



Farming in the U.S. and the Opportunities for Correcting Past Harms

John Boyd Jr. is the civil rights leader you've never heard of. For decades, he's been fighting the U.S. government's discrimination against Black farmers like himself, securing billions for them to keep their lands—and keep the legacy of Black people in agriculture alive. It's a legacy that traces back to slavery, when Black Americans built the agricultural wealth of the United States.

Today, farm workers are predominantly Latino, especially in the West, and are witnesses to their own decades-long history of mobilization for the rights to fair wages and working conditions in the fields. In California, that legacy now includes a booming business of legal cannabis cultivation. This episode explores the throughlines of racism and economic exploitation in agriculture, but also where great opportunity for reconstruction of the industry—and reparations for past harm—can exist, if we know where to look. Reported by Paulina Velasco.

Follow John Boyd Jr. on Twitter [@JWBoydNBFA](https://twitter.com/JWBoydNBFA).

Pamela Kirkland: I'm Pamela Kirkland, a reporter and producer. The conversation around reparations can seem both overwhelming and contradictory. On one hand, it's hard to imagine how our country could ever fully atone for the centuries of injustice and atrocities committed against Black and Brown citizens. On the other hand, there's the belief that reparations are not only achievable, but essential to healing and moving forward. What we know is that reparations are owed to the descendants of the enslaved, and frankly, the bill is past due. This next episode is reported by LWC Studios' Managing Producer, Paulina Velasco.

Paulina Velasco: For over 200 years, the wealth of what would become the United States was built in part by enslaved people working in agriculture. [The free labor that produced cotton and other crops was the basis of a booming international economy.](#) This created enduring throughlines in the agricultural industry in the ways that farm workers and agricultural laborers were and continue to be undervalued.

Understanding the experience of agricultural workers in the U.S. throughout our history allows us to showcase opportunities for reparations and reform. [Many descendants continue to work the land as farmers,](#) but Black farmers have faced discrimination from the US government for decades. They are continually denied the kinds of federal loans that subsidize most agricultural businesses in the U.S. In the 1980s and '90s, one man decided enough was enough.

John Boyd, Jr.: When you hear about the history that's laid out on some of the national scales, they go from the '60s straight to Black Lives Matter. No, you skipping the chapter. It was called The Black Farmer's Movement.

Velasco: [John Boyd, Jr. is a fourth generation farmer in Virginia and longtime advocate for Black farmers.](#) It all started when he filed a discrimination complaint through his local civil rights office, based on his experience when the US Department of Agriculture rejected his loan applications. As he shared the complications he encountered, he heard that other Black farmers were having similar experiences.

Boyd: I founded the National Black Farmers Association along with Linwood Brown and Sylvester Warren and other key advocates.

Velasco: They began organizing trips to DC to voice the concerns of Black farmers. Then, the first class action lawsuit granting Black farmers' compensation for decades of discrimination in federal loan programs was settled. But over 85% of potentially eligible farmers missed the window to file claims. John Boyd, Jr. doubled down on his advocacy and was instrumental in a series of actions including a second lawsuit, congressional legislation, and promises from the executive branch throughout the 2000s and 2010s, all aiming to give Black farmers compensation for decades of discrimination. John calls this the most effective civil rights story that you've probably never heard of.

Mr. Boyd, thank you so much for being here.

Boyd: Thank you so much for having me.

Velasco: Tell me about a day on your farm. What's your day look like? What brings you joy about working in agriculture?

Boyd: Well, my day starts early, every morning about 5:00. My day is out, so I'm out, and on a day like today, the first thing I would do is check on my crops. We are still planting soybeans, so I've been spreading fertilizer and stuff like that. Moving equipment from farm to farm. The farm brings me joy. Being outside and being with mother nature and the sounds of the birds and the smell of the land. If people want to know what freedom is, working on your own farm and looking at your crops on your own farm has a sense of freedom for me.

Velasco: How long has agriculture been in your family?

Boyd: I'm a fourth generation farmer, so farming has been in my family going back to slavery. My mother's parents were sharecroppers, and they both died as sharecroppers, Lee and Ruth Robinson, in my lifetime, with no access to running water inside of their home. They had outside facilities, and they really, really were very hardworking people. And my father's father, his name was Thomas Boyd and Martha Boyd, they owned their own farm. They were very active in the church, in the community, very dignified Black people in the community.

Velasco: Can you explain why, to somebody that doesn't follow agricultural policy or how it works, can you explain why government loans, USDA loans are so important for farmers?

