



The Workers Behind Our Groceries: A Book Talk with Benjamin Lorr — Transcript

Hosted by the Aspen Institute's Food & Society Program and Economic Opportunities Program,
June 21, 2024

Description

People in the US spend more than 10% of their disposable income on food each year. About a trillion dollars of this spending goes toward purchasing food to eat at home, much of it spent at grocery stores and supermarkets. Yet, very few people understand or know about how food makes it to this last step of the food supply chain and ends up on the shelves of their local store. In "[The Secret Life of Groceries: The Dark Miracle of the American Supermarket](#)," author Benjamin Lorr traces the history and evolution of the modern-day supermarket, exposes the grocery supply chain, and reveals the often exploited and underpaid labor that goes into making sure shelves are stocked. Lorr paints a vivid picture of how agricultural and meat processing workers, fisherman, truck drivers, and grocery store workers, among others, often endure poverty and sometimes worse as they work to feed our country.

In this book talk — hosted June 21, 2024, by the Aspen Institute [Food and Society Program](#) and [Economic Opportunities Program](#) — [Maureen Conway](#), vice president at the Aspen Institute and executive director of the Economic Opportunities Program, delivered opening remarks and [Corby Kummer](#), [Aspen Food and Society](#) interviewed author [Benjamin Lorr](#), about this book, "[The Secret Life of Groceries: The Dark Miracle of the American Supermarket](#)."

For more information about this event — including video, audio, transcript, speaker bios, and additional resources — visit our website:

<https://www.aspeninstitute.org/events/the-workers-behind-our-groceries-a-book-talk-with-benjamin-lorr/>

Speakers

Maureen Conway (Opening Remarks)

Vice President, The Aspen Institute; Executive Director, Economic Opportunities Program

Maureen Conway serves as executive director of the Institute's [Economic Opportunities Program](#) (EOP). EOP works to expand individuals' opportunities to connect to quality work, start businesses, and build economic stability that provides the freedom to pursue opportunity. Maureen founded EOP's [Workforce Strategies Initiative](#) and has headed up workforce research at the Aspen Institute since 1999.

Maureen also curates a public discussion series at the Aspen Institute, [Opportunity in America](#), which brings together voices from business, labor, policy, human services, media, academia, and others to discuss the challenges experienced by many in today's labor markets and new ideas for addressing these challenges. In addition, Maureen oversees EOP's leadership development programs, which connect innovators, both within communities and from across the country, to peers working to help low- and moderate-income Americans access opportunity.

Benjamin Lorr

Author, "The Secret Life of Groceries: The Dark Miracle of the American Supermarket"

Benjamin Lorr is the author of "The Secret Life of Groceries: The Dark Miracle of the American Supermarket," an investigation into the human lives and workers at the heart of the American grocery store. Benjamin is also author of *Hell-Bent*, a critically acclaimed exploration of the Bikram Yoga community that first detailed patterns of abuse and sexual misconduct by guru Bikram Choudhury. Lorr is a graduate of Montgomery County public schools and Columbia University. He lives in New York City.

Corby Kummer (Moderator)

Executive Director, Food & Society at the Aspen Institute

Corby Kummer is executive director of the Food and Society program at the Aspen Institute, a senior lecturer at the Tufts Friedman School of Nutrition Science, and a senior editor of *The Atlantic*. In recent years, the Food and Society program launched new initiatives that include the Food Leaders Fellowship, Conversations on Food Justice, Safety First: Protecting Workers and Diners, Food is Medicine Research Action Plan, and Open Access: Equitable Equity for Food Businesses.

Kummer is the author of *The Joy of Coffee* and *The Pleasures of Slow Food*, the first book in English on the Slow Food movement. He has been the restaurant critic for *New York*, *Boston*, and *Atlanta* magazines and a food and food policy columnist for *The New Republic*. A weekly commentator on food and food policy on WGBH's Boston Public Radio, Kummer has received six James Beard Journalism Awards.

