

Transformations in agricultural non-waged work: From kinship to intern and volunteer labor

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Abstract

What is the relationship between unpaid and non-waged work and the survival, and even growth, of small- and medium-scale farms? This research brief examines this question through examining the growth of internships and volunteer positions (non-waged work) on ecologically oriented farms, with a focus on trends in Ontario, Canada. Through reporting on the qualitative and quantitative findings of our research, we track the

decline of family labor throughout the broader agriculture sector and the emergence of new forms of non-waged work on ecological farms. We focus on the continuities and changes at play in shifting forms of farm work and discuss the new forms of knowledge exchange occurring on farms, the precarious economic situation of many farms, and the gendering of non-waged work. We conclude the brief by raising several challenging questions regarding the politics and sustainability of farmers' dependency on interns and volunteers.

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Introduction

How have small- and medium-sized farms survived in the face of intense competition from large, industrialized agricultural operations and within the

context of a corporatized food system? As farmers search for creative pathways to navigate the fraught political and economic landscapes of agricultural production, what has been the enduring and changing role of non-waged workers in the reproduction of farms?

These questions are as old as capitalized agriculture and are at the heart of a growing trend that has seen interns and volunteers working on ecologically oriented farms (including agro-ecological, organic, and biodynamic operations) in Ontario, Canada, which is the focus of this article, but also across North America and Europe. In this research brief we report on how groups of interns and volunteers (non-waged workers) have come to replace unpaid family members as one means of negotiating the modern agriculture sector and the challenges of running a profitable operation.

We argue that a transformation has occurred in the nature and configuration of non-waged work on farms. Historically, operating and sustaining farms depended on family members that would work without receiving a formal wage.¹ However, as kinship labor has steadily declined over the last five decades, internships and volunteer positions have greatly expanded, to the point where there are currently several hundred ecological farms in the province of Ontario offering non-waged “farm experiences.” In short, while there has been a dramatic decline in on-farm family workers throughout the agriculture sector, there has been a countertrend in the ‘alternative’ sector, which has seen growing numbers non-waged workers who come from urban and suburban locations.

This argument that we elaborate on below emerges from our study of new forms of non-waged work on ecological farms. We conducted two province-wide surveys of Ontario farmers making use of non-waged workers and have drawn data from the Canadian Census of Agriculture to augment our own data set. We have also completed

over 80 semistructured interviews with farmers, non-wage workers, and industry observers (e.g., nonprofit organizations, lawyers, and researchers). Our broader research focuses on the dynamics, challenges, and possibilities associated with intern and volunteer labor on these farms. We explore the social, political, and economic forces defining such forms of work and the experiences of farmers and workers.

The Decline of Unpaid Family Labor

Harriet Friedmann explains that the “survival of the farm may well depend on the ability to invoke familial obligations for women and children to participate in labor in the present and for children to inherit and ensure the continuity of the farm” (1990, p. 208). For generations farms have been able to survive and, at times, outcompete larger capitalized operations by making use of the unpaid, and often unseen, work of women and children (Smith, 1985; Van der Ploeg, 2013). As Kubik explains, “Typically, women farmers are not paid for [various types of household and farm work] even though it subsidizes the farm and frees up a large portion of the farm’s consumption costs” (Kubik, 2005, p. 87). However, in the Canadian context the reproduction of farms through unpaid family work has perhaps reached its limits as family members are increasingly either abandoning farm life entirely and/or are engaging in off-farm work, which, as many have noted, doesn’t necessarily mean relief from their on-farm activities (Vail, 1981; Whatmore, 1991).

