# When Students Meet the Sweatshop

A new wave of social responsibility comes to US campuses, and women lead the way.

by Andy Douglas

{mosgoogle}When Molly McGrath attended a talk on sweatshop labor by Charles Kernaghan, a speaker with the National Labor Committee, the University of Wisconsin-Madison student knew she had found a cause to work for.

Kernaghan described the appalling conditions of workers who stitch clothing for U.S. retailers at apparel factories in El Salvador: women and girls hunched over sewing tables in cramped, dusty rooms, working long hours for pennies.

“I was not really an activist until then,” McGrath said. “But I was a feminist.” The progression from one to the other seemed both logical and necessary. The sweat labor issue was connected to so many of her generation’s concerns—women’s rights, the environment, human rights, labor rights, consumerism—that it seemed to lend itself seamlessly to the possibility of a widespread activist movement.

The economics themselves were damning. A typical college baseball cap that retails for $19.95 may have earned the worker who stitched it about eight cents.

McGrath jumped headfirst into a growing activist coalition, coordinated on the campus level by a nationwide student group called United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), in concert with a host of labor, human rights and interfaith advocacy groups.

Many students are making the leap to activism that McGrath made. At the forefront of the anti-sweatshop coalition, students have organized sit-ins, street theatre, demonstrations and rallies to pressure their educational institutions to examine their ties to sweat labor. Apparel companies like Nike and Reebok supply schools with athletic or employee uniforms, and are also licensed by schools to produce clothing bearing the schools’ logos—a $3 billion a year industry, located mainly in countries with cheaper and less stringent labor standards.

Student activists are pushing for codes of conduct to be signed between universities and companies, which prohibit the kinds of abuses Kernaghan described. In recent months, many such codes have been signed.

Gender-Equality Activism

This is very much a women’s issue. Ninety percent of sweatshop laborers are female; 40 to 50% of them are under 18. Often forced by their employers to take pregnancy tests or use contraception as a way to “maintain productivity,” these women also face regular sexual harassment. As Sherene Judeh, a University of Iowa undergrad, explained, “Women are economically disadvantaged everywhere, including the U.S. But in developing countries especially, the responsibilities of both taking care of the home and working outside the home falls on women.”

It’s also a women’s issue because a growing number of younger female activists are taking leadership roles in the movement.

Noted Judeh, “There are so many excellent women in this movement. They bring tremendous resources, coming from various backgrounds, studying in various fields, and with different levels of experience.”

Gender equality has evolved as an important value among this generation of activists. According to U of Iowa grad student and USAS activist Laura Crossett, “So many people in this movement were raised with the idea of gender equality. They’re sensitive to it in a way older people may not be.”

Crossett said gender balance is a conscious part of decision-making when USAS members consider who will speak at a rally or event. “By talking about it, people end up doing it instinctively.”

“The movement is stronger for having the balance it does,” she added.
The idea of gender equity is even built into the organizational structure of USAS, which works by consensus.

“It’s a decentralized decision-making process,” Crossett said, “the ideal of participatory democracy put into practice. There are too many people out there who think that the only real democratic choice they have is filling in a line on a ballot.”

Women’s groups and peace groups germinated the idea of consensus during the Vietnam War protest era, Crossett noted. Until then, women in activist movements were often relegated to making coffee or taking minutes, and

they got fed up with it.

Times have changed, and men no longer dominate the activist conversation. The consensus process works amazingly well. “We have very few dissenting votes, and we make every effort to accommodate all points of view,” said Crossett. “It irks me when people criticize USAS’s methods as confrontational or aggressive. They don’t realize that the work behind the scenes is completely democratic, in contrast to the way the university operates, I might add. It’s the way society ought to function.”

Support for the sweat labor issue had modest beginnings, with only a handful of students actively engaged. In 1996, sweat labor was becoming a hot topic as Nike drew fire for the conditions of their shoe factories in Southeast Asia, and a tearful Kathy Lee Gifford faced charges on American TV that the clothing label bearing her name depended on sweatshop labor in Central America and New York.

“We started out small,” said McGrath, “organized a few actions, usually focusing on a particular issue. For example, we’d leaflet J. C. Penney,” (whose brand name manufacturer Phillips-Van Heusen, McGrath said, is a flagrant violator of worker rights in Guatemala).

The movement has since picked up a tremendous momentum. After months of struggling to get a code of conduct passed with the U of Wisconsin administration, things seemed to come to a head in February of 1999. A rally in front of the administration building developed a special kind of synergy.

“Someone said, ‘Let’s go in,’” McGrath recalled. “We went in, sat down, and it took off from there. It really kind of became a community place. There’s a strong co-operative presence in Madison that seemed to help. People were very supportive.” Sympathetic professors held teach-ins on topics such as the cultural history of corporations.

