

# Solidarity™: Student Activism, Affective Labor, and the Fair Trade Campaign in the United States

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**Abstract:** Ethical labeling campaigns have become a central means for diffusing and negotiating conflicts between social movements and market actors. Fair Trade was a pioneering ethical label and, by many accounts, a success. For nearly a decade, United Students for Fair Trade (USFT) activists worked to build the reputation of the Fair Trade Certified (FTC) label, but in Fall 2011 they withdrew their support and urged ethical consumers to do the same. This paper is an urgent reflection on USFT's trajectory from guerrilla marketing to boycotting FTC products. While their actions may appear shortsighted and contradictory, their decision to withdraw support from the FTC label has roots in a long struggle for control of Fair Trade. We argue that their actions signal a new stage in consumer action, as activists lose faith in the legitimacy of ethical labels and instead target the agencies that own the ethical brandscape.

**Keywords:** affective labor, ethical consumption, student activism, Fair Trade, boycott, buycott

I don't like the direction the Fair Trade movement is going. I thought this was about solidarity with farmers. But now the Fair Trade label is being sold out to the highest bidder. It's lost its soul. You know there are some companies I can't support even if they do carry Fair Trade coffee. McDonalds? Wal-Mart? CocaCola? Really? Who are we working for? (Kim, organizer with United Students for Fair Trade).

Over the past decade, the Fair Trade label has moved from the margins to the mainstream in the United States. While the dramatic growth of Fair Trade Certified (FTC) imports is often chalked up to the voluntary entrance of large commercial retailers like Starbucks and Wal-Mart into the Fair Trade fold, it was also a political achievement scored by a powerful coalition of activists and NGOs. Since 1999, thousands of people in the United States have supported campaigns designed to educate consumers and pressure corporate actors to sell FTC products. According to Paul Rice in 2005, CEO of FairTradeUSA, activists played a vital role in "awakening the sleeping giant", by calling upon consumers to open their eyes to the plight of coffee farmers. By pressuring companies and educating consumers, "activist groups [were] the fundamental vanguard fostering Fair Trade markets" because they "directly politicize consumers" and engage in "direct forms of action" to expand the market for FTC products (Goodman 2004:900–901). Fridell claimed the role of activist

networks was “to create a demand for Fair Trade products among consumers and then demonstrate to corporations that this demand exists and can be capitalized on” (2007:146). Yet, as Barnett et al (2010) and Goodman (2010) have noted, the perspectives of activists who spearheaded ethical consumption campaigns like Fair Trade have often been neglected in most academic research, particularly in the United States.

Arguably, no network of activists has played a greater role in bringing FTC products to market in the United States than United Students for Fair Trade (USFT). Formed in 2003 to promote the promising FTC label, USFT got the word out. They educated consumers, enlisted their peers in campus-based and national Fair Trade campaigns, and presented a relentless, persuasive, and at times coercive force to increase the market share for Fair Trade products. USFT activists steeped themselves in the tactics of guerrilla marketing to sell FTC products and lend credibility to the Fair Trade brand. What made activist networks valuable was not their purchasing power, but their ability to take the Fair Trade message directly to consumers and retailers using word-of-mouth, under-the-radar, and other subversive marketing techniques. More than mere consumers of Fair Trade products, activists affiliated with USFT carried out the hard sales and marketing work central to the commercial success of campaigns. To build the reputation of the FTC label, activists could reach far into the distant corners of the consumer landscape where NGOs and brand marketers struggled to go—and they did it for free.

However, on 25 October 2011, the Coordinating Committee of United Students for Fair Trade released a dramatic statement that shocked FairTradeUSA, the owner of the FTC label. USFT called on its affiliates and supporters to curb support for the FTC label and in a dramatic reversal actually encouraged consumers to boycott FTC products.