Boyd: We see it, as a Black farmer, USDA being the lender of last resorts. So if you can't obtain a farm operating loan from USDA, then you probably won't get one. So farmers need farm operating loans every year to plant their crops and harvest their crops, to pay for machinery breakdown and cost of labor, and pay for seed and lime and fertilizer, and all of the things that farmers need to plant their crops

where we have to have those resources readily available in order to run our farming operations.

And that's what's been so detrimental for Black farmers. Where at USDA, it takes 287 days on average to process a Black farmers loan request, and less than 30 days to process a white farm loan request. We are losing land, Black farmers are, at three times greater rate than any other race in the country, and we've lost millions of acres of land at the turn of the century. 19th century, we owned nearly, there were nearly 1 million Black farmers in this country, tilling 20 million acres of land. And today, there's less than 50,000 Black farmers tilling 3.5 million acres of land. So, a long story short, we are facing extinction.

Velasco: Which is really fascinating to hear you talk about because you've been studying these numbers, you've been reciting this for decades, right? So you're saying this is the case in 2023 still?

Boyd: Yes. My father was a very simplistic man and he would ask the question, "John, did you get the money or you didn't get the money? And whatever happens in the middle doesn't count." [We didn't get the money, and that has been the story of Black farmers and this country and primarily Black people in this country.](#) 40 acres and a mule. We didn't get 40 acres and a mule. We were promised 40 acres and a mule. We were promised nearly \$4 billion in debt relief. We didn't get it, so we see it as broken promises by our own government on behalf of Black people in this country.

Velasco: We talked a little bit about this when we chatted over the phone, but I found it really interesting that you described, we're talking about sort of the means to the end, and so you've already listed many things that you've done including litigation, including lobbying Congress. You've described also these different means as also obstacles to the final result, right, because things get bounced around between the branches and the courts.

Boyd: It's a triangle effect. You have to have advocacy, you have to have the courts, and you have to have our own Congress here in the United States. If you're missing one point on the triangle, you can't get results. So, the two lawsuits that I spearheaded on behalf of Black farmers, one settlement came in 1997 for \$1 billion, and the other settlement came on December 8th, 2010 for \$1.25 billion under the Obama Administration.

Each one of those, and debt relief, followed 10 years later. Every 10 years, I was able to get some sort of victory, but it shouldn't take that long. A whole decade to get a settlement done is too long because we've lost so many Black farmers during that journey. I've led all of these rallies and protests. I rode my mule and wagon to Washington, DC for 17 days. I've rode my tractor to Washington to get the Late Filers Bill passed in 2010.

So I did things a little bit differently. Instead of asking a member of Congress for a meeting, I would find out what door they went into the Rayburn building, and I will be waiting there with my mule or I'd be waiting there with my tractor, and probably the most unrecognized civil rights leader and most effective civil rights leader in United States history. But I was able to secure billions of dollars for Blacks, and no one's talking about it.

Velasco: What would you say keeps you going?

Boyd: I would say it's the faces that I see. I see the face of my grandfather, Thomas Boyd. I see the face of my grandfather, Lee Robinson. I see the face of Linwood Brown, I see the face of Sylvester Warren. All of these great men, John Moses Bonner. All of these guys played a tremendous role in my life in guiding me in advocacy, and those are the faces that I see every time I hear the word no. Those are the faces and the voices that I hear.

Velasco: In 2012, I think it was, you said that the cases that you were working on in your advocacy had nothing to do with reparations. Do you still feel that way?

Boyd: Well, I've said I've never used the word reparations on purpose. Now, the cases that I've done is reparations. I want to be very clear. There was an apology by the government. There was a monetary settlement, so I was able to secure \$2.5 billion in those cases solely for Black people, which has never been done in history. So it was reparations. What I didn't do was tout it as a victory for reparations, because when you say reparations on Capitol Hill, you're almost shooting yourself in the best foot. Members of Congress quickly shut down and they see it as, "This is something that I don't want to do." So I never used the word reparations. I just kept pressing it on as it's a part of history that we have to fix. And I see reparations as the same thing, a fix that has to be addressed in this country for wrongdoing against the Blacks.

We were the only group of people who never really got land. Blacks never received any sort of reparation for the act of slavery. Probably one of the most brutal acts on American soil was carried upon a group of people that was stolen from their homeland. But we're here, and we've contributed to a country. We helped build it, and we've always been good stewards of the land and good farmers. The same way, my daddy was a good farmer, he called himself a master farmer. I said, "Dad, what's a master farmer?" He said, "Anybody who can farm out here in this society with no money is a master farmer." And we're still here. We're still here farming, and if that isn't a definition of resilience, people, I don't know what is.

