has focused scholarly attention on the potential of sustainable agriculture and associated alternative food movements to challenge the conventional agro-food system. Goodman and Goodman summarize widely held beliefs about organic agriculture when they suggest that, “organic praxis brings good husbandry to the land and healthy, nutritious food to consumers.”⁴² Yet, absent from this promise is any indication of the lived realities of the farm workers engaged in organic production. In fact, sustainable-food-system proponents have largely sidestepped labor questions by focusing on environmental and personal health issues and by framing social sustainability in terms of the survival of the small or family farmer, rather than the well-being of workers.⁴³ As mentioned previously, where labor is acknowledged, reduced exposure to agrochemicals is the primary rationale for why organic production is better for workers, and assumptions are often made that organic growers have a different relationship with workers.⁴⁴

For the purposes of this study, we interviewed organic growers, agro-food researchers, and representatives of nonprofit organizations involved in the debates around regulatory issues, market-based approaches, and, more generally, the relationship of the organic community to labor issues. Key groups

included the California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF), an organization founded in 1973 by “activist growers seeking to promote and define organic production practices,”⁴⁵ that provides certification services, advocacy, and education and has a membership base of more than 1,800 growers;⁴⁶ the Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF), a nonprofit organization that includes about half “family” farmers and half urban consumers;⁴⁷ and the California Sustainable Agriculture Working Group, or CA-SAWG (recently renamed the California Coalition for Food and Farming), a “network dedicated to promoting a sustainable and socially just food system . . . member organizations include farm, environmental, consumer, farmworker, and other groups.”⁴⁸

In this section we consider how framings of sustainable agriculture around two interrelated concepts—small-scale production and a distinct culture of farming—have shaped dynamics within the organic sector, concealing fundamental tensions between the interests of growers and workers. As a precursor to the hand-weeding debate, we also explore these tensions as they have manifested with respect to more general questions of labor rights. Guthman’s comprehensive study of how and why California’s organic agriculture sector has come to replicate conventional production relations serves as a point of departure for our analysis.⁴⁹ Like Guthman, we are concerned with the intersection of and tensions between agrarian populist ideas and the political economic realities of organic agriculture. However, we focus on only one element of this dynamic, exploring specifically these underlying tensions in the context of concrete campaigns for regulation of labor practices.

The Organic Movement Versus the Organic Industry

[O]ur growth is bringing us to a critical crossroads. Will our trunk grow straight or crooked? How high will we spread our branches? Whom will they shelter? Whom will we feed? To answer these questions, we must make a decision about our identity: are we an industry? Or are we a movement?⁵⁰

At the same time that organic growers, activists, and scholars laud rising demand for organic products as evidence of increasing consumer consciousness about how food is produced, many decry the phenomena associated with the expansion of organic agriculture. Often referred to as the “industrialization” of organics, the consolidation of organic processing and retailing functions and the proliferation of large-scale organic farming operations are attributed to the entry of conventional corporate agribusiness into the sector.⁵¹ Still, some of the largest organic operations in California have emerged from *within* the organic movement.⁵² This commercial orientation of many organic growers calls into question the extent to which the original spirit of the organic movement is being destabilized by agribusiness.

Tensions around the adoption of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National Organic Standard underscore the contradictory relationship of movement-oriented growers to the market. During the process of developing the national standard, producers and activists—who had dedicated years to developing a set of alternative ecological practices—adopted an oppositional stance, arguing that the very meaning of organic agriculture was being contested. Despite their participation in the rule-making process, the organic rule that was ultimately proposed by the USDA was seen as being written by and for conventional agribusiness and an “apparent attempt to subvert the organic farming movement by calling into question its most basic premises.”⁵³ Among the most egregious examples was the proposed allowance of genetically modified organisms and irradiation, which for many signaled a shift from process- to product-based standards to facilitate the mainstreaming of organics. It is important to note that this was precisely the purpose of the USDA program, namely to codify standards and promote legibility via a consumer label. As Guthman points out, it was not simply the outcome but “the drive for regulatory legislation [that] effectively subsumed much of the organic movement into an organic industry.”⁵⁴

Despite the organic community's oppositional stance to the USDA's proposed organic rule, only a handful of participants advocated inclusion of social standards, and most growers continue to oppose inclusion of social or labor standards in the definition of organics. The experience of one group that attempted to develop a coalition between organic grower and labor interests, CA-SAWG, provides another case in point. According to several participants in the coalition, grower representatives objected when the group attempted to *reaffirm* support for a set of organic social standards it had previously endorsed during the debate about the USDA National Organic Program. Opposition came from two key organizations: CAFF and CCOF. According to one participant:

We just said, we need to pull back; we're not as far along as we thought that we were. We hit walls that we weren't expecting to hit. When it's in generalities everybody is completely on board. When it comes down to specifics, like legislation being endorsed or specific projects, that's when it starts falling apart.⁵⁵

About the incident, a labor advocate who had been recruited to the board stated:

When I first started with SAWG, and I saw CCOF, in particular I saw them as a small organic farmer organization and they are *not* an organization like that . . . it was a much steeper hill than what I had anticipated . . . I mean I really went in there oblivious to what I was about to face . . . we developed those labor principles that said we believe in freedom of association and so this was just an affirmation of that principle but it wasn't seen that way.⁵⁶

Interviews with other actors supportive of labor issues confirmed these tensions and several suggested that this has made it difficult to believe that grower-dominated organizations are interested in meaningful collaboration. According to one labor

advocate, “Ties between labor and organic groups are hot and cold; there are good ties with specific organizations and individuals,” and the “tone is friendlier” than with conventional growers on certain issues, but their actions are not all that different.⁵⁷

A closer examination of the organic agriculture movement’s relationship to labor issues reveals a more complex set of political–economic alignments than the conventional vs. organic and movement vs. industry depictions suggest. While we do not want to minimize either the divergence of visions and practices among organic growers and their allies or the significance of transnational corporate actors’ control of the food system, we do want to suggest that the boundaries between movement and industry are perhaps more porous than is often suggested.

Agrarianism and Class Dynamics

When I buy clothes I look for labor seals, and that’s at least something, but you can’t impose it [labor standards] on organic, you’ll just shut it down.⁵⁸

This statement reflects a widespread belief within the organic agriculture community that farming is somehow different than other productive sectors. It further illuminates a contradiction between the general principles of sustainability espoused by many organic actors and the actual practices of organic production. In numerous interviews with growers and activists, as well as in our survey of organic growers, it was suggested that labor standards for sustainable agriculture are either unnecessary, because of growers’ different relationship with workers, or unviable, because of market competition. The critical question here is how to account for the belief that farm workers cannot be afforded the same rights and protections as those granted workers in other sectors without jeopardizing the entire production model? While this perspective has clearly been shaped by the imperatives of the broader agro–food system, labor exploitation is also legitimated by a form of agricultural exceptionalism, the idea that “farming is culturally different from the rest of society and needs its own voice.”⁵⁹ However, the relationship of agrarian populism to the capitalist logics of accumulation and competition also plays heavily into debates around the labor question.