Transcript

Maureen Conway (00:07)

Good afternoon, and welcome, everyone. Thank you so much for your patience with our technical difficulties this afternoon. My name's Maureen Conway. I'm a vice president at The Aspen Institute and Executive Director of the Economic Opportunities Program, and it is my great pleasure to welcome you to today's conversation, The Workers Behind Our Groceries: A Book Talk with Benjamin Lorr. This conversation is a collaboration between the Food & Society Program and the Economic Opportunities Program here at The Aspen Institute and is the third and final event in our three-part series, The Hands That Feed Us: Job Quality Challenges in the Food Supply Chain.

Before we start, I want to just do a quick review of our technology. All attendees are muted. Please use the Q&A button at the bottom of your screen to submit and upvote questions. Please do share your perspective, ideas and experiences related to today's topic in the chat. Also, do please take a moment to respond to our quick feedback survey, which should pop up on your screen when you leave today's session. We encourage you to post about this conversation on the social media platform of your choice. Our hashtag is #talkopportunity. If you have any technical issues during this webinar, you can please send us a message in the chat or send us a note at EOP.program@aspeninstitute.org. This event is being recorded and will be shared via email and posted on our website following the close of the session. Closed captions are available. Please use the CC button at the bottom of your screen to activate them.

I just want to say a quick note of thanks to my colleague Corby Kummer and his team at the Food & Society Program for our collaboration on this series. It has been really terrific working with them on our central passions around good food and good work and how they should intersect more. This series has helped us really explore ways in which our food systems fall short, to put it mildly, in providing good food and good work. I'm also thrilled we're closing this series with the discussion of Benjamin Lorr's excellent book, *The Secret Life of Groceries*. He really goes through workers all across the food chain, and it's just an excellent set of issues to use in our closing session. So with that, let me hand the mic over to you, Corby, to take away today's discussion. Thank you both so much.

Corby Kummer (02:34)

Maureen, and really the thanks are all to Maureen, Matt Helmer and the Economic Opportunities Program, which is an inspiration to all of us who work at The Aspen Institute. I invite everybody to look on the Economic Opportunities Program website and our Food & Society site where we have Food Leaders Fellows - we're about to announce our third cohort - who work on the food system and job quality, but no one is better informed on this than Benjamin Lorr. His "*Secret Life of Groceries*" is a landmark book about the food system, about the people who work in it, and it really opens your eyes to your so-called "enlightened choices" when you go to the supermarket.

Also, I have to say I, for decades, have been a food writer, and I was working with my agent on a book about grocery stores, a backstage Look, I didn't tell Ben this, and I thought, "Nobody's done this. I'm going to go underground and work in a grocery store." I would've done a much worse job than Benjamin Lorr. He did a beautiful job, and he did such great reporting and great writing. And because we're starting late, I'm starting with him right away, and I'm going to read you something you said at a Q&A about labor and about going underground or just working in a food store. It happened to be a Whole Foods in Bowery in New York, which Bowery, whatever its associations, it's now a very upscale Manhattan neighborhood. This is an upscale market, probably entitled... There's a great quote about what people think their food choices say about them, but I'm going to start about labor.

"I was really surprised," Ben Lorr has written in *The Secret Life of Groceries*, "the ways these minimum wage jobs have changed. I've worked a lot of minimum wage jobs over the years. I worked them 20 years ago in high school, right after college. I have a memory of them almost tinged by nostalgia, but just like everywhere else in the chain, labor in retail has become more 'efficient.' Industry-wide practices, like variable scheduling, on-call scheduling, just-in-time scheduling where employees don't have a fixed schedule, rather one that varies week to week by up to 40% or only receive their schedule a few days in advance, have devastating effects. You can't get a second job. There's no schedule to schedule around. You can't arrange child care, your take-home pay swings wildly, and the changes in hours worked." That's a brilliant observation. Could you also paint a picture for us, what it was like to work in supermarkets, and also, you did other kinds of food labor. And welcome, Ben Lorr!

Benjamin Lorr (05:25)

Yeah. Hey, thanks so much for having me. First, apologies for robbing the world of your undercover grocery expose. I think we're all at a loss for that. One, it's great to just be here and start off with this. When I started off this book, I did not really think I was writing a book about labor, but it really rapidly transformed into one just by talking about the pressing issues in the food system that define groceries, that define the factors that get food to shelf. It all boiled back to labor. It all boiled back to all these hidden actors.