Over the past five decades in Canada there has been a steady decline in the number of unpaid family workers on farms and a concomitant rise in paid laborers. Cloutier notes, “In 1946, unpaid family workers were the second largest group [i.e. less than self employed farmers without paid help; more than paid workers and self-employed farmers

¹ While many women have worked on farms outside of a formal wage, at times they have received a share of farm revenues by virtue of their kinship relationships and also have shared the farm amenities they contributed to directly through their labor. At the same time, feminist contributions to the literature have signaled how much of women’s on-farm

work goes unpaid in a formal sense and have highlighted the power dynamics that creates such a situation. As such, we retain the term ‘unpaid’ out of fidelity to feminist scholarship that signals the gendered inequalities between who is formally ‘paid’ and ‘unpaid’ while recognizing forms of nonmonetary ‘compensation.’

with paid help] and represented 30% of all employment in [Canadian] agriculture” (2001, p. 3). However, by the end of the twentieth century, this was the smallest group relative to the other three. In the same period, paid laborers saw their share of farm employment jump from 12% to 42% (Cloutier, 2001). In Ontario specifically, paid employees now represent nearly 52% of those working on farms, while 43% are farm operators and 5% only are non-waged family workers (Statistics Canada, 2011). These changes stem in part from the consolidation and industrialization of agricultural operations, insofar as larger farms tend to require a higher number of paid employees compared to smaller operations. While an increasing number of women are now farm owners and/or operators, many are also working off-farm (Leckie, 1993; Trauger, 2004), there is no longer the same percentage of unpaid family workers supporting farms, at least in the conventional sector.

The Rise in the Use of Interns

Over the past two decades, growing numbers of internships and volunteer positions have become available to people seeking farm experiences and training in ecological production methods. While short-term volunteer positions have been available through programs like World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF) for over 40 years, in the early 2000s farmers in Ontario began searching for a more reliable and invested labor force. At the same time, an increasing number of aspiring ecological farmers were seeking ways to build their knowledge and skills that were unavailable through institutional programs. Many of these individuals approached experienced farmers as potential mentors. Like-minded farms began establishing networks such as the Collaborative Regional Alliance for Farmer Training (CRAFT) and Stewards of Irreplaceable Lands (SOIL), which sought to link aspiring interns with on-farm training experiences and provide guidance and support to farmers and interns on expectations and best practices. In most cases, interns work as many or slightly fewer hours than farm owners and receive a small stipend, room, and board, as well as hands-on education in return.

From an initially small group of farms,

agricultural internships have exploded across Ontario (and across the global north). While it is difficult to assess exactly how many farms are using non-waged workers, our survey results suggest that at least 250 farms in Ontario are making use of interns and volunteers, and we hypothesize that the actual number could be significantly higher. Of the 139 farmers who provided complete responses to our surveys, the average farm had 4.2 non-waged workers, compared to 1 waged worker paid less than minimum wage and 1.1 paid minimum wage or more. In our sample there were 571 non-wage workers, but the total number across Ontario could be considerably higher. The challenges of generating a representative sample, however, make an accurate estimation difficult (see Ekers, Levkoe, Walker, & Dale, 2015).

As noted above, non-waged family members make up only 5% of the overall agricultural workforce in Ontario, whereas on ecologically oriented farms make up 65% of the workforce. These figures demonstrate that the use of non-waged work on “alternative” farms is significantly higher than on most farms across Canada. In this respect, while non-waged work on farms endures, interns and volunteers represent the new face of such work, replacing unpaid family labor. This shift is divided sectorially, however, as the numbers of non-waged workers are declining on “conventional” farms they are growing on ecological farms. These points are captured in the following remarks from an organic farmer in Ontario who was paying his son a salary to work on the farm: “Our son has just moved back home this year and he has a career in the film industry, but he’s come back to work part time and may work into being here full time. I’m not sure whether that will work. And our daughter is away...I don’t know. She may still farm. *I’ve often thought that we’ve replaced our children with apprentices* [emphasis added].”