Participants in the sustainable and organic agriculture communities often promote a vision of ecologically and socially sustainable, small-scale production that replicates the family farm, if not in reality then in spirit. One CAFF representative stated:

They [growers] are very concerned about retention of their labor force because then they do a better job. They know the farm; they know, in fact, what crop rotations are going to occur. They almost become part of the farming process, I mean, the decision-making process of how they can help make the crop better. So, that’s a big part of people we work with—is to make the farm workers part of their family, part of their farm family.⁶⁰

Here, although wage labor is acknowledged, workers are *like* family and can even *almost* become part of the farming process, suggesting that the “family-scale”

sustainable farm operates according to a different logic than agribusiness. By sidelining class differences in this way, or by erasing workers from the landscape altogether, this framing obscures the actual dependence on hired labor in organic production. Although a majority of organic farms rely on wage labor, according to one farm labor representative, the organic community consistently insists that labor is simply “not our issue.”⁶¹ Another agro-food scholar we interviewed suggested that, within alternative food movements, “social justice is defined in terms of consumption . . . justice [for workers] in agriculture is something that no one talks about.”⁶² This invisibility is underscored by a recent study, in which none of the thirty-seven alternative agriculture leaders interviewed mentioned labor as a pressing problem in the current food system.⁶³

In some cases, labor issues have not only been sidestepped, but organic and sustainable agriculture interests have stepped into the legislative arena to oppose the labor movement’s agenda. Asked about their role in legislative advocacy, a CAFF representative stated, “[t]he UFW or others may be bringing an issue forward to address a large commercial operator that also comes back to negatively impact family farm producers.” When pressed on this question, this representative was unable to provide any clear parameters about how the group distinguishes between a family farmer and a large-scale operation.⁶⁴ We view this focus as one of the primary obstacles to the movement’s meaningful engagement with labor issues, revealing what Guthman argues has been the organic movement’s greatest challenge—namely losing sight of *processes*, in this case labor practices, by focusing on the *form* of the small or family-scale farm.⁶⁵

Indeed, the idea that the family farm, in and of itself, represents a meaningful measure of social justice is widely accepted within alternative food movements. Yet, as mentioned previously, farm size does not necessarily correspond with better wages or working conditions. However, because the majority of organic growers *are* relatively small, with annual sales under \$50,000 and because small and medium-scale growers circulate widely within alternative food movements, the vision remains a powerful one for mobilizing support for grower interests, even when they conflict with workers’ interests. In the following section, we consider how the organic community was able to effectively undermine labor’s position in the case of SB 534, a proposed bill to restrict hand weeding. To do this, the organic community framed the issue as a tradeoff between workers on the one hand and family farmers and an environmentally friendly food supply on the other. We focus primarily on the discursive strategies employed and the solidarity demonstrated between large and small, conventional and organic agricultural interests to highlight the centrality of class in determining the organic community’s opposition.

IV. THE “HAND-WEEDING SAGA”

In 2002, the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation, the United Farm Workers, and the California Labor Federation seized the political moment of a

governor sympathetic to labor issues and a Democratic-controlled legislature to file a regulatory petition to limit unnecessary hand weeding in agricultural production. It was the culmination of a decade-long effort, following a 1993 ruling by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (Cal-OSHA) that hand weeding defeated the intent of the original ban on *el cortito*, the short-handled hoe.⁶⁶ Since that time, California Rural Legal Assistance had been monitoring practices in the fields and witnessing numerous violations. In cases where they could not secure voluntary compliance from the growers they approached, they brought complaints to Cal-OSHA one by one.⁶⁷ From the perspective of the labor organizations, a regulation was needed to address the loophole. When Cal-OSHA administrative hearings failed to achieve agreement between labor and grower representatives, labor advocates turned to the introduction of Senate Bill (SB) 534 during the 2003 legislative session.⁶⁸

Supporters of the bill asserted that their goal was “to close a loophole in the existing ban on short handled tools . . . so that hand weeding, thinning, and hot capping is not treated as a permissible alternative.”⁶⁹ To opponents in the organic community, however, this was a controversial bill “that Monsanto would have been proud to sponsor,” was designed to “get rid of hand weeding,” and sent a message that you have to “spray everything . . . genetically modify everything . . . or move it out of California.”⁷⁰ Even though the bill contained multiple exemptions—added during a series of administrative and legislative negotiations to try to address organic growers’ concerns—they continued to oppose it. In doing so, the organic sector appeared to demonstrate its solidarity with agribusiness and, at the same time, compromised an already tenuous relationship with labor groups because of questions about its commitment to social sustainability.

On September 11, 2003, the California State Senate was scheduled to vote on SB 534. At the last minute, proponents of the bill arranged for Dolores Huerta (co-founder of the United Farm Workers) to speak on the Senate floor in support of the bill. Opposition leaders responded by sending a private plane to fly an organic grower and President of the CCOF Board of Directors from Watsonville to Sacramento to counter Huerta’s remarks, by arguing that the bill would put organic farmers out of business. Her efforts helped to convince a number of Democrats to either abstain or vote against the bill. She recalls the following:

A Democrat called me up and said, “I’m not going against you cause you’d be ugly in my district; cause you’d show up and say I went against organic ag.” . . . He goes, “you owe me.” and I go, “what do I owe you?” And he goes, “I’m gonna throw a barbecue for my reelection campaign and you’re gonna show up and say that I supported you,” and I go, “You’ve got it,” and he goes, “We won’t go out against labor; Democrats cannot vote against labor, but we can leave. We can not vote.” So he goes, “I can figure out with you in the next couple days how many non-votes you’re gonna get” . . . And I went, OK, and so I remember calling up a guy from the Farm Bureau and I said, “I think I got 12 non-votes.”⁷¹

Indeed, with the Democrat's abstentions, SB 534 was defeated by seven votes. About the outcome, the organic grower from Watsonville recalls, "That was so huge for us 'cause now all of a sudden we in the organic industry had a voice."⁷² According to her, "It was the first time we [CCOF] had ever taken this kind of stand."