Your question on what it was like to work in a retail food store, I had the most dilettante-ish experience doing this, because I was working while writing with a significant other source of income. I don't want to make too much of it as a way of understanding. I will say I ended up working in two different chains, one of which isn't even featured in the book. It was just background for me to make sure that what I was saying about the Whole Foods I was working at was not some type of crazy atypical experience. Overall, there were a lot of pleasurable aspects of the retail grocery experience. At this point, the retail grocer, and I were behind the counter. I was not at the checkout, which is a mind-drubbing part of the store. I think maybe in a different place, but you are there as customer service. You're there to provide a smile for people.

I was front-facing, and so I think the experience that I had was very different from somebody who works behind the scenes, who works at a dark store, who works in a warehouse, who works even below, carving the fresh fruit, carving mold spots off for the prepackaged fresh. My

experience was one that was probably not so different from the retail experience of 20 years ago. This scheduling piece that you pointed out was a market change in terms of not knowing when you are going to work, not knowing the duration of your shift walking into it, or at least being prepared from prior experience that you might just be told to go home because the day was slow and, thus, just not having any fixed sense of an income.

In that way it was a mixture of truly, and I think Whole Foods really selects, and I go out of my way to say this, they really select for kind of an outgoing, extroverted employees who genuinely like social interaction, that part of the job as much as we might want to think if that's an oppressive structure, that's us, I think, projecting onto the people we see in the food system all of the things that are going on behind the scenes that we might understand in the back of our minds are going on. We think that this retail interaction is something troubling, but I think it's a drop in the bucket.

Corby Kummer (08:51)

Two questions. Did your colleagues have a choice as to whether they got a front-facing job or not, and did you hear a lot of complaints backstage about where they were positioned in the store? Were you plucked out because you clearly had an education and you would match much more the kind of customers there? Did you volunteer for it? In other words, how much autonomy did you have, and how did you feel that compared to the autonomy of your colleagues? Then I'll ask another question.

Benjamin Lorr (09:24)

Yeah, I think there were a number of frustrations. Any retail job, low paying job, when you get to questions of choice around autonomy, you get to the question of, "Well, how much choice do you have when you're in a system where you have to work and jobs are scarce?" There's always this thin threat of being a team player at a place like Whole Foods where there is a vocal culture that encourages you to speak up and advocate for yourself, and there is a silent threat that if you're not a team player, you might be asked to play for a different team at a different store because you're not a fit for the culture.

So there is this dual mindset that I don't want to pay short shrift to because I heard a lot of people talk about that. There was a lot of frustration with the pace of advancement in Whole Foods. I think there was not a lot of frustration, however, in where people were placed in the stores. I think people were happy to be where they were, and there was an ability to transfer after you were working there six months from place to place, and there was enough turnover at the store that if you made it through those six months, you could probably find there would be an opening in the store, and you were credibly received in your department you'd be able to move right along.

Corby Kummer (10:47)

And can you tell us, first of all, did it change your personal behavior toward other workers, or were you always unfailingly gracious as a customer, so you needed no change at all? Then tell us about other jobs you worked while researching the book.

Benjamin Lorr (11:05)

Oh, gosh. I think the one thing that probably changed is when you're on the other side of these retail interactions, you realize just how over-the-top effusive many people are in their thanks to you. So I would have these moments where people would make extended, lascivious eye contact with me as a clerk and I'm handing them their packaged fish. You've seen the Saturday Night Live sketch where they're saying, "Buh-bye, buh-bye." It was the exact opposite where they're trying to take this small intimate moment and extend it into this meaningful interaction where they're thanking you so much for your service. If anything, I became more self-conscious that I played into that dynamic my whole life and have been going through retail interactions with ridiculous stopping over-the-top praise to someone who does not care about it at all because they're more concerned with the other things.

Corby Kummer (11:59)

Did this have anything to do with the timing of COVID and the heroicizing of so-called essential workers, which I fear vanished after COVID?