These emerging patterns of non-waged work on farms also highlight changes taking place in how farming knowledge is being passed on to a new generation of farmers. Historically, farm children acquired specific, grounded knowledge through working on the farm while also becoming accustomed to the rhythms and demands of farm life. Similar forms of knowledge exchange are now

occurring through internship experiences that often span an entire season of production. As one intern explained: “I’m interested in learning some techniques that have been passed down through the generations [but this] is not a multigenerational farm.” Another intern expressed similar sentiments when asked why he was willing to work without a wage:

Because they’re experienced, people pay money to take this sort of thing from farmers with their experience. To get it for free, you know, room and board and everything, I’m on the up compared to some people. There are schools where you can go and spend thousands of dollars to learn these things that for a little isolation, I’m learning. [I’m working] with farmers that have 40 years experience—that’s a lot of time.

In these remarks we see how an exchange of knowledge is being facilitated by non-waged work arrangements. To note, many of the farmers we interviewed were also the products of internship programs and went on to establish their own farms, with access to land being the key hurdle they needed to overcome.

While there are many changes occurring in the agricultural sector regarding the dynamics of non-waged work on farms, there are also significant continuities at play. One of these continuities is the precarious economic situation of many ecological farms. Throughout history, small- and medium-scale farming has almost always amounted to a precarious livelihood, even if some industrialized operations are profitable. Our survey results suggest that ecological producers are struggling financially, with many reporting fairly meager on-farm incomes and revenues. We suggest that the use of interns and volunteers must be understood within this economic reality. Respondent farms reported average annual gross farm revenue of CA\$94,786 and a median of CA\$40,000. Notably, however, 54% of the respondent farms reported annual gross farm revenues of less than CA\$50,000. Perhaps more illustrative of the strained financial situation of the farms we surveyed is the personal

net on-farm income that farmers drew from their revenues. On average respondents reported a personal on-farm income of only CA\$13,629. Given the economic challenges that many farmers face, numerous survey respondents and interviewees noted that paying workers a minimum wage might push their operations into bankruptcy. One farmer and member of a nonprofit organization supporting internships reflected on this issue: “One thing I think is common to all of them [i.e., farms hosting interns], if we are being honest... whatever their motivations are, they’re solving a labor challenge on their farms.”

Another continuity between historical and contemporary forms of non-waged work is the gendering of this kind of labor. Historically, much of women’s work on farms has gone unpaid, and our survey suggests that 60% of interns and volunteers are women. Over 70% of the interns and volunteers we interviewed were women. When asked about why more women than men are interning and volunteering on farms, a woman farmer responded:

A lot of these farms are community development farms... They’re people-centric. It’s about teaching. It’s about interactions in the community. Women have been doing education and social work all along and this is education and social work and growing food. Well, who’s been doing gardens? It’s more traditionally been women so I don’t really think it’s surprising [that women are interning and volunteering].

Here we see how historical gender divisions of labor, and more particularly care work, are identified as the reasons behind the high percentage of women interns and volunteers working on farms. To briefly summarize, this research suggests that while non-waged work is an enduring feature of small- and medium-scale farms, there are both continuities and changes in the social character of the work.

Conclusion: A Sustainable Model?

To conclude, we want to point out a central question that must be explored by both practitioners

and researchers moving forward, that is, the sustainability of interns and volunteers as a means of supporting ecological farms. When done well, the exchange of labor for training is a provocative challenge to more formal and institutional forms of farmer training that can be misaligned with the desires of aspiring farmers and more established operators. However, those involved in the sector, and commentators like us, need to question whether ecologically oriented farms can continue to sustain themselves and even grow through relying on non-waged workers. And more importantly, should they? Are these arrangements fair and just for all involved, and can farmers and food movements square the ecological gains made on farms with questions of labor justice? One intern on a farm in western Ontario reflected on these issues: “The idea of sustainability behind the whole creation of the community supported agricultural model—like finding a sustainable way of farming, but having volunteers—is that really a sustainable way? Is it really going to last, this whole thing of having free labor?” The issues discussed in this brief are very much in motion and the questions above are being actively negotiated. It is clear that much more research and political discourse are needed about the labor required for producing a just and sustainable food system. 

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