Velasco: [According to the most recent complete Census of Agriculture](#) conducted in 2017, just 1.8% of small, medium, and large scale family-owned farm producers identified as Black, the majority in the small scale category. [Only about 1 in 100 farmers is Black](#), and [Black farms operate on less than 5 million acres of the more than 893 million acres of total farmland in the US](#).

There's a long history of resilience and activism in the agricultural industry. Across the country, in California, farm workers, predominantly immigrants, Latinos and Filipinos, began mobilizing for better workplace rights in the 1960s.

Dolores Huerta: Thank you. Thank you very much. Muchas gracias. Thank you.

Velasco: That's a clip of [Dolores Huerta at a live recording](#) of the LWC Studios' podcast, [Latina to Latina](#). Dolores was, of course, a founder of the United Farm Workers Movement of the '60s. With Cesar Chavez, she organized the nationwide Delano grape strike, eventually achieving greater workplace protections for the laborers and the fields of California. Here she is describing how she argued with Cesar Chavez about whether they should boycott potatoes or grapes.

Dolores Huerta: People don't think of California when they think of potatoes, they think of Idaho. Then I think we should boycott grapes because California produces 90% of the grapes of the United States of America. I was in charge of boycott on the East Coast, so what I did is I went after the small independent stores to take off the grapes. We would pick at the stores, and they would eventually take off the grapes. And so we got the independent stores and then we went after the small chains, and then we got them to take off the grapes, and then went after the larger chains. And then finally, the biggest chains.

Velasco: The grape boycott lasted five years and forced the country to have a conversation about how the people who were harvesting their food were being treated. The labor force in U.S. agriculture was originally enslaved people, brutalized by a calculated and inhumane system, and [this foundation has had enduring consequences for workers in the industry](#). Farm workers were [specifically excluded](#) in the 1930s from the National Labor Relations Act, which first gave workers the right to unionize, and the Fair Labor Standards Act, which codifies basic workplace protections.

Southern politicians in particular lobbied against extending workplace rights to Black workers whom they wanted to keep subjugated under Jim Crow. [The repercussions of this decision came to be felt by immigrant farm workers in the west, mostly Latino, but also Asian and Indigenous migrants](#). California laborers eventually [gained the right to unionize in 1975](#), but working conditions are still difficult, and this sector of the agricultural labor force lives in dire poverty [in one of the richest economies in the world](#).

[Gianna Nino-Tapias](#) is a Stanford medical school student who grew up in a farm worker family in eastern Washington state. She went viral in 2020 when she tweeted out a picture of the blueberry she was picking. She was working the fields on her summer break saying she was paid just \$7 for picking two gallons of berries. She's been doing seasonal fruit picking, she says, since she was 14. [Here she is, on Latina to Latina](#).

Gianna Nino-Tapias: So there's no plumbing out there, so they bring out porta potties, And your drinking water comes from a cooler that they have to move closer to you. Every time you move lines or move blocks of farm land, they have to move the bathrooms and water closer to you. Because we're working at a per piece phase, so we're paid per unit of blueberry gallons that we pick, and every moment that you spend out there is used towards your salary. And so, leaving to the bathroom isn't really an option because you spend what, five minutes walking out, a couple minutes in the bathroom, and then five minutes walking back?

And it's just not feasible when you're seasonal migrant farm workers and you have to make that income last for the rest of the year. And so, a lot of people would hold their pee in or not use the restroom or not drink water because they don't want to leave to go to the restroom. I would hear of people getting kidney stones all the time.

Velasco: She talked about how hard it was to work the field while on her periods, the back, knee, elbow and joint pain farm workers develop over time. These experiences inspired her to go into the medical field. Gianna described what conditions were like in 2020 during the height of COVID-19.