Benjamin Lorr (12:07)

Yeah. No, that's a great point. This was all pre-COVID. All the research of the book had concluded by fall of 2019, so my experience was different, but I think you make a great point that when you were a retail worker, especially during this phase of COVID, you were deemed an essential worker. People are banging pots and pans as they stay at home, and you are forced to go to work and you get a hero's pay bonus for two weeks, maybe two months, and then you watch as there's a giant stock buyback at the end of the year because these grocery chains are literally making record profits, and your hero pay disappears. You go back to normal. I think it bred a lot of resentment.

Corby Kummer (13:00)

One of the questions that came in, because luckily many participants did send questions in beforehand, to your knowledge, did any of these COVID-19 bonuses have an effect on the wage structure, and do you suppose that the kind of disillusionment or kind of morning-after effect you've just been describing has anything to do with the strengthening of union attempts among food service workers?

Benjamin Lorr (13:27)

Oh, undoubtedly, undoubtedly. I think there was a real solidarity that developed during COVID. I think it coincided with a high watermark, at least a local high watermark, for union relationships, and it certainly was an additive factor there. I think that it was a period where we're talking to frontline grocery workers, it was extremely stressful, same thing that was happening to teachers, these are frontline workers who are getting burnt out at never before seen levels. They were making very little money while white collar professionals were told that their patriotic duty was to stay home and limit care and limited contact. They were very attuned to that hypocrisy.

Corby Kummer (14:31)

For a while, Amazon, after it bought Whole Foods, announced a whole redesign of its stores, which it hasn't abandoned, but it hasn't really gone forward with, in which only the front of the store with fresh produce and counters, like the one where you were having people smile a too long as you were serving them, would remain, and all of this behind the scenes work of the non front-facing workers would be roboticized. How should we view that? Is that a direct assault on jobs and wages, or given the often kind of inhuman conditions of that work, is it a good thing? Where should we be thinking about that attempt?

Benjamin Lorr (15:19)

I will say it's something I've thought a lot about. I thought a lot about it in the context of trucking where the automization of trucking is coming. It's something that's beloved. It's going to be an earthquake for this extremely important sector where the majority of the states, it's the number one employer. I think after spending time with those jobs, it became impossible for me to defend business as usual and impossible for me to romanticize the idea of maintaining those jobs. On the other hand, I think it's a social question that, again, the grocery book was great at surfacing these things that can become microcosms of larger flags in how capitalism is structured right now, larger flags in how our trade relationships with other countries are, but it doesn't provide answers. It's just the tip of the iceberg.

I think the real danger for me is the jobs that aren't able to be automated, aren't able to be roboticized, which there are numbers of which, but that get then shuttered behind the scenes. When you're a front-facing worker who's selected because you have a nice smile and a great interpersonal demeanor, your job is going to be okay. If you are then put behind the scenes in a dark store or in a roboticized Amazon store where you are essentially transformed into a human robot, your working conditions are going to deteriorate, the remaining incentives to treat you like a human being just diminish a little bit more.

I think that shift is something that COVID very much accelerated with, you have 30 minute grocery delivery, all of that stuff really accelerated these trends. I think that's a very dangerous, bad disturbing trend. We are not good as a society at labor enforcement locally, we're not

good at it internationally, and so the more that we put people into vulnerable jobs behind the scenes in industries where there's a pattern of abuse, that's not great.

Corby Kummer (17:40)

Would you become a supporter of the attempt to give more of those jobs to robots if they're inhuman already?

Benjamin Lorr (17:51)

Well, right now, we don't have a society that's structured for the rise of robots. We need to give people basic living. If that was coupled with some type of UBI, universal income, and again, these are things that are way out of my pay grade as a writer. I have not written a book on UBI, I don't understand well enough all the ramifications, but I don't think without a strong social safety net we can be like, "Aha, this job is so horrible, what we're going to do is roboticize it, and you're going to be better off." Because right now, you'll be just left without a job, and that's obviously a worse situation.