We hereby pull our support from FairTradeUSA and encourage others in the movement to do the same until drastic reforms can be made. We fear that without action from Fair Trade supporters, Fair Trade will entropy into little more than a cheap marketing ploy. Increasing fair-label washing . . . will cause more consumer distrust and confusion and cripple the power of the movement to make real changes in farmers’ lives (United Students for Fair Trade 2011).

After 8 years as a leading voice for the FTC label, USFT threatened to undo the ethical reputation of the brand they had worked so hard to create. Why did USFT turn from Fair Trade’s greatest champions to some of its most ardent critics? And what does it tell us about changes in consumer politics today?

In this paper we trace USFT’s shift from supporting to subverting the campaign for the FTC label. Michael Goodman, in a recent paper exploring the changing market and movement dynamics of the Fair Trade movement, called a closer attention to the “nuances” of activist engagement in campaigns and potential openings still left to leverage the politics of ethical consumption to the benefit of the poor in the global South. Suggesting that there is still limited empirical research on the orchestration of Fair Trade campaigns he argues that “. . . there remains much space for exploring how particular ethical consumption networks are developed and how they might work for particular people” (Goodman 2010:106). In what follows we not only consider how the Fair Trade campaigns work for particular people, but

the inverse, how particular people, namely youth activists, work for the Fair Trade campaign.

Our research illustrates that the Fair Trade campaign repositioned activist networks like USFT as a powerful workforce charged with co-branding, certifying products and selling the Fair Trade cause. Student activists were seen as both valuable and volatile to the Fair Trade campaign, not just because of their purchasing power, but because of their ethical motivations and ability to take the Fair Trade message directly to consumers and retailers, leveraging their relationships and their reputations to promote the Fair Trade brand, a form of work which we understand as affective labor (Hardt 1999). Activists with USFT provided a powerful stamp of approval for the FTC label that fostered legitimacy and loyalty among potential retailers and consumers. Paradoxically, however, as Fair Trade products made greater inroads into mainstream retail markets in the United States, USFT leaders found themselves in a precarious position. While they interpreted their affective labor as a form of work-in-solidarity with farmers and worker communities in the global South, they were consistently courted by the campaign broker FairTradeUSA to supply affective labor to endorse the ethical branding campaigns of large commercial retailers seeking to capitalize on growing buzz around Fair Trade. Anxious about the complicity of their work-in-solidarity in the rapid mainstreaming of FTC products, USFT activists began to lose faith in the Fair Trade cause, ultimately resulting in a shift from positive to negative advertising in the form of a boycott.

As corporate retailers turn causes into commodities and take greater control over the ethical brandscape, it is critical to focus attention on the role of activists as affective labor in producing and reproducing emotions, sensibilities, and concerns that enable the growth of markets for products like FTC coffee or tea. It is also critical to understand how student activists on university campuses today are responding to the appropriation of their work promoting the causes they care about. Historically, the university has been a key site of struggle and a critical space for reimagining activism in the neoliberal era (Cravey 2004; Featherstone and USAS 2004; Silvey 2004). As we demonstrate, Fair Trade campaigning was one key way that such campus-based activism has been reimagined. According to Cravey, students understand themselves as “a highly potent consumer market [who] push the limits of contemporary internationalist labor advocacy by exploring contradictions in their own multiple subject positions—as consumers, as questioning students, and as privileged young people, who by accident of birth have better opportunities than those working in sweatshops” (2004:205).<sup>1</sup> Student activists could leverage their privileged location as consumers to “link distant nodes in regimes of accumulation” (Silvey 2004:191). While we agree with the thrust of Cravey’s argument, student activists affiliated with USFT did more than question their multiple subject positions, acknowledge their privileged or link distant nodes in regimes of accumulation. They played a vital role in the growth of a retail market for FTC products.