- Nino-Tapias: A couple of weeks ago at the end of July, some farm workers were accidentally sprayed with pesticides back home. And that was so frustrating for me to see, when you're breathing in pesticides, obviously, that's going to impact your lungs, and if you have inflamed lungs, sick lungs, the virus can get to you and have greater impacts. That has just shown me that even though we're seen as essential, our lives are probably not worth protecting, and that is so devastating for me to hear because that's my family, that's my community. Those are people that I've known my whole life.
- Velasco: [In 2023, the University of California Merced Community and Labor Center released its first California Farmworker Health Study.](#) Some of the findings: squalid living conditions for predominantly renting farm workers. [Working in wildfire smoke.](#) Almost a quarter of workers who are women say they have irregular periods. Two out of five workers say their employers never provided written heat illness prevention plans, which are mandatory. And when it comes to their ability to demand better conditions, over a third of the surveyed farm workers said they'd be reluctant to file a report against their employer for violating workplace health and safety rules, and nearly two-thirds said it was because they'd be afraid of losing their job or facing retaliation.
- Velasco: [More than half of California's farm workers are undocumented.](#) California has a [\\$50 billion agricultural industry and employs over 400,000 people.](#) The Public Policy Institute of California reported in 2023 with 24 million acres being farmed and over 68,000 farm operations [recorded by the USDA in 2022.](#) Part of that labor force is the farming of cannabis, considered a market ripe for investment in entrepreneurship, [recreational marijuana became legal in California in 2016,](#) but it was planted and harvested in the state long before that.
- Rob Chlala: My name is [Rob Chlala](#). I am an Assistant Professor at Cal State Long Beach's Department of Sociology, and also working with the UCLA Labor Center on the Cannabis Worker Collab.
- Velasco: Rob and his team are conducting the first ever California Cannabis Worker Survey, an effort to understand what it's like at the front lines of the cannabis industry. The goal—to inspire better policies and encourage new organizing in this sector of the economy. I started by asking Rob what got him into this work.
- Chlala: Whenever I talk about this work, and it's actually related to why and how I do this work, I really have to stop and acknowledge all of the people, all of the community members who have lost their lives and livelihoods through the war on drugs in the last 30 to 40 years. It's a particular privilege to be here to talk about how far we've come because we've lost so many people along the way.
- Velasco: Could you tell me a little more about your background and growing up in Los Angeles?
- Chlala: My family came from Lebanon when I was five years old, so we moved to the Inglewood area, and I grew up there. Coming from a civil war context into a context of where I saw brutal police violence in the streets of Los Angeles, grew up in the time of the uprising, and so really saw another kind of militarized violence. And in that, came across the cannabis economy repeatedly as a source of economic survival, eventually for myself and many of the people that I was growing up around, and also as a source of kind of healing and self-medication.

My dad worked in agriculture. He worked in produce trucking, and worked the same routes of which cannabis was moving alongside many other plants. So I got to see firsthand industrialized agriculture, and having seen that growing up, having myself turn to opportunities in the cannabis informal sector, the underground, and seeing just how many people thrive and live off of that, so far from the images that we have of drug economies and the Hollywood version of illicit markets, I wanted to really give an opportunity for people to share their experience, especially as legalization barreled forward.

Velasco: So that gets us sort of into what you study, which is the ways that the cannabis industry, now that it's legalized, is looking more and more like agriculture across the U.S. And you also talk a lot about worker mobilization. Farm workers in California have a long history of unionization and mobilizing for their rights. So, how is cannabis fitting into that picture as well?

Chlala: Workers have made tremendous strides in terms of pushing for more access to unions. They've shaped some of the laws directly. So, for example, you can't Uberify cannabis delivery. You can't have independent contract work and cannabis delivery work, which is a huge benefit to workers. But I think the thing right now to pay attention to is the looming threat of cannabis monopolization and corporate consolidation.

There's a group of new larger entrants into the cannabis space, and some of those entrants are putting a lot of pressure on folks, not giving folks access to safety and equipment, putting people out in the heat and the smoke and all the things that California farm workers experience. And right now, there's a flurry of news articles about this. And many of those news articles paint cannabis as exceptional as this outlawed agricultural space in which there's allusions to the Mexican mafia or Chinese investors, or all of these racialized images that have long been part of our conversation on the war on drugs, depicting them as responsible for these egregious labor violations.

But the fact of the matter is, if you go down the road from any of these places to cut flower farms to strawberry farms, to where we produce the bulk of U.S. agriculture, you're not going to see that very much different conditions. And so, the idea that cannabis is somehow this exceptional zone of violence belies the fact that the more cannabis becomes an industrialized agriculture, the more it conforms to the egregious practices in the larger agricultural industry.

Velasco: Right. You think the framing is off?

Chlala: Yeah, I think the idea is often the initial news of these deaths on the job or the discovery of a labor camp often comes through a press release from a sheriff's department, from local enforcement authorities who want to, of course, exceptionalize it in order to justify more raids and more attacks on these cannabis facilities.

Velasco: Well, so how does this framing that we're talking about affect how we look at solutions, like how we analyze the real problems that are there and then come up with solutions?

Chlala: Yes. So that's, I think, the key. So I think there's so much work to be done in agriculture in California. It's also a state that has led the way in innovative labor organizing and new practices, and one of those things is a worker-driven

enforcement model. So workers educating workers in the same industry, workers going out to do outreach, workers building community and building spaces for people to report and take action together. And then linking folks to unions, right? Because the answer that has been, that that exceptionalizing model brings us, and that even unfortunately is being instituted through right now, attempts to do enforcement by the Department of Cannabis Control, is sending people in and doing raids.