Without the lobbying of the organic community, the hand-weeding legislation would most likely have passed the California Senate. The first, and crucial, "No" vote by a Democrat was cast by a senator from a district with a vibrant organic agricultural community. After the defeat of the bill, a labor representative conceded that CCOF was successful because of its ability to publicly frame the issue. In her words:

So we lost the media message on that one . . . it was just all opposed, just solidly opposed, which was disheartening . . . what we were trying to do, what we are still trying to do is close the loophole on the short-handled hoe. And what they expanded it to was we were trying to get this as a first step to eliminate hand harvesting and we were trying to increase the use of pesticides.⁷³

The media message put out to supporters of organic agriculture by CCOF did not acknowledge the exemptions at all and included claims that were arguably false. An excerpt of one e-mail message sent to various listserves illustrates the alarmist tone:

According to its sponsors, the intent of this bill is to prevent back injuries in farm workers, but the only ones who will actually benefit from Senate Bill 534 are chemical companies. If 534 becomes law, there will be only one legal way for farmers to control weeds: chemical herbicides. Farm workers suffer much greater health hazard from exposure to toxic chemicals than they do from pulling weeds.

Around the same time, a Community Supported Agriculture newsletter from an organic farm in Northern California sent a similar message to its members:

This bill is a disaster to farmers for several reasons, but it is also unique in that it will primarily affect small farms like ours, who are already having difficulty competing with large, mechanized operations . . . The passage of this law will essentially set a precedent to outlaw an entire range of motion for employees. It will certainly speed the demise of small farming in California, and give imported vegetables another competitive advantage over those grown locally.

The bill's opponents rallied opposition by presenting it as a measure that threatened the existence of small organic farmers, one that would inevitably lead to an increase in pesticides, and convincing people that it was not even in the interest of workers.

Yet initial opposition to the hand-weeding restrictions had come from conventional agribusiness groups that have historically opposed organic interests, in particular the Farm Bureau and the Western Growers Association. At the same

time labor representatives were being portrayed as promoting pesticides, conventional agribusiness interests were underwriting the opposition campaign, providing funds for legal assistance and even for the private airplane that brought the organic grower to Sacramento for emergency testimony. According to her:

We've worked together wonderfully on hand weeding. One of the things that was really interesting in the hand weeding saga is that I could be that public spokesperson and they had all the money . . . we at CCOF don't have that kind of money but Western Growers⁷⁴ does and you know, the grower-shipper association does. They have full-time on-staff lawyers. So by working together, we could get all that out, and that was just wonderful.⁷⁵

In fact, the final bill included two pages of exemptions, almost all of which applied to organic agriculture, including the following:

This legislation is intended to close the hand weeding loophole to the short-handled tool ban by generally prohibiting hand weeding *where reasonably available long-handled tools or other alternatives can be used* without causing significant damage to a crop or to closely integrated production materials or irrigation systems, or where a crop has otherwise been specifically exempted because of narrow circumstances unique to that crop.

Long-handled tools are required except when . . . the employer can demonstrate that proper use of a reasonably available and appropriate long-handled tool and any reasonably available . . . alternative can reasonably be *expected to cause significantly greater damage than would be caused by hand weeding, thinning, or hot-capping* to the particular crop (emphasis added). . .⁷⁶

Far from eliminating all hand weeding, or forcing farmers to use chemicals, the bill appeared to accommodate the concerns raised by organic groups. How then do we account for the fervent resistance to the bill, which served to publicly locate the organic community in direct opposition to the farm worker movement?

It is likely that at least some of the opponents never read the actual legislation, instead relying on CCOF, a trusted voice in the organic community, to translate its meaning. And because the CCOF leadership took a strong proactive stance, this perspective was widely disseminated. One grower we interviewed suggested he disagreed with CCOF's position after talking with one of the sponsoring labor organizations and learning more about the bill.⁷⁷ Still, even those who were aware of the legislative content expressed broader fears about the potential of a new regulatory burden and a mistrust of the exemption process. From the perspective of small and medium-scale growers, although their production costs would not have increased if they could demonstrate that hand weeding was necessary to their operation, they were ideologically motivated by the fear of a cost squeeze in an increasingly competitive environment. Far from being used by agribusiness, they utilized their favorable reputation as family-scale growers to gain support for their position.

For conventional and organic growers, large and small alike, the real problem with SB 534 was that it would have placed the burden on employers to actively

request exemptions. Growers would have been forced to prove that there were no other viable options when requesting exemptions, thus ceding discretion over labor practices to a governmental authority, Cal-OSHA. Comments during public meetings demonstrated growers' preoccupation with burden of proof issues, including those of a California Farm Bureau Federation representative:

When an inspector did not agree with the grower's assessment and cited the grower, it would be difficult for a grower to prove the significant damage requirement in an appeals hearing . . . the exception does not provide any protection for the employer who has to make a decision in the field.⁷⁸

Like disputes over use of the short-handled hoe before it, the debate over hand weeding was fundamentally about the drive to ensure productivity under competitive conditions, and to do so through control of labor. According to one grower:

It would be insane to have workers hand weeding if they could be using a hoe, because the latter is more economical. The worst thing for a farmer is to have a worker sit down and a farmer would only do so if the crop were sufficiently valuable that sitting and weeding were the only alternative . . . Time-motion studies indicate that it gets expensive when a person stops walking.⁷⁹

In contrast, testimony from a CRLA representative and former farm worker disputes this claim, suggesting that "foremen for growers who weed by hand cite two reasons for the practice: one, it is permitted by Cal-OSHA; and two, because it is faster to do the work that way."⁸⁰

Growers' reasons for opposing the restriction were both material and ideological. On the one hand, the opposition's testimony exhibited fears about economic loss because of decreased competitive advantage and crop damage. While this concern was about the particular effects of the proposed restrictions, growers also expressed concerns about the potential for future labor regulation that might be opened up by this initiative. Some suggested that this was the first step toward eliminating hand harvesting. These concerns were especially acute in the case of organic growers, who insisted that, while defeating the hand-weeding ban might benefit "big agribusiness," for them it was a matter of survival. One grower suggested that once a restriction was codified as necessary to protect health and safety, it would inevitably lead to a wholesale ban.⁸¹

On the other hand, comments reflected ideological beliefs that growers' decision making should not be questioned, particularly by "outsiders." One organic grower "questioned non-agricultural people's ability to regulate a cultural practice" and further suggested there was simply no need to do so because, "it is not the 1960s anymore . . . California has the most politically correct food supply in the world."⁸² These comments ignored the considerable testimony of those most intimately familiar with the farming process: workers themselves.

Organic groups' leadership in opposing efforts to further restrict stoop labor effectively opened up—or made visible—a rift between the farm worker and sustainable agriculture movements and called into question the potential for future alliances. One labor representative noted that the UFW and CCOF had stood together in opposition to genetic modification just months before, but that the hand weeding fight represented a new and potentially dangerous precedent:

CCOF and CAFF . . . the hand weeding really brought them out of the woodwork legislatively . . . The real problem's gonna be if you have the organic farmers and the small farmers coming up and saying this is gonna affect them, you're gonna peel off a lot more Democrats. And that's really scary, because you're allowing some of your liberal Democrats to confuse the issue of being environmentally friendly and being socially responsible . . . and that's exactly what happened with hand weeding.⁸³

In terms of the significance of CCOF's politicization, this instance does seem to be somewhat unique. As previously mentioned, this was the first time CCOF had taken such a stand, and the organization has not *led* opposition to labor legislation since. Still, organic growers have opposed, albeit in a less coordinated way, other labor legislation, including the recently enacted minimum-wage increase, heat-stress standards (following several deaths in the summer of 2006), and other workplace health and safety standards.