Like Kim, we believe the central question confounding activists today is not what to buy, but who activists are working for. Is it farmers? NGOs? Corporate retailers? As we show through the example of USFT, the processes of co-optation, incorporation and subsumption that leverage affective labor for ethical branding by corporate retailers is already being challenged by the activists themselves. The appropriation of

the sentiments and emotional content of work-in-solidarity with oppressed groups by private NGOs and corporations generates tremendous frustration, anger and resistance among activists who believe the fruits of their labor should benefit farmers and workers over corporations. USFT's call for a boycott of FTC products may indicate the emergence of a new phenomenon as activists become conscious of their affective labor power and reposition themselves in a new wave of anti-branding and or rebranding campaigns that seek to damage or re-appropriate the ethical brands they worked so hard to create.

Our argument is informed by ethnographic research and shaped by our direct participation in USFT and the wider Fair Trade movement. Our engagement in USFT includes our experience as a National Coordinator (Curnow 2004–2008) and Advisory Board member (Wilson 2006–2008). Our considerable distance (4 years since activity) puts us in the unique position of offering an accurate picture of the history and current state of USFT, as well as the politics of the Fair Trade movement and its discontents. The research includes participant observation of 18 Fair Trade conferences (2004–2011), 55 semi-structured interview surveys carried out with student activists at the USFT Conference in 2005 and 43 surveys in 2011, 41 semi-structured interviews with USFT leadership in 2006, and 25 of follow-up interviews with past USFT leaders in 2011.

The paper is structured in five sections. First, we review key debates over the politics of ethical consumption. In particular, we juxtapose the work of Barnett et al (2005, 2010) and Guthman (2007) to discuss the way Fair Trade campaigns privatize political action. Second, given the privatization of political action in these campaigns, we argue for greater attention to the role of activists as affective labor in the promotion of Fair Trade. Third, we shift to our research on USFT, highlighting the critical work that student activists did to bring the FTC label to market. Here we demonstrate the central role of activists as affective labor in promoting Fair Trade through college campus "conversion campaigns". Next, in the fourth section we explore the reasons why USFT activists participated in Fair Trade campaigns. We highlight how USFT activists were involved in numerous economic justice campaigns and tended to see their affective labor-time in the Fair Trade campaign as "work-in-solidarity" on behalf of farmers and workers in the global South. This work-in-solidarity was a labor of love to express a commitment to the struggles of farmers and workers and creating a more just global economy. Fifth, we illustrate the perplexing position of USFT as FairTradeUSA negotiated partnerships with large commercial retailers that were the sworn enemies of its activist base. Here we discuss USFT activists' consciousness of their affective labor power. We conclude by discussing the recent trajectory of USFT with a focus on the decision to boycott the FTC label and look to the future of consumer activism against ethical branding.

## **The Politics of Fair Trade Campaigning in the United States**

In April 2000, San Francisco-based NGO Global Exchange launched the Roast Starbucks Campaign to hold the company accountable for injustices committed in its supply chain. Riding the wave of anti-globalization and anti-corporate sentiment

from the explosive anti-WTO Battle in Seattle, and triggered by an exposé on “sweatshops” in the Guatemalan coffee fields, Global Exchange served Starbucks an ultimatum. Buy FTC coffee or face the consequences. Global Exchange backed up their demands for Fair Trade with the threat of a nationwide protest. Promoting brand-bashing tactics employed by the anti-sweatshop movement against Gap and Nike, Global Exchange directed people to carry out store-front demonstrations in 29 cities, coordinated a massive letter-writing campaign and encouraged students across the United States to demand that purchasing agents cut contracts with Starbucks for coffee retailed in cafeterias and dining halls. “We are the attack dogs, biting at their heels, grrrr”, said Kevin Danaher, co-founder of Global Exchange in an interview with NJ Star Ledger (Orr 2000). “We use grassroots pressure.” Fearing a prolonged fight that might tarnish their iconic brand, within days Starbucks executives announced that they had signed a letter of intent with Fair Trade USA to start selling FTC coffee in more than 2000 cafés and 500 colleges.

