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Migration and Corporate Control of Agriculture

As control over world agricultural production becomes increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few large corporations, many people have raised concerns about the implications for consumers and for small and family farmers. These concerns have centered on the little-known potential impacts of genetically modified foods, the potential environmental impacts of large-scale intensive agriculture, and the inability of small farmers to compete on world markets. Less attention has focused on the connection to migration, but it is a direct and dramatic one. As transnational agro food corporations take advantage of large US subsidies and market access to dump their excess products on Mexican and Central American markets, they are able to further increase their profits by hiring as cheap migrant labor the very rural people from those countries who have been forced off their land by floods of subsidized agricultural imports.

On October 17-19, 2002, a group of nearly seventy activists, academics, and policy advocates concerned with the growing political influence of large agribusiness corporations convened outside Chicago to explore means of collectively challenging corporate control of global agriculture. Participants represented a wide array of constituencies affected by the overwhelming market power and political influence of large transnational agro food corporations, including consumers, small farmers, environmentalists, and agriculture and food processing labor unions. The gathering marked the launching of the Agribusiness Accountability Initiative, a newly-created and forum sponsored by the Center of Concern and the National Catholic Rural Life Committee.

The meeting began with an analysis of the current state of global agribusiness market and political control, as well as activist attempts to challenge it. Participants identified two fundamental and inter-related areas of shared concern: 1. the oligopolistic control of global agricultural markets exerted by a small number of transnational corporations, and 2. the tremendous influence these corporations wield in the formulation of national and international agriculture and trade policies.

Corporate agribusiness's political and economic power is visible in a number of current trends in global agriculture, including: the worldwide drive towards export-oriented agriculture; subsidy regimes in rich countries (especially the U.S. and the European Union) which favor export-oriented corporate agriculture, and increased privatization of "points of control" in the food production process, notably land, water, and genetic resources.

The increasing control of a few agribusiness corporations has drastic implications for small producers throughout the world, for all food consumers, and for the environment. Although

large agricultural corporations claim that they are bringing the benefits of “cheap food” to consumers, participants in this AAI Forum noted that these corporations are essentially externalizing the costs of production, by exposing the public to the environmental, health, and economic costs of the transition from local production networks to corporate, vertically integrated food production.

The Enlaces América project came to be concerned with agricultural policies and international agricultural markets because current trade and economic development policies in North and Central America, which favor export-oriented agriculture, are devastating agricultural sectors throughout the region, displacing millions of small farmer, and forcing rural residents to migrate to urban areas or the U.S. Small farmers in the U.S. and the European Union are also marginalized and forced off their land as they lose the ability to compete in global markets. Other sectors of society – including consumers who want access to healthy, reliable food; laborers in agricultural production and meat processing; and people concerned with the environmental damage caused by industrial agricultural production – are also adversely impacted by agribusiness consolidation of market and political power.

In order to do move forward on these issues, activists and advocates must educate and organize a broader array of impacted sectors about the nature and repercussions of corporate control of agriculture. Participants also agreed that their alliance-building efforts must be truly international, since corporate agribusiness market and political activities are global in their impact and reach. They observed that there are a number of opportunities for forging international alliances of small farmers, including ones that span North/South boundaries. The real issue at play is how much power producers have when they come into contact with the marketplace – and the answer is “very little” for small farmers in the U.S. and the European Union, as well as those in the developing world. Participants also suggested that the issue of accountability for transnational agribusiness activities offers significant possibilities for cross-border organizing.

Other key constituencies who will need to be brought into a global movement against corporate control of agriculture include consumers and agribusiness labor. As participants considered how to effectively develop global consumer-farmer-labor networks, they emphasized the need to move beyond the notion of “fair trade,” which for many people implies networks between consumers in the “north” and producers in the “south”, and towards the notion of “fair food”, which is more encompassing. Rural communities throughout the world are currently suffering the brunt of corporate agribusiness’ deepening market consolidation and political influence, but ultimately everyone who eats is part of and affected by global processes of agricultural production and trade.

For more information about the Agribusiness Accountability Initiative, please contact Peter O’Driscoll at the Center of Concern at podriscoll@coc.org, or visit the AAI website at at <http://www.coc.org/focus/private/aai.html>.