We do not dispute that hand weeding is, in fact, a critical component of organic production. The point we wish to make here is that organic growers who have actively positioned themselves as part of the organic “movement,” and therefore in opposition to conventional agriculture and industrial organics, willingly served as the face of the opposition on a bill that would primarily benefit their discursive antithesis. These growers were not satisfied with *any* regulation of the practice, even where intermittent and necessary hand weeding was to be permitted and where they would have likely been exempted. For them, only a blanket exemption would suffice, which, in the end, the entire organic industry received. When legislative leaders again raised an interest in the issue in 2004, Cal-OSHA quietly modified the short-handled hoe regulation to include a narrow hand-weeding restriction. However, this restriction was written so as to exempt the majority of fruit and vegetable production, whether conventional or organic, without requiring any burden of proof.⁸⁴

V. BEYOND ORGANIC? THE VOLUNTARY SOCIAL CERTIFICATION AND LABELING ALTERNATIVE

During the same period that the hand-weeding legislation was being debated in the California Legislature, an increasing awareness about the failure of organic agriculture to address the social relations of production had sparked calls to move “beyond organic.” This “beyond organic” discourse acknowledges the

need for a more holistic vision of sustainability that incorporates not only environmental practices, but also social dimensions, including labor practices. Yet many in the movement do not agree on what this vision entails, much less how it might be realized. Recent attempts to codify social standards, primarily in the form of additional certification and labeling programs, have not resolved this ambiguity. Our research also examined growers' attitudes about the inclusion of social measures in organic certification, the proliferation of voluntary social certification and labeling initiatives, and the implications of these initiatives for California's agro-food production complex.⁸⁵ We found significant opposition among organic growers to incorporating social measures into organic certification. We also documented a wide range of programmatic standards being adopted for various social certification programs.

We initially raised questions about the role of social standards within organic agriculture because of several developments within the organic agriculture movement. First, the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) adopted a chapter on "Social Justice" for its Basic Standards in 2003. Second, the USDA's process of developing a National Organic Standard sparked calls, albeit not universal ones, to consider a broader definition of sustainability that included a social component. However, these concrete mechanisms have not materialized largely because of opposition from small and large organic growers in California and the United States. For the most part, social standards have been channeled into the establishment of separate, voluntary programs that have varying standards and levels of accountability.

International organic groups *have* adopted a broader definition of organic agriculture, in particular through a social justice chapter in IFOAM Standards. The U.S. organic movement, however, has resisted such inclusion.⁸⁶ IFOAM defines organic as "an agricultural system that promotes environmentally, socially, and economically sound production of food, fiber, timber, etc."⁸⁷ Accordingly, IFOAM adopted a social clause and stated that it expected all of its accredited certifiers to comply.⁸⁸ Rather than requiring its certified operations to adhere to this social component, the California Certified Organic Farmers adopted a dual-track certification program, allowing growers to opt out of IFOAM certification and comply only with the USDA standard. Still, IFOAM's social clause does not require a concrete set of practices and, thus, remains largely symbolic.

The U.S. organic community has consistently opposed efforts to codify labor practices through state regulation or organic certification programs.⁸⁹ In California, where the first law concerning organic agriculture was passed (in 1978), the question of social standards has been hotly debated since the beginning. One long-time observer of the organic community explains:

Someone has always picked up the [social justice] chair and brought it to the table. More often than not, a majority either took it away, or didn't fill it, or complained about it . . .

In '87 there was a group trying to figure out how to write labor standards for CCOF membership. So I would say that the issue has always been engaged—never successfully, and in some cases, very passionately.⁹⁰

During the process that resulted in the USDA National Organic Program, requests that certification standards address working conditions were submitted for consideration, but in the end, the final rule explicitly excluded any reference to labor.⁹¹

One organic grower explained that she supported the idea of social certification for organic agriculture but that it should address things like “no child labor . . . bathroom facilities . . . Do they get medical treatment if they’re hurt on the job?” She disagreed that the right of workers to unionize and bargain collectively should be required.⁹² Findings from a survey of California organic growers suggest she is not alone in this regard, despite the fact that California state law guarantees these rights.⁹³ In addition to opposing the inclusion of rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining, a majority of organic growers surveyed disagreed that certification should require payment of a living wage, health insurance, paid sick leave, or vacation. Furthermore, only 25 percent agreed that organic certification should include *any* criteria for working conditions. Even those who thought organic agriculture should ensure fair and healthy working conditions for farm workers did not believe it would be economically viable to do so.⁹⁴

Following IFOAM’s adoption of a social clause, one representative of CCOF explained the difficulty of adopting labor standards:

If you try to impose too many things on the system, it collapses. And so when you try to get away from farming and try to push other things you would never push it through our board meetings. The board would never go for something like that. They went for platitudes, you know, we will obey all the rules, and we’ll be good . . . And we’re organic, which means we’re holistic . . .⁹⁵

Despite the fact that organic agricultural production is highly labor intensive and reliant on a low-paid immigrant workforce, many organic agriculture proponents believe that addressing farm labor issues is “getting away from farming.”

On the other hand, the rapid proliferation of voluntary social certification and labeling initiatives suggests some support for social standards.⁹⁶ One researcher mentioned that 30 percent of respondents to an internal CCOF grower survey expressed an interest in “beyond organic” standards.⁹⁷ Given this growing interest, albeit in social standards *separate* from organic certification, we have conducted research and analysis of several initiatives that have either initiated exploratory work or begun to certify operations in California.