The Fair Trade campaign presents retail brands and consumers with an alternative to traditional boycotts—the selling and purchasing of ethical commodities (Conroy 2007). The FTC label, owned in the USA by FairTradeUSA,<sup>2</sup> ostensibly ensures that products as diverse as bananas, flowers, cocoa and coffee meet ethical sourcing standards that help small-scale farmers, farm workers and producer organizations compete internationally, earn a “fair deal” for their production, and foster sustainable development (Raynolds and Wilkinson 2007). For a decade, a campaign made up of grassroots activists and NGOs in the United States has actively promoted FTC products in the retail marketplace and educated consumers about injustices perpetrated against disadvantaged commodity producers, effectively building a movement of consumers who demand an alternative to conventional retail products (Conroy 2007). Today, Fair Trade is one of the most geographically extensive product certification networks in the world and among the most recognizable ethical brands in the United States (Conroy 2007; Raynolds and Wilkinson 2007).

Barnett et al (2005, 2010) describe the effects of campaigns like Fair Trade in terms of a greater politicization of everyday life for consumers in the global North. Campaigns like Fair Trade, write Barnett et al (2010) “embed altruistic, humanitarian, solidaristic and environmental commitments into the rhythms and routines of everyday life” (2010:13). Furthermore, NGO-led campaigns like Fair Trade encourage people to “recognize themselves as bearing certain types of global obligation by virtue of their privileged position as consumers, obligations which in turn they are encouraged to discharge in part by acting as consumers in “responsible” ways” (Barnett et al 2010:13). For Barnett et al (2010) Fair Trade campaigning represents a growth in the types of protest repertoires at people’s disposal, including boycotts, lobbying, rallies, or shareholder activism, and they claim that such campaigns “seek to use everyday consumption as a surface of mobilization for wider, explicitly political aims and agendas” (2010:13). As Barnett et al claim, campaigns touting Fair Trade “enlist ordinary people in broader projects of social change” (2005:39) and are a new way in which solidarity networks are being formed transnationally. In this view, Fair Trade campaigns expanded and democratized participation in consumer movements by lowering barriers to citizen

action and enabling more people to act on their moral conscience, proliferating forms of political practice and civic engagement into new venues.

Guthman's critique of voluntary ethical labels like Fair Trade (2007) directly counters the epistemology of Barnett et al (2010). Guthman provides three critical interventions that challenge Barnett et al's (2005, 2010) assumption. First, ethical consumption, Guthman argues (2007), channels potentially volatile consumer grievances into highly individualized purchasing decisions. In addition, claims made about Fair Trade labeled products tend to resonate with consumers who have the disposable income to spend on higher priced luxury commodities, thus making ethical consumption a privileged political act available only to particular classes. Second, Guthman critiques ethical labeling as a campaign tactic since it depends upon corporate volunteers willing to submit to what Mutersbaugh calls the "semi-public" scrutiny of third party certification, but only so far as it benefits their bottom line. Third, and perhaps most significant for the arguments in this paper, is that Fair Trade and other ethical labels are ultimately managed or controlled through private institutions like NGOs and corporate retailers that are not publicly accountable. Following Guthman (2007), therefore, we understand Fair Trade campaigns as playing a role in privatizing politics (see also Brown and Getz 2008; Roff 2007) rather than democratizing politics (Barnett 2005, 2010).