In fact, that is the situation overseas where you have people who enter in true bonded labor, enslaved labor situations where they have no source of income, and they're so desperate to be active participants in their own lives that they put themselves in extremely desperate situations to get a job. Yeah, great, let's roboticize things, but let's build a real safety net for people that they can survive without those jobs. Until then, I think no, no, even if it's a horrible job, it's probably better than nothing, which is again, not the solution I'm advocating for either.

Corby Kummer (19:06)

You mentioned trucking, and you just slipped in the fact that it's so familiar to you, and it was not to me and maybe to many of our viewers, that it's the number one industry in many states. I found that staggering. I never think about it. You also quoted someone, either a person or an industry-wide saying, that a lot of the jobs are sharecropping on wheels. Can you talk about what that statement means and what it was like for you to observe and embed with truckers?

Benjamin Lorr (19:39)

Yeah, absolutely. So this was extremely eye-opening for me as well when I got into it. First, trucking, enormous. 10 billion tons of freight trucked around this country every day. That breaks down to about 350 pounds per man, woman, child per day that's being shipped on your behalf. There's just 350 pounds out there right now that's your 350 pounds. It's a staggering amount of our lives that are being moved around. It's a staggering amount of labor that goes into it. As you said, it's the number one profession in a majority of the states, or at least it was when I was writing this, and it's an exceedingly dangerous job. It's on the top 10 lists of most risky professions every year, and it's transformed. As you were saying, truckers will call it sharecropping on wheels. I

certainly describe in the book a system that is very close to sharecropping or to a form of bonded labor.

That's very different from our romantic perceptions of it. I grew up with this image of the 1970s Smokey and the Bandit, outlaw trucker, CB radio kind of an outlaw, but he was lovable, and that's the trucker I thought I was going to be covering in this book, and that is a very outdated model. There was an intense deregulation of the trucking industry spanning Carter to Reagan, so it's not actually something we can just say, "Oh, this was an evil Republican, Reagan conservative deregulation thing."

Trucking was tightly controlled by a few cartel-like carriers, it was radically deregulated, and the truckers themselves, as part of that deregulation, became a low cost bidder. The cost for shipping freight plummeted, which was great. It reduced prices, but it made the trucker themselves a commodity in the fleets in the carriers. This had a number of ripple effects that I could get into. Probably the one I spend the most time on in the book and the one that I found the most threatening and the one that really dovetails on this sharecropping metaphor was the way that trucking carriers use CDL licenses and career education and training programs and then the promise of becoming an owner-operator in lease programs who gained financial control over truckers.

Essentially, they make outlandish promises to the quality of a trucking job, recruit rapaciously from people, a lot of veterans who are coming back, minimum wage retail workers. There's stories of them recruiting right out of homeless shelters. They make these huge promises. You go, you sign on, you accumulate a heavy amount of debt as part of your education program to get into that. They then work you at training rates. Because trucking, like any job, and especially because it's so dangerous, it's not an unskilled job. It may be blue collar, but it's absolutely not unskilled, and so you're not equipped to just drive a big rig when you walk in off the floors of a Walmart that you had been working at and thought you're going to walk into this six-figure job. You need to train.

Those training rates are extremely low, they're extremely profitable for the trucking company, and they wield the debt that you have to prevent you from being a free actor in the market and going from carrier to carrier, so you're beholden to a single carrier, and it just sets up lots of abusive structures that keep people beholden at one place, and then because you're contractually obligated at one place, when they decide that you're no longer profitable for them, whether that's because your training rates are up, whether that's because you complain a little too much, they "starve you out," which is reduce your miles, and you get flushed from the system.

The trucking industry that I followed had turnover from 96% to 112%, which is, again, a mind-boggling turnover. Turnover at a top law firm, which was deemed a crisis for the profession, is at about 17%. Turnover at Starbucks is 60% or so. So just to put that in perspective, we're talking about the fleet will turn over a hundred percent of its members a year, and the recruiters, they're all paid on commission. They're trying to recruit about three people a week at the big firms, so they make these outlandish promises, and they get people in. They pass them with debt, and then they wield that debt like a threat.

Corby Kummer (24:55)

Can we assume that a lot of the turnover is people who simply can't support that debt load and abandon it?