Initiatives we have considered thus far include the following: the Food Alliance, a nonprofit certifier that “promotes sustainable agriculture by recognizing and rewarding farmers who produce food in environmentally friendly

and socially responsible ways” and focuses on helping mid-sized farmers access markets;⁹⁸ the Social Accountability in Sustainable Agriculture project, an international collaborative project to explore the potential for increasing the accessibility of certification for producers by linking organic and social audits;⁹⁹ and the Agricultural Justice Project, a group that has developed a comprehensive, “high bar” approach to social certification, largely in response to the failure of the USDA organic standards process and the perceived failure of other certification initiatives to meaningfully address labor issues.¹⁰⁰

Like organic certification, these initiatives codify standards for production practices related to working conditions, labor rights, wages, and benefits. However, their voluntary nature and the flexible manner in which they are being operationalized contrast with more traditional forms of collective organizing for labor rights via trade unions and state regulation. With the exception of the Agricultural Justice Project (AJP), workers have not been substantively involved in the process of standards development and monitoring. One representative of the AJP points out that “the discourse is going on without the involvement of workers.”¹⁰¹ This lack of participation from those most affected by social certification fits with the historical lack of workers involvement in consumer–labor initiatives.¹⁰²

Currently, the only initiative certifying social measures in California is the Food Alliance. However, its standards do not address wages or labor rights, nor do they include farm workers in on-farm audits. The standard related to wages and benefits underscores its weakness vis-à-vis labor issues:

Compensation and Benefits: Employers reward seniority and excellent performance and manage piece rate work to ensure wage commitments are met. Benefits such as profit sharing, health and life insurance, are offered *when practical and affordable* (emphasis added).¹⁰³

A Food Alliance representative explained that farm worker unions’ emphasis on collective bargaining agreements is “so immensely polarizing that it undermines our efforts to recruit growers who want to improve incrementally.”¹⁰⁴ This failure to include “enabling rights,” which are viewed as critical to ensuring “protective rights” in the case of antisweatshop programs may render certification an infeasible mechanism for promoting worker justice.¹⁰⁵ Because the right to freedom of association and collective bargaining require employers to share decision making about production processes with workers, growers view them as unacceptable and even polarizing.

While some researchers have lauded the potential for certification program to re-embed agro-food markets in social and ecological considerations,¹⁰⁶ others have argued that the participation of labor unions and labor rights-focused non-governmental organizations at the local level is needed to ensure accountability.¹⁰⁷ In the context of agricultural certification, the challenges identified in

other sectors, such as apparel and manufacturing, are exacerbated by the preoccupation with the small-scale or family farm. The certification model's reliance on market mechanisms coupled with the framework of agricultural exceptionalism discussed in the previous sections make the potential of these initiatives to alter labor practices tenuous at best. Because growers are viewed as different from other employers, they are less likely to be held accountable for exploitative practices.

Certification provides a more flexible mode of governing labor practices, which resonates with a wider shift away from public regulation and toward "increasingly voluntarist, neo-corporatist regulatory frameworks involving non-binding standards and rules, public-private cooperation, self regulation, and greater participation from citizen coalitions."¹⁰⁸ In this regard, growers may view certification as a more benign alternative to state regulation, particularly given the potential to be rewarded in the marketplace, through additional price premiums. Proponents insist that these premiums reflect the actual costs of doing business and that increased prices will translate into improvements for workers. One labor advocate pointed out that there is a "tendency to believe in trickle down social justice, meaning that the way to help workers is to help growers first . . . While there may be some truth in this, it is not a sufficient approach to ensuring fair working conditions."¹⁰⁹ In other words, a social label could provide economic rents without requiring shared decision making over wages and working conditions.

Still, increased interest in social certification may create new openings for improving labor practices and promoting a more holistic definition of sustainability in practice. One organic grower suggests that the inclusion of labor standards in organic certification could be a good thing since, in his words, "Even though we're regulated by the state, nobody ever comes to check on us. We're completely unregulated, or, we're not monitored." Another grower, who is known for the good working conditions on his farm, explains why he invests in his workers:

We want to make sure we maintain habitat on our farm . . . On top of that, we want to make sure that the people that are working on the farm are . . . getting good benefits . . . I think [organic consumers] would want to know that. Even though there's not really a social component to being certified organic, you know, I think there's some underlying, some understanding that goes along with that; that people would want to have a social component on the farm.¹¹⁰

As a member of the Santa Cruz-based Organic Farming Research Foundation insists, a successful organic system "would have to address the role of labor. Absolutely. You're not truly sustainable if you haven't addressed the role of labor in your production system."¹¹¹

While the potential for realizing more socially sustainable agro-food production systems remains questionable, this increased attention may yield some

improvements. A longtime researcher with the University of California notes that the “beyond organic” discourse focusing on social issues in sustainable agriculture reminds her of the “early days” when “you could hardly say the ‘O’ word . . . Now it feels that way about farm worker.”¹¹² Similarly, one grower who operates under a collective bargaining agreement with the UFW told us that his early experiments with organic production were also met with much skepticism. “Everybody said it wasn’t possible to do. And that’s the same thing they’re saying about labor issues.”¹¹³

VI. CONCLUSION

Findings from our research challenge assumptions that organic represents a more socially sustainable agricultural-production system and suggest that the organic boom, in and of itself, holds little promise for California’s farm workers. We focus attention on the intersection of farm labor and organic agriculture neither because we assume organic growers treat their workers poorly, nor because we believe the organic community has a unique responsibility to alter the social relations of production in California agriculture. Instead, we suggest that a growing awareness about the ecological and social implications of the conventional food system, as reflected in the phenomenal growth of organic products, makes this a critical moment for consideration of the “labor question.” Consumers are urged to support organic farming with claims that it is “better for” or that it “supports” farm workers.¹¹⁴ It is precisely because of the widespread belief that organic agriculture represents a more socially just form of production that these issues must be critically evaluated at this time.

We present this analysis as a way to explore the hidden tension between labor and organic agriculture groups and to start making production relations more visible. Given the complexity of relations within and between organic agriculture and labor groups, these tensions are often concealed. However, in the regulatory and collective bargaining arenas, these tensions and the contradictions underpinning them are placed in sharp relief. Toward this end, the hand-weeding legislation serves as a useful point of departure for a broader analysis of the structural challenges that, up to now, have inhibited the movement from seriously addressing social justice concerns.¹¹⁵

While much of the hand-weeding debate focused on making distinctions between well- and ill-intentioned growers, the underlying tension lies in the contradictory structural positions occupied by growers and workers. Furthermore, the oft-raised distinctions between large and small, or corporate and family farms, are inadequate for explaining events and outcomes in this case. In fact, opposition on the part of growers, as well as among their community-based representatives, to initiatives aimed at regulating labor practices appeared to be virtually universal. We have argued that this polarization stems from the

contradictory class positions of growers and farm workers. Agrarian ideology further constrains the realm of possibility by erasing workers from the landscape of agricultural production. The emergence of strategies utilizing market mechanisms further elide class distinctions by focusing on connecting consumers with the “farmers” producing their food.

NOTES

1. Douglas L. Murray, “The Abolition of *El Cortito*, the Short-Handled Hoe: A Case Study in Social Conflict and State Policy in California Agriculture” *Social Problems* 30 (1982): 26–39.

2. California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation, “State of California Takes Meaningful First Step to Close ‘Hand-Weeding Loophole’ to Short-Handled Tool Ban,” www.crlaf.org (accessed June 16, 2004).

3. The petition was filed by the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation, United Farm Workers of America, AFL-CIO, and the California Labor Federation.