While we share in some of Barnett et al's enthusiasm, our own involvement as activists in the Fair Trade campaign in the United States leaves us less sanguine about the efficacy of Fair Trade as a social movement strategy. Although originating in anti-globalization activism in the 1990s, the Fair Trade campaign looks very different from earlier and present cycles of consumer protest. Fair Trade campaigns in the United States have been launched alongside labor solidarity, anti-sweatshop, culture-jamming, farmworker justice, anti-free trade agreement, voluntary simplicity, anti-GMO, slow and local food, recycling and waste reduction campaigns (Barnett et al 2010:14–15; Traub-Werner and Cravey 2002), however their orientation toward the conventional marketplace, their focus on retail market growth, and their symbolic and strategic use of the privately owned FTC label has engendered a different kind of consumer-oriented campaign; one which may originate in a desire for transnational solidarity rooted in social movement organizing, but is ultimately a form of brand building and product sales. Moreover, since the FTC label is owned by FairTradeUSA, a privately managed NGO that has a financial stake in the successful growth of market share for labeled products, the actions of social movement actors serve a cause directed by a private organization which is not publically accountable.

### **From Ethical Consumption to Affective Labor**

While perhaps carrying the message or sentiment of a movement, the FTC label is not controlled by movement in the United States; indeed, it is an ethical brand that operates under the privatizing rules and intellectual enclosures of copyright and trademark law. Fair Trade campaigns have created a complicated and perplexing field of action for activists who are motivated to participate. The engagement of activists in Fair Trade campaigns, we argue, cannot be explained solely through the

discourse of politicizing consumers. Indeed, as we demonstrate below, campaigns touting Fair Trade not only hail activists to consume FTC products. They also mobilize them to work, both consciously and unconsciously, to promote the Fair Trade brand, which, again, is privately owned. While activist engagement may be intended to benefit farmers and workers in the global South, decisions about the use of the FTC label is determined by private NGOs and also directly benefits both private non-profit and for-profit entities in the global North. Therefore, the highly productive work of activist networks can be captured for brand management, without their consent.

Rather than consuming brands, activist networks play an active role in producing them. Therefore we propose thinking about the way activists engage in campaigns promoting Fair Trade in terms of affective labor. Affective labor produces use values that are often difficult to transform into a monetary calculus and therefore tends to be invisible and uncompensated. Often called labors of love, solidarity work, women's work, domestic labors of social reproduction, and the like, affective labor is, as feminist scholars have argued, socially necessary to reproduce households, families, communities or movements.<sup>3</sup> According to Hardt and Negri (2000), affective labor is immaterial, emotive, caring work that produces social networks and forms of community associated with human interaction (Hardt and Negri 2000:293). Therefore, because affective labor is productive of socialities and it represents a set of labor practices that sit on the boundaries of capitalism, affective labor can be seen as the basis of a potentially emancipatory anti-capitalist politics (Hardt 1999; Hardt and Negri 2000; Spivak 1985).

Yet, affective labor is not only reserved for non-capitalist or anti-capitalist projects. As Hardt argues, affective labor is "one of the highest value-producing forms of labor from the point of view of capital" (1999:90). Today in post-industrial consumer-dependent retail economies, we are increasingly employed through trendsetting social circles, to participate in viral, stealth, and guerrilla-marketing techniques that build brand identification and brand loyalty. Ultimately such unpaid work can be subsumed into capitalist circuits through the creation of brand value which also enables the capitalization of firms (Arvidsson 2005:249) and the realization of surplus value as profit in retailing (Spivak 1985). Labor in branding and advertising socializes capital, adds value, generates loyalties, and also produces affective economy, where immaterial and intangible emotions, desires, sensations, experiences, feelings and sentiments are as important as the physical products themselves (Arvidsson 2005; Hardt 1999). By thinking through the way we participate in branding as working subjects, rather than consuming subjects, we can reimagine just how deeply the valorization of capital through branding has penetrated our lifeworlds (Klein 2002).