Benjamin Lorr (25:04)

I think it's a mix. One, trucking, as we said, is a gargantuan industry. There are many, many, many different types of truckers. The type of trucker that I focused on in the book is a CDL-licensed, over-the-road trucker, OTR, who is the backbone of the grocery industry, so that's why I focused on them. There are movers, and there are local truckers who are going from job site to job site, picking up construction. There are many different forms of trucking, so this is all a caveat to say that there's turnover that is between sectors which may not be as big a warning sign as the turnover, which is what you're saying, which is certainly a sizable amount of people who are just flushed out of the profession, who sign up for lease-to-own program and are told their owner-operators of their own truck, but they have to pay off that truck and essentially never get a chance to make enough money to pay off that truck and then exit the profession with less money than they walked into after giving God knows how many miles and time of their life.

Corby Kummer (26:30)

You all make the point that they are strapped literally into a job that leaves them unhealthy with very little recourse to exercise and very little ability to find fresh food, as those of us with a wilderness of choice, find, whenever we go to a highway truck stop because we're forced to, and then we think, "No, I'll just wait until I can go to a Whole Foods or something we can afford to do." So hearing about-

Benjamin Lorr (26:58)

A hundred percent. Also, I just would say it's an extremely isolating profession. I think you are stuck in a 12X12 box if you're running a team, which means you're doing it with another person, which is the industry's preferred model. You're sleeping in that truck on top of your coworker, essentially, in a bunk bed situation. It doesn't take much imagination to understand how that situation can become extremely abusive, especially if you're a female trucker. You're partnered with a male trainer who controls whether or not you ascend in the career ladder and make it out of being a trainer. You're on the road in a most isolated situation. That gender dynamic I go over in the book. I didn't talk to a female trucker who didn't know somebody who had a bad experience, and I talked to as many female truckers as I could. But it's not even a gender thing. If you're stuck with an abusive male person, male bunkmate who's slowly losing his mind because you're on the road for 14 hours every day, it's not a great situation either.

Corby Kummer (28:06)

So this is a very sobering picture of jobs we don't think about when we waltz into a supermarket. I think that some of us, especially probably the people listening to this talk, are aware of field and food-raising jobs, the difficulties of them. Economic Opportunities Program, we at Food & Society have worked a lot with the Coalition of Immokalee Farm Workers, which has raised national visibility and concern about workers' jobs in fields, and there are other organizations, and it's something we can never think about too much. Are there other unseen jobs you found in your research we should be thinking about as we walk into a supermarket?

Benjamin Lorr (28:53)

Oh, gosh. Yeah. First, all praise the Coalition of Immokalee Workers(CIA). I'm so glad that you brought them up. If we get a chance to talk about the positives, I think we should circle back there. Look, I think I was unaware of just the network of brokers and buyers and manufacturers, how a manufactured product gets to shelf, especially one that starts off as a raw commodity that's sourced, there's just so many components. I think I grew up with this image of a supply chain that was boxes with arrows, and they were basically like boxcars on a train that they're pretty linear, and no.

In the book, I look at the Thai shrimp supply chain, and I use that as a microcosm, because I think it is very indicative of a number of complicated supply chains that make up backbone commodities that we use. It's a six-layer supply chain, and if you were to draw those arrows, you'd just have hash marks all over because it's very intersecting, it's still a small broker, both the people who are sourcing the raw ingredients for the aquaculture that shrimp come from are small holders with individual boats. A lot of the shrimp producers are still small holders. That, itself, is fractured into hatcheries, into people raising mature shrimp, into processing plants.

The volume that the modern supermarket depends on, these chains depend on, depend on a volume of supply that has so many small actors, and each of those actors is involved in a war for lowest price. The grocery store is structured around, we haven't really talked about the big structural forces in the grocery store, but it's structured around volume, and it maintains that volume by maintaining very small margins and a very low price so that people buy a lot. The way you get an advantage is by keeping that price low, and the way that you keep that price low is that you put a lot of pressure on your buyers, put pressure on the importers and the exporters and the manufacturers to give them a lower price. They put pressure on the people who are producing for them, and they put pressure on the people who are doing the raw materials, and that pressure just gets compounded all down the chain for lower and lower price in a way that just completely amplifies when you get to the bottom and often comes out of workers.