4. In fact, during a first Assembly floor vote, the bill, authored by Senator Gloria Romero, received majority support. Key support for the bill came from the Teamsters Union, California State Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO, United Farm Workers of America, and the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation. Opposition groups included California Certified Organic Farmers, the Community Alliance with Family Farmers, the Western Growers Association, and the California Farm Bureau.

5. Senate Bill No. 534 (Romero), California State Legislative Service, http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/03-04/bill/sen/sb_0501-0550/sb_534_bill_20030909_amended_asm.pdf (accessed May 12, 2008).

6. Authors’ interview with organic grower and California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF) representative, March 2004.

7. Our research design incorporated multiple methods of data collection, including: (1) Qualitative interviews with key actors in the farm labor and organic agriculture movements, organic growers, and agro-food researchers conducted during 2003–2004 and 2006; (2) A review of written materials from organizations representing farm labor, and organic and sustainable growers; (3) A review of public documents from meetings of the California Occupational and Health (Cal-OSHA) Standards Board, the Cal-OSHA Hand Weeding Subcommittee, and the 2003–2004 California Legislative session. Information on the positions of organic growers also comes from a survey conducted by two of the authors during the spring of 2004, data and analysis from which are presented in Aimee Shreck, Christy Getz, and Gail Feenstra, “Social Sustainability, Farm Labor, and Organic Agriculture: Findings from an Exploratory Analysis,” *Agriculture and Human Values* 23, no. 4 (2006): 239–49.

8. Pascal Liu, Mikkel Andersen, and Catherine Pazderka, “Voluntary Standards and Certification for Environmentally and Socially Responsible Agricultural Production and Trade (Rome: United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, April 22, 2004).

9. Michael Sligh and Carolyn Christman, “Who Owns Organic? The Global Status, Prospects, and Challenges of a Changing Organic Market” (Pittsboro, NC: RAFI-USA, 2003).

10. Nutrition Business Journal Data cited in: “The Economics of Food, Farming, Natural Resources, and Rural America, Briefing Room: Organic Agriculture: Consumer Demand Continues to Expand,” USDA Economic Research Service, <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Data/Organic/Demand.htm> (accessed October 18, 2007).

11. United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Economic Research Service, "The Economics of Food, Farming, Natural Resources, and Rural America," <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Data/Organic/> (accessed October 18, 2007).

12. *Ibid.* According to this report, California had 1916 certified operations, while Wisconsin had 580.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Table developed from primary data authors' obtained from the Registry of Certified Organic Operations, California Department of Food and Agriculture (2006).

15. Karen Klonsky, "Organic Agricultural Production in California" in *California Agriculture: Dimensions and Issues*, ed. J. Siebert (Berkeley: UC Giannini Foundation of Agricultural Economics, 2003), 241–55.

16. Karen Klonsky and Kurt Richter, "Statistical Review of California's Organic Agriculture, 2000–2005" (Davis, CA: University of California at Davis Agricultural Issues Center, 2007).

17. CDFA Registry; Klonsky and Richter, "Statistical Review."

18. Source: Karen Klonsky, Laura Tourte, Robin Kozloff, and Benjamin Shouse, "A Statistical Picture of California's Organic Agriculture, 1995–1998" (Davis, CA: University of California Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources Agricultural Issues Center); Klonsky and Richter, "Statistical Review"

19. USDA Economic Research Service, "Farm Characteristics, 1992, 1997, and 2002 Census of Agriculture," <http://www.ers.usda.gov/StateFacts/CA.htm#FC> (accessed November 17, 2007).

20. *Ibid.*

21. For a full analysis of survey responses from a survey of 170 organic growers see Shreck, Getz, Feenstra, "Social Sustainability, Farm Labor, and Organic Agriculture."

22. U.S. Department of Labor, "Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) 2001–2002: A Demographic and Employment Profile of United States Farm Workers," <http://www.doleta.gov/agworker/report9/toc.cfm>. The National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS 2002) estimates that undocumented immigrants represent 52 percent of the national workforce, while the United Farm Workers suggest the figure may be as high as 85 to 90 percent in California.

23. Authors' interview with Don Villarejo, August 2003.

24. M.A. Kahn, P. Martin, and P. Hardiman, "Employment and Earnings of Farm Workers: California and San Joaquin Valley, 1991, 1996, 2001," Sacramento, Employment Development Department, Labor Market Information Division, 2003, http://www.labormarketinfo.edd.ca.gov/admin/uploadedPublications/516_FarmWorkerEmpEarn2001.pdf.

25. *Ibid.*

26. Authors' interview with Don Villarejo, August 2003.

27. Because agricultural labor and employment statistics do not differentiate between organic and conventional, small and large, family and corporate operations, comprehensive data-tracking variation in incomes and labor practices for workers in these different segments of agricultural production is not readily available. However, interviews with farm workers, labor advocates, and growers indicate similar wages and working conditions. Also see: Felicia Mello, "Hard Labor," *The Nation*, August 24, 2006; Jason Mark, "Us vs. Stem," *Grist*, August 2, 2006.

28. Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams*; Shreck, Getz, and Feenstra, "Social Sustainability, Farm Labor, and Organic Agriculture"; R. Strohlic, C. Wirth, A. F. Besada, and C. Getz, *Farm Labor Conditions on Organic Farms in California* (Davis, CA: California Institute for Rural Studies, forthcoming at www.cirsinc.org).

29. Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams*, 52.
30. Shreck, Getz, and Feenstra, "Social Sustainability, Farm Labor, and Organic Agriculture."
31. California Certified Organic Farmers, "Top Ten Reasons to Buy Organic," <http://www.ccof.org> (accessed October 23, 2007).
32. Authors' interview with Don Villarejo, August 2003.
33. Don Villarejo and S. L. Baron, "The Occupational Status of Hired Farm Workers," *Occupational Medicine: State of the Art Reviews, Special Populations* 14 (1999): 613–35.
34. According to testimony before the California Supreme Court from eleven physicians who either specialized in back injuries or had extensive experience in treating farm workers (CRLAF, "State of California Takes Meaningful First Step").
35. For an overview of the health risks associated with pesticide exposure see, Margaret Reeves, Anne Katten, and Martha Guzman, *Fields of Poison 2002: California Farmworkers and Pesticides* (San Francisco: Californians for Pesticide Reform, 2002) and Jill Harrison, "Abandoned Bodies and Spaces of Sacrifice: Pesticide Drift Activism and the Contestation of Neoliberal Environmental Politics in California," *Geoforum* 39 no. 3 (2008): 1197–214.
36. The exploitative nature of farm work in the United States is well documented. For recent accounts see Daniel Rothenberg, *With These Hands: The Hidden World of Migrant Farmworkers Today* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000 [1998]); Charles D. Thompson, Jr. and Melinda F. Wiggins, *The Human Cost of Food: Farmworkers' Lives, Labor, and Advocacy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); California Institute for Rural Studies (CIRS), *In Their Own Words: Farmworker Access to Health Care in Four California Regions* (Davis, CA: CIRS, n.d.); and Richard Mines, "Farmworker Health in a Binational Context," (San Francisco: Challenges in Agricultural Health and Safety Conference, September 7–9, 2003).
37. Gregory Rodriguez, "Disposable Workers Wanted in Colorado," *Los Angeles Times*, April 30, 2007.
38. Richard A. Walker, *The Conquest of Bread: 150 Years of Agribusiness in California* (New York and London, The New Press, 2004), 66–67. The often-violent process by which California's agricultural working class was formed has been well documented. For historical analysis of California's agricultural working class formation, labor exploitation, and resistance see Tomás Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); George Henderson, *California and the Fictions of Capital* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Cary McWilliams, *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1969); Don Mitchell, *The Lie of the Land: Migrant Workers and the California Landscape* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Devra Weber, *Dark Sweat, White Gold: California Farm Workers, Cotton, and the New Deal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
39. Peter Andreas, *Border Games: Policing the U.S.–Mexico Divide* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000); Kitty Calavita, *Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration and the INS* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Cletus Daniel, *Bitter Harvest: A History of California Farm Workers, 1870–1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981); Joseph Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper: The Rise of the "Illegal Alien" and the Making of the U.S.–Mexico Boundary* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002).
40. Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper*, 40.
41. *Ibid.*, 157.