Nowhere is the role of affective labor in branding more apparent than in the production and advertising of ethical commodities like FTC products. As Brown and Getz (2008:1188) argue, ethical commodities are "predicated on linking consumption choices with production conditions" and requires "a level of trust and understanding about what the label means". Fair Trade as a brand requires the building of trust in a particular narrative about the relationship between producers and consumers, about alternative development, and about the existence of a more

ethical or “better” economy facilitated by Fair Trade standards and certification. As Mutersbaugh and Lyon (2010) argue, creating this sentiment for consumers requires a lot of invisible work, not only to cultivate material commodities and manufacture high-quality retail products, but also to generate an aura of ethicality and to “guarantee” the veracity of moral claims. While standards and certification regimes create a level of accountability and trust in the Fair Trade brand, and NGOs and celebrities also distinguish the Fair Trade brand by circulating discourses of alternative development and political ecological imaginaries, activist networks have also historically played a critical role in campaigning. Activist networks, like NGOs and celebrities, helped establish trust and created an emotional involvement in the Fair Trade brand. Originating in desires for solidarity with farmers and workers, activist networks have actively lobbied companies and consumers to buy into Fair Trade in the retail marketplace.

### **Bringing the Cause to Market: United Students for Fair Trade**

The affective labor of activist networks, although often unacknowledged, produces tremendous value in certifying that the good is good, and bringing the cause to market. We came to understand the role of activist networks as affective labor in Fair Trade campaigns by observing and participating in the work of USFT. USFT formed in 2003 with the support of Oxfam America, Global Exchange, and FairTradeUSA to build a market for the FTC label on college and high-school campuses across the United States. As a USFT vision document states, “students provide an important grassroots component to the Fair Trade movement, making it the standard on campuses”. USFT recruited, trained and represented student activists at 120 universities and high schools with the objective of promoting “Fair Trade principles, products and policies” (USFT 2008). Activists affiliated with USFT did the sales work to build and sustain the Fair Trade movement and market.

USFT formed with the primary objective of facilitating campus conversion campaigns for FTC products on every campus across the country. “Campus conversion campaigns”, as USFT activists described them, were coordinated actions by a core group of activists to convert a campus dining hall or food service provider from conventional to FTC products. USFT helped student activists on affiliated campuses by developing, implementing, and sharing tactics to lobby food service providers to carry FTC coffee on campus. USFT activists described their collective and individual actions in the Fair Trade movement as working one-on-one with consumers, institutional purchasing agents, and retailers to educate, promote, garner support, raise awareness, change behaviors, and increase availability of FTC products. One informant from Texas Christian University, Ted, summed up his engagement in the following way: “We have three different goals—changing personal habits, educating consumers, and pushing for availability.”

According to FairTradeUSA, pushing for availability was critical to increase volumes of Fair Trade products on campuses. In 2003, the FTC label was just emerging from

obscurity and few food service providers with lucrative campus contracts carried FTC coffee. USFT's work was to change that, insisting that the big food service providers source complete lines of FTC coffee. Student activists carried out their campaigns according to a standard "recipe". According to the USFT Organizing Guide, the arc of a conversion campaign generally looked like this:

In most cases 25% of a student body must explicitly endorse Fair Trade to win the support of administration. As such most campaigns will gather between 1500 and 2500 petition signatures over the course of a given year. Penetrating campus culture further, the typical campaign will also publish one to two articles in a school newspaper, make several presentations in classes, host speaking events, hand out reams of materials, form coalitions with community organizations, push professors to incorporate Fair Trade into curriculum, and raise awareness amongst local restaurants and cafes and their clientele (USFT 2008).

Between 2003 and 2006, activists affiliated with USFT ran an estimated 350 campaigns like these on their college campuses. Through pioneering campaigns run at American University, UC Davis, University of Washington, UCLA, Boston University, and Harvard University, campus-based activists also played a role in forcing the hand of food service providers such as Sodexo, Sara Lee, and Aramark, large commercial retailers such as Starbucks, Brueggers Bagels and Java City, and even coffee-importing behemoth Procter and Gamble, to make commitments to sourcing and selling FTC coffee. Students not only proved that there was demand, but also staked their reputations, demonstrating to food service providers that the Fair Trade label was meaningful to consumers and was an authentic road to a better world. Their work imbued certified products with value, thus making them interesting and palatable to consumers and commercial retailers.