If you're an undocumented worker who's working in a cannabis field where you feel like your life is under threat, people coming in, guns blazing, who are likely to put you in the deportation pipeline are not the people you're going to be wanting to talk to. You're going to see your employer at that point as your only protection, or you're going to just be, you may actually be deported. And so, those kind of solutions don't do anything.

Velasco: Yeah. Once we, we're talking about framing, this is when we were talking before the interview, I started to see a little bit of that everywhere. The Chairman of the California Assembly Public Safety Committee, calling himself a cannabis cop, and just that choice of words, it starts sort of popping out to me everywhere.

Chlala: Yeah. No, and I'm like, that's fine if you also are going to be the lettuce cop, if you're going to be the cop for any other major production. Strawberry cop, I mean, please, we could use one of those instead. But there has never been any benefit to these enforcement driven models except for the people who get to do the enforcement. They get inflated budgets, they get fancy toys, and then the people who are really struggling and suffering at the front lines never benefit from them. And it's really interesting too, because that also precludes conversations on what real repairing of the war on drugs means, right? We could be having a conversation about how to actually invest in massive cannabis taxes that are being proffered by the legal market into real reparative solutions.

Velasco: What do reparative solutions look like, and are you hearing that from the workers that you're talking to? Do they want some of these solutions, unionization and mobilization?

Chlala: The most common things that folks want are really, one, just recognition of the importance of their work and the value of their work. Folks in those stores love really interacting with people and building relationships and connecting them to the plant and medicine and healing. The other kind of repair that folks talk about is really questioning what happens to all the tax money. They see those receipts, literally. They see how much money gets in the stake offers, and they see, and they question, "What would it mean to actually reinvest that in my community?" They go back home, many of them to working class communities of color throughout their state, where folks are trying to make rent add up, in rural communities especially, where they're seeing a lack of infrastructure and services.

And to them, it means reinvesting in places where, for the longest time, the bulk of money went to police budgets. The other conversation we have when we extend beyond the circle of workers themselves, to conversations with community affected by the war on drugs, they say they would like to see investment in job opportunities beyond cannabis as well.

Velasco: There's definitely these narratives of opportunity and entrepreneurship for people that were disproportionately targeted by the war on drugs, people of color. And

then there's this darker side of worker exploitation and the legal cannabis industry being sort of swallowed by just all these commercialized agriculture and its problems. How do you square these two sides of the equation, and how do you feel like there's limits, maybe, to the potential the industry could have to offer opportunity and entrepreneurship to people?

Chlala: Part of how I deal with that contradiction is thinking about what, that there's not just going to be one version of the industry that emerges out of this, right? Unions have been able to crack through and create a floor by unionizing multi-state operations. And then, we also want to think about what is the larger pie in the sky ceiling, I guess, or breaking that ceiling too, a possibility, by building more cooperatives, by building more worker-owned enterprises. And then the third thing is thinking beyond the economy itself and a marketized relationship.

Thinking of how can we create legal structures to reignite things like the cannabis buyer club model, which was the model on which dispensaries were based. They came out of particularly out of the queer movement during the HIV/AIDS crisis. You could get free medicine. It was all worker run and operated, and these were also community spaces. You'd go into a buyer's club, you'd have access to mental health services, to other art spaces, to things where people were built and created community. And later, in a broader connection between the queer community and the disabled community as well. So finding a range of opportunities for the industry to exist so that we can preserve both non-market and market relationships.

Velasco: Rob, thank you so much.

Chlala: Thank you so much. This means so much.

Velasco: At the root of the U.S.' agricultural industry are Black farmers and Latino farm workers. One group holds the legacy of the past, while the other represents the evolving landscape of the industry. Both are fighting for a more equitable future.

Special thanks to John Boyd, Jr. and Rob Chlala. You can follow John on Twitter at @JWBoydNBFA, and follow Rob's work on Instagram at Cannabis Worker Collab. You can listen to the full interviews with Dolores Huerta and Gianna Nino-Tapias on LWC Studios' podcast, Latina to Latina.

Pamela Kirkland: This podcast is meant to be enjoyed in an order that makes the most sense for our listeners. Choose your reparations journey and keep the conversation going.

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CITATION:

Velasco, Paulina, reporter. "Farming in the U.S. and the Opportunities for Correcting Past Harms." *Still Paying The Price*, LWC Studios. July 24, 2023. StillPayingThePricePod.com.

Produced by