42. David Goodman and Michael Goodman, "Sustaining Foods: Organic Consumption and the Socio-Ecological Imaginary" in *Sustainable Consumption: Conceptual Issues and Policy Problems*, ed. M. Cohen and J. Murphy (Amsterdam: Elsevier Science, 2001), 97–119.

43. Patricia Allen, *Together at the Table: Sustainability and Sustenance in the American Agrifood System* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004).

44. See, for example, Daniel Jaffee, Jack R. Kloppenburg, and Mario B. Monroy, "Bringing the 'Moral Charge' Home: Fair Trade within the North and within the South," *Rural Sociology* 69, no. 2 (2004): 169–96.

45. CCOF, "Timeline of the Birth of the National Organic Program," *California Certified Organic Farmers Magazine* XXI, 4 (2002–2003): 22.

46. CAFF, "Organic Directory," http://www.ccof.org/cgi-bin/organicdirectory_search.cgi (accessed December 20, 2007); CAFF's membership base includes growers from outside of California as well.

47. CAFF, "History," <http://www.caff.org/join/history.shtml> (accessed October 23, 2007); authors' interview with CAFF Representative, September 2003.

48. California Coalition for Food and Farming, "What is California Coalition for Food and Farming?" <http://www.calfoodandfarming.org/about> (accessed October 23, 2007).

49. Julie Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams: The Paradox of Organic Farming in California* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004).

50. Elizabeth Henderson, "Upper Midwest Organic Farming Conference Keynote Address: Who Should Own Organic?" La Crosse, WI, February 26, 2003, http://www.newfarm.org/depts/talking_shop/0304/moseshenderson.shtml (accessed October 24, 2007).

51. Phil Howard, "Consolidation in Food Retailing and Dairy," *British Food Journal* 103, no. 10 (2001): 715–28; Sligh and Christman, "Who Owns Organic?"

52. Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams*; Samuel Fromartz, *Organics, Inc., Natural Foods and How They Grew* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Inc., 2006).

53. Timothy Vos, "Visions of the Middle Landscape: Organic Farming and the Politics of Nature," *Agriculture and Human Values* 17 (2000): 245–56, 247. Vos provides a thorough overview of the divergent perspectives of organic agriculture activists and the USDA.

54. Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams*, 111.

55. Authors' interview with representative of CA-SAWG, March 2004.

56. Authors' interview with farm labor advocate, April 2004.

57. Authors' interview with farm labor advocate, June 2004.

58. Authors' interview with CCOF Representative, August 2003.

59. *Ibid.*

60. Authors' interview with CAFF Representative, September 2003.

61. Authors' interview with farm labor advocate, June 2004.

62. Authors' interview with sustainable agriculture researcher, August 2003.

63. Patricia Allen, Margaret FitzSimmons, Michael Goodman, and Keith Warner, "Shifting Plates in the Agrifood Landscape: The Tectonics of Alternative Agrifood Initiatives in California," *Journal of Rural Studies* 19 (2003): 61–75.

64. Authors' interview with CAFF Representative, September 2003.

65. Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams*, 176.

66. The June 1993 ruling by Cal-OSHA found that because it requires bending an additional six to twelve inches, hand weeding places additional stress on the back and contributes to lower-back morbidity. The memo stated that action was required to prohibit

these activities, as was intended by Section 3456 of Cal-OSHA rules. As of 2003, that action had still not been taken, despite efforts to come to some agreement with agricultural employers. Source: Labor Presentation, "Minutes of Handweeding Advisory Committee" (Sacramento, State of California Department of Industrial Relations, Occupational and Health Safety Standards Board, February 6, 2003).

67. CRLA representatives testified that, while some growers were willing to fabricate longer, appropriate handles for their tools when approached, others sought to circumvent the ban by switching to hand weeding. One representative further commented that, after the short-handled hoe was banned, he saw all the crews using long-handled tools but that more recently he had seen an increase in use of hand weeding and using short-handled tools (Labor Presentation, "Minutes of Handweeding Advisory Committee").

68. Cal-OSHA established a Hand Weeding Advisory Committee comprised of labor and grower representatives, which met for nine months.

69. Mark Schacht, "Minutes of Handweeding Advisory Committee" (Sacramento, State of California Department of Industrial Relations, Occupational and Health Safety Standards Board, June 23, 2003), 4.

70. Authors' interview with CCOF Representative, August 2003.

71. Authors' interview with organic grower and CCOF Representative, March 2004.

72. Ibid.

73. Authors' interview with CRLAF Representative, April 2004.

74. Western Growers is a grower trade association initially founded to fight labor organizing in the fields. Although it represents large and small growers, large-scale conventional interests dominate it.

75. Authors' interview with organic grower and CCOF Representative, March 2004.

76. State of California Legislative Council's Digest (2004).

77. Authors' interview with organic grower, August 2003.

78. Carl Borden, "Minutes of Handweeding Advisory Committee" (Sacramento, State of California Department of Industrial Relations, Occupational and Health Safety Standards Board, June 20, 2003), 9.

79. Chris Bunn, "Minutes of Handweeding Advisory Committee" (Sacramento, State of California Department of Industrial Relations, Occupational and Health Safety Standards Board, February 6, 2003), 15.

80. Jesus Lopez, "Minutes of Handweeding Advisory Committee" (Sacramento, State of California Department of Industrial Relations, Occupational and Health Safety Standards Board, February 6, 2003), 4.