“The administration ignored us for a few days. They didn’t want to concede, so finally we started pounding on the walls and chanting.” The administration caved. The action had involved 50-75 core students, but 300 participated at its climax. The standoff lasted over 97 hours.

The resulting code was the best set up at a university yet. It called for full public disclosure on factory locations, the right to a living wage, the right to collective bargaining, and the protection of women’s rights.

This was part of a national upswing in campus activism. In 2000, students with similar demands at the U of Michigan took over the Office of the University President. A similar sit-in at the U of Iowa lasted a week. Five students were arrested and charged with criminal trespass. In Berkeley, students galvanized support by staging a mock fashion show, with models walking the runway, describing the appalling conditions their clothes were made in.

This new round of activism was spurred in part when (primarily Duke University) students who worked as interns for labor unions last summer—organizing low-wage workers as part of a broad initiative called Union Summer—returned to campus in the fall committed to continuing activist work.

The sweatshop issue is good for large-scale organizing, McGrath said, because it’s something that people can relate to. Clothes are a part of this consumer culture, and if people are made aware of where their clothes actually come from, they become sympathetic.

Being part of an international network of activists has proven to be inspiring. “The fact that there were people from other schools involved in this whom we could call, or talk to via e-mail, was really empowering. We had conference calls set up every two weeks with students from all over the country.” In Madison, and elsewhere, labor unions and Non-governmental Organizations have been supportive, offering mentoring relationships.

Changing Corporate Behavior

Medea Benjamin, director of Global Exchange and a prominent spokesperson on the sweat labor issue, detailed in a recent press release the key issues facing the anti-sweatshop movement today. These include public disclosure by apparel companies of the names and locations of their factories; a living wage for all workers in these factories; the setting up of independent monitoring bodies to inspect factory conditions; facilitating the education and organizing of factory workers; and regulations which ensure that U.S. companies operating overseas follow health and safety standards at least as strong as the ones they use at home.

“As long as companies continue to scour the globe in search of the lowest paid, most docile workforce, we will face an uphill battle,” she wrote. “But the international worker/consumer alliance that continues to grow has the potential to become a powerful force for changing corporate behavior.”

Students continue to push for codes of conduct, but compliance has been problematic, it being difficult to determine whether a company is acting in accord with such codes or not. Following a presidential task force investigation of sweat labor in 1996, the Fair Labor Association (FLA) was set up to monitor apparel factories for labor abuses. It originally

had broad support, both within the apparel industry and among watchdog groups. However, it soon became clear that there were a number of problems, and some of its supporters began to withdraw.

“Critics of the FLA point out numerous loopholes,” said James Tracy, an activist at the University of Iowa. “The agreement doesn’t have any teeth.” Under the FLA, corporations choose their own monitors, which generally turn out to be their accounting firms. A company pays a set fee, and gets to use a sweat-free label, conceivably giving rise to a situation in which sweat-free labels are sewn on right there in the sweatshop.

A major demand of student activists is that their universities withdraw from the FLA. Many of them are pushing their schools to sign on with the Workers Rights Consortium (WRC), an alternative, student-led, monitoring organization.

Slowly, progress is being made. Students at a few universities—UW-Madison, Berkeley, Michigan and Arizona—have gotten their administrations to pull out of the FLA and seek their own means to press companies to allow for independent monitoring. The University of Iowa also agreed recently to a code of conduct, and signed on with the WRC.

“We’ve made tremendous steps,” Crossett said. “Universities are now demanding full disclosure of factory sites in their contracts with manufacturers. A year ago, they had said disclosure was ridiculous, just as they’re saying paying a living wage is now.”

The personal gains are just as important as, and cannot be separated from, the political ones, Crossett said. This is another way in which female activists have had an impact on the activist process. “(The USAS movement) is a successful model of the personal as political. It’s not just ‘let’s talk about our feelings,’ although I don’t dismiss the importance of that. But it’s a personal commitment reflected in political action.”

Crossett noted that the U of Iowa sit-in “helped me clarify my takes on the issues, and to see how very much all things are tied together. It was a transformative experience.” On the night she was arrested, Crossett called her mother and told her “I hope you’re not upset. This is the result of everything you have taught me.”

“A lot of people seemed to be waiting for this kind of issue,” she said. “Older activists have become reinvigorated. And everyone seems to be there for deep personal reasons.”

“It’s provided me the opportunity to feel I’m speaking and getting listened to. I’m now giving talks in public. In earlier activism, most speakers were men, or sometimes older women. I hope it’s encouraging to younger activists to see women taking as important and as public roles.”

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