Your question of where the hidden actors are, from the brokers who aggregate things, that was a big source of surprise for me, how powerful they are, how subject they are to price controls, and what a role they play in supply chain visibility or invisibility in terms of sourcing from a wide swath of producers and being able to offer a manufacturer plausible deniability about where their product come from, especially if you have three or four brokers that you're sourcing from,

and they all just assure you that, "Yeah, of course those farms are great." You're not going to know, because there's so much work to go into the supply chain on that level and source from individual local producers, especially in something that is not 'agribusinessy' and not super vertically integrated, all these kind of things that I think a lot of people walking around food think of as really bad. We lift up the family farm and we lift up the smallholder, but what it does is it creates a lot of invisibility in the supply chain, because sourcing from all sorts of smallholders requires a lot of hidden actors.

Corby Kummer (33:01)

This is very easy to have us plunge into despair. There isn't anything we could do about these brokers who allow all this deniability through the stepwise progress up the supply chain. We already have questions coming in about, "Oh, come on, please, what can I do?" We've already gone over this. I just have to read something that's so telling and so good that you said in an interview. "Our food options allow us to express meaning. That is, food that allows us to demonstrate who we want to be, whether that's worldly and sophisticated, thin and athletic, decadent and indulgent, ecologically virtuous, connected to our ancestors, distinct from our kid, et cetera, down the line of human aspiration." So our buying choices and the romanticism of voting with our buying dollar, does that work? What can we do in a grocery store to try to improve labor conditions?

Benjamin Lorr (34:10)

One, I would say the take home message of this book for me was an abandonment of this vote with your dollars mentality that I grew up with at Eric Schlosser. Michael Pollan really introduced me to it. Eric Schlosser and *Fast Food Nation*, a book I loved, was very influential to me growing up. With *Make It Your Own Way*, the Burger King slogan inverted, and guess what? We can create the system we want by making informed consumer choices. I guess I reached the end of that paradigm in this book because of things like the Thai shrimp industry where there were so many levels of obscurity between top and bottom.

The well-intentioned people within the industry, who were buyers whose whole job it was to source, people who are working in NGOs in the sector whose whole job it was to demonize and call out bad actors, couldn't tell you who to buy from and who not to buy from when you are talking about a certain scale. Of course, they could point to one or two good farms, but when you get to a certain scale, they would throw up their arms. They wouldn't have great ideas of how to reform a supply chain.

Now, this isn't universally true of every category in the grocery industry, but certainly for some of our big commodities, it is. Then you take that dynamic of invisibility, and you add in marketers and you add in an auditing system that is geared to making promises, which again, we haven't really touched on, and you get these layers that interrupt you from the actual conditions on the ground and that make a choice, a supposedly informed choice, not super informed.

So that's the negative. Now let's get to the positive, which I think is there are programs like the Coalition of Immokalee Workers that you mentioned, Migrant Justice in Vermont, doing their Milk with Dignity program that are doing really fantastic things, amplifying workers' rights, really shifting away from an auditing system that guarantees our food. The auditing system is basically a snapshot of a company through pre-arranged visits. They go, they check, they check financial records, they don't typically interview employees, it's just looking. It is debatably okay for empirical things like food safety where you're tracing a pathogen, and I think you can make an argument at least that it has had some role in that reform.

When you get to something like a withheld paycheck at a place, and especially a withheld paycheck that was withheld six months ago from when the auditor visits in a language that the auditor doesn't speak, it becomes meaningless. So these new programs that really emphasize worker-to-worker education, raising worker rights, and putting hotlines and apps. I know it sounds silly, but workers have access to smartphones, giving them ways to raise their voice. A huge factor in this is do these organizations have a permit to go on-site and talk to workers, engage with workers directly? Auditors don't have that right. They come for a pre-arranged visit, often with extreme restrictions on who they can and cannot talk to.