81. Authors' interview with organic grower, October 2007.

82. A. G. Kawamura, "Minutes of Handweeding Advisory Committee" (Sacramento, State of California Department of Industrial Relations, Occupational and Health Safety Standards Board, March 24, 2003), 15.

83. Authors' interview with CRLAF Representative, April 2004.

84. California Division of Occupational Safety and Health, "Hand Weeding, Thinning, and Hot-Capping Regulation, Section 3456, Hand-Held Tools," <http://www.dir.ca.gov/oshsb/handweedinglanguage.pdf> (accessed November 17, 2007).

85. For a thorough analysis of growers' perspectives on the inclusion of a social component in organics see, Shreck, Getz, and Feenstra, "Social Sustainability, Farm Labor, and Organic Agriculture." For a comprehensive overview of social certification initiatives, see Sandy Brown and Christy Getz, "Privatizing Farm Worker Justice: Regulating Labor through Voluntary Certification and Labeling," *Geoforum* (forthcoming).

86. Authors' interview with representative of the Social Accountability in Sustainable Agriculture Project, July 2003.

87. International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements, "What is Organic Agriculture?" <http://www.ifoam.org> (accessed July 20, 2004).

88. As an accrediting, not a certifying, body IFOAM Basic Standards are standards with which certifiers seeking accreditation must comply. IFOAM accreditation is most widely recognized in Europe.

89. Authors' interview with sustainable agriculture researcher, August 2003; authors' interview with CCOF Representative, August 2003; authors' interview with farm labor advocate, June 2004.

90. Authors' interview with sustainable agriculture researcher, March 2004.

91. Richard Mandelbaum, "Testimony to the National Organic Standards Board," (February 9, 2003). USDA, "National Organic Program Final Rule," Washington DC: Federal Register, December 21, 2000.

92. Authors' interview with organic grower and CCOF Representative, March 2004.

93. The California Agricultural Labor Relations Act of 1975 granted farm workers the right to organize, hold harvest-time elections, and bargain collectively, but farm workers in most states still are denied this right, even though workers in almost every other industry were granted it by the National Labor Relations Act signed in 1935.

94. Shreck, Getz, and Feenstra, "Social Sustainability, Farm Labor, and Organic Agriculture."

95. Authors' interview with CCOF Representative, August 2003.

96. Kari Hamerschlag, "An Assessment of Market Viability for a Third-Party Certification and Eco-Label for California: An Analysis Prepared as Part of the Vivid Picture Project, a Project of Ecotrust and Affiliates, Requested by the Roots of Change Council, Funded by the Roots of Change Fund," <http://www.VividPicture.net> (accessed April 27, 2006). The report states that over 150 eco-labels have been established internationally, a majority over the past decade.

97. Authors' interview with sustainable agriculture consultant, April 2006.

98. Food Alliance, "Who We Are," <http://www.foodalliance.org> (accessed April 17, 2006); Hamerschlag, "An Assessment of Market Viability"; Authors' interview with Food Alliance Representative, April 2006.

99. The SASA project included representation of four accreditation and certification bodies: The Fair Trade Labeling Organization, IFOAM, the Rainforest Alliance, and Social Accountability International. For more information see <http://www.isealalliance.org/sasa/> (accessed April 23, 2006).

100. See Elizabeth Henderson, Richard Madelbaum, Oscar Mendieta, and Michael Sligh, "Toward Social Justice and Economic Equity in the Food System: A Call for Social Stewardship Standards in Sustainable and Organic Agriculture" (October 2003).

101. Authors' interview with farm labor advocate, June 2004.

102. Dana Frank, "Where are the Workers in Consumer-Labor Alliances? Class Dynamics and the History of Consumer-Labor Campaigns," *Politics and Society* 31 (2003): 363-79.

103. Food Alliance, "A Description of the Food Alliance Certification Program and Standards," <http://www.foodalliance.org> (accessed April 17, 2006).

104. Authors' interview with Food Alliance Representative, April 2006.

105. César Rodríguez-Garavito, "Global Governance and Labor Rights: Codes of Conduct and Anti-Sweatshop Struggles in Global Apparel Factories in Mexico and Guatemala" *Politics and Society* 33, no. 2 (2005): 203-33.

106. Elizabeth Barham, "Towards a Theory of Values-based Labeling," *Agriculture and Human Values* 19, no. 4 (2002): 349-260; Laura L. Reynolds, "Re-embedding

Global Agriculture: The International Organic and Fair Trade Movements,” *Agriculture and Human Values* 17 (2000): 297–309.

107. Teri L. Caraway, “Political Openness and Transnational Activism: Comparative Insights from Labor Activism,” *Politics and Society* 34 no. 2 (2006): 277–304; Dara O’Rourke, “Outsourcing Regulation: Analyzing Nongovernmental Systems of Labor Standards and Monitoring,” *Policy Studies Journal* 31, no. 1 (2003): 1–29.

108. James McCarthy and Scott Prudham, “Neoliberal Nature and the Nature of Neoliberalism,” *Geoforum* 35 (2004): 276.

109. Authors’ interview with farm labor advocate, June 2004.

110. Authors’ interview with organic grower, March 2004.

111. Authors’ interview with sustainable agriculture researcher, March 2004.

112. Authors’ interview with sustainable agriculture researcher, August 2003.

113. Authors’ interview with organic grower, August 2003.

114. British Columbia Certified Organic, “Reasons to Buy Organic,” www.certifiedorganic.bc.ca/ReasonsToBuy/#b (accessed July 26, 2004); Organic Trade Association (2004).

115. In addition to the hand-weeding bill, there have been other recent legislative moments. For example, sustainable agriculture and labor groups were on opposite sides of California legislation to require mediation in cases where contracts were not settled in a timely manner, according to a farm labor advocate interviewed April 2004.

Christy Getz (cgetz@nature.berkeley.edu) is an Assistant Cooperative Extension Specialist in the Department of Environmental Science, Policy and Management at the University of California, Berkeley. A sociologist by training, she conducts applied research and outreach focused substantively on the following areas: social justice in sustainable agriculture, food security and sustainability in agriculture and natural resource systems, and participatory capacity building within cooperative extension. Her research currently focuses on social justice issues in the organic agriculture and small-farm sectors.

Sandy Brown (sandybrown@berkeley.edu) is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Geography at the University of California, Berkeley. She has a background in community-labor organizing and organic farming. She is currently conducting research about the role of fair trade certification across multiple scales of production for her dissertation, entitled “Fairness for Whom? Regulating Labor through Voluntary Certification and Labeling.”

Aimee Shreck (ashreck@mac.com) is Research Director for the California Faculty Association, the labor union representing faculty in the California State University. Her research interests include the fair trade movement and the relationship between the movement for sustainable agriculture and social justice concerns. More recently, her work focuses on collective bargaining, labor relations, and equity issues relating to public higher education.