The call to support the South Central Farmers seemed straightforward. Latino farmers in inner city Los Angeles fighting to keep land given to them by the city. Touted as the largest community garden in the US, the 14-acre South Central Farm was plowed under in 2006 after a land ownership dispute that entangled the city of Los Angeles, neighborhood residents, and immigrant farmers who had worked the land for twelve years. This is a convoluted story of private land expropriated by the city, handed over to the farmers for more than a decade, and then sold back to the original owner for the same purchase price. From the opening aerial view of acres of verdant gardens in the midst of an industrial desert, to shots of bulldozers plowing down corn while the farmers hang from the fence in tears, there is an undeniable dimension of tragedy. The Garden, a 2008 film by Scott Kennedy, only begins to peel back the layers of complexity in a case study that shapes political and community organizing with visceral dramatic turns.

The characters and story line are far more complicated than they first appear. The farmers become divided into two camps—the incumbent farmers and the “organizers,” such as Tezo and Rufina. While the film uses familiar tropes to frame the narrative, there are indications that some farmers viewed them as newcomers more concerned with their political agenda than with farming. When the farm is criticized by the local community for using public land to provide financial gain for a small number of farmers, the activist leaders attempt to restrict the number of plots each family may use. They claim to be enforcing rules agreed to by all of the farmers, but their approach is heavy-handed and met with resentment that leads to violent confrontation.

The current status of the farm is a painfully familiar one. While the farmers have found other land and are growing once again, as of June 2018 the 14 acres remain empty—a blight of food, job-creating industrial applications or community amenities. The Stop Community Food Centre in Toronto, an organization that works to increase access to food by linking local urban agriculture, community networks, and anti-poverty advocacy. The Stop coordinates cooking classes, drop-in meals, permaculture workshops, a greenhouse, and an experimental shielded garden. For more information, see www.thesop.org.