These programs that are worker-driven, social responsibility, I think of that as a real bright spot, a real place where we could pour more resources in. The downside is they're not scalable. They inherently work on local knowledge, deep in roots, building trust with workers, and so you're not going to get a program like that and then poof, now it's going to cover even the whole East Coast. Migrant Justice is great in Vermont. They're not something that you can just take and transplant to Texas.

Corby Kummer (38:13)

Okay. We'll go onto the websites of CIW, Coalition of Immokalee Workers, CIW.org, and Migrant Justice. Will I only arouse more despair-inducing cynicism if I ask about third-party certifiers? If there are little marks on labels, Animal Welfare, Marine Stewardship Council, I'm in favor. I'm partial to one called How Good because I know the founders, who try to rate food on a whole variety of parameters including worker treatment. Have you found any that you trust or any that you personally look for when you buy food?

Benjamin Lorr (38:55)

How Good, I have not a bad thing to say about How Good, actually. In general, you then have to just drill to the next level of these things. Again, things that are based on snapshot audits, no good in my opinion when it comes to things like environmental justice, when it comes to workers' rights. If you're looking for a gluten-free product, the gluten-free label is probably great, but it's not helpful if you are looking for fair trade. I don't put a lot of stock in that, to answer your question. I look for employee-driven cooperatives. Bob's Red Mill is a great example. Anything where there's a 30% ownership stake by employees, there's some evidence there that that is a place where we can ... It's a real leverage point where employees feel bought in.

None of these things are panacea though. If you're a manufacturer that's employee-owned, you still have the same low-price incentive to put pressure on your suppliers, and so your employees might be good, but you're still going to be putting pressure down the chain. Systemic change, I think, really is going to come from empowering workers, whether through unions, whether through these worker voice programs, through big systemic things like we need trade treaties with police enforcement attached to it. We have trade treaties that say the most beautiful things about illegal labor and forced labor, and then when you come to try to enforce that, there are delays, there are court rulings with completely unclear enforcement mechanisms, right? These are violations of workers rights that involve often imprisonment, stealing of wages. You need police action to combat that. You don't need an NGO to step into that space. I'm an advocate of structural change, I guess, after this book, not about consumer choice.

Corby Kummer (41:03)

Great. I remember that that is something you strongly, it's a real takeaway of your book, this voting with your fork. I love Eric Schlosser's book, which is the most eye-opening book about labor practices in the US since the second World War. Policy change, what should we be advocating for?

Benjamin Lorr (41:26)

Yeah, I think just that laundry list I just gave. I am really thinking about our trade policies and clear dispute mechanisms, building that into the new treaties we're negotiating in Asia. There were some new advances, I think, with the new North American agreement with Mexico. Obviously, many people found them disappointing. I think they were a step forward. They were not a step forward enough. But the more that we can have policy level shifts that are pro-Union, a big fan of this, the current FTC. It's kind of controversial. They're picking fights with people, they're losing some of those fights, but I think at least they're trying, at least they're enforcing these rules with Robinson-Patman and other places. They're taking rules from the book and they're raising them into the public sphere, and that's going to have a ripple effect on corporate behavior. Whether or not they're successful with the challenge, I think, we don't know. We'll see.

But I think robust enforcement of antitrust laws and, again, getting people in office who understand that and are willing to take that risk as opposed to worrying about it and keeping it in a theoretical space. There's trade treaties, I think. Just a general pro-worker, pro-unionization framework. The answer is not always unions. There are plenty of privately owned places that don't negotiate with unions, but have the threat of informed workers to keep them honest. I think that those are really important ingredients.

Corby Kummer (43:17)

Great. Pro-worker businesses, trying to understand which are genuinely pro-worker. We'll be flooding your email box saying, "Is that one good? Is that one good?" Then smiling a little less gratefully and just making a work-like transaction...

Benjamin Lorr (43:36)

Give them a good Bronx cheer.

Corby Kummer (43:40)

All of your advice and your experience have been invaluable. I have a heavily marked up copy of the book, *The Secret Life of Groceries* by Benjamin Lorr. It is the book everybody should read and teachers should assign, and all of our Food Leaders Fellows will be required to read. Thank you, Benjamin Lorr, for joining us today, and thanks to our friends at the Economic Opportunities Program for making this whole terrific series possible.