### ***Work-in-Solidarity***

Activists devoted tremendous time to conversion campaigns, spending, on average, 10–15 h a week on organizing and usually carried out campaigns over a 4–6-month period. Members of the USFT coordinating committee spent upwards of 20–30 h a week organizing at the national scale, on top of campaigning on their own campuses. Around Fair Trade conferences where they trained and recruited new activists as well as conversion campaigns targeting national brands, USFT coordinating committee members worked 40–50 h a week to coordinate their activist base. As Trisha, a member of the USFT coordinating committee from Evergreen College, explained:

What makes us unique is that, here we are sitting around in a fucking cluttered apartment surrounded by bags of give-away-swag, stapling information to little coffee bags, and organizing the program for the (conference) participants. We aren't paid to do this. No one else does this for free. You understand, we don't get paid. It's all volunteer work.

While it is certainly the case that some students affiliated with USFT may have had time to volunteer because of their relative privilege as college students who may have less work responsibilities, we found a great deal of class difference within

USFT's activist network. In fact, countering the image of the irresponsible college student, the majority of coordinators did their work on top of their school and paid employment as most had waged employment as work-study or for other financial reasons.

Thousands of college age students volunteered, to educate consumers and push for availability due to emotional appeals that framed the act of advertising FTC products as a form of direct solidarity with farmers and workers to help them earn a fair price or living wage. Why did this work appeal to activists? Eighty-three percent of USFT-affiliated activists interviewed in 2005 described the work they did promoting FTC products as a form of solidarity activism. For instance, in an interview conducted with Kim, an at-large member of the Coordinating Committee of USFT from Cornell, she took great pains to distinguish what she did promoting Fair Trade as an expression of "work-in-solidarity". Unlike the consumers at the cafeteria who grabbed a cup of coffee on their way to class, her actions went far beyond such mundane everyday activities. She was working on behalf of farmers and workers. Distancing herself from more convenient consumerist behavior she explained, "Look, I don't drink coffee, I don't like the smell of it, or the taste of it. But I talk about it a lot. I am working to create an alternative market." As she further explained, promoting FTC products on her campus and in her community was "hard work", and she had to find time to do it:

I see promoting Fair Trade products as being a catalyst for some greater sort of change because the ways that consumers and companies interact with the world is unsustainable. I am working in solidarity with farmers workers . . . Fair Trade activism is about solidarity.

What we found particularly compelling about Kim's explanation was that she consistently referenced "the work" of Fair Trade campaigning while also highlighting the nature of that work as motivated by, and embedded in, a sense of solidarity. Karen, a student at Marquette, echoed her sentiments, saying:

I tried to move my local community [in the United States] to be more invested in Fair Trade and try to use Fair Trade in a way that would bring a real benefit to farmers and workers. At the same time farmers would be working and support the cooperative system locally in their countries. We would both be working toward a system where they could have a somewhat better life. And it's not my place to dictate what would mean a better life for them, but it IS my place to work with them. . .

Roland, a student at Michigan State University, echoed Karen and Kim's conceptualization of work-in-solidarity. After describing his campaign to bring 100% FTC coffee onto his campus, Roland stated that:

for me its all about joining hands with farmers. I'm doing marketing for them. I'll do it alone if I have to. I grew up on a farm and I know how hard it is. The farmers who are involved in Fair Trade don't have a voice here in the United States where their coffee is sold. I try to make my voice their voice.

Roland felt that the best way he could work-in-solidarity with farmers was marketing coffee on their behalf. He insisted that volunteering his time to market coffee was a form of solidarity. He was representing, literally standing in for, the voice of farmers demanding just prices for their production.

## Solidarity™

While students understood their activism as work-in-solidarity with farmers and workers, Fair Trade companies and corporate retailers saw their work as free and effective for increasing product sales and building a brand. While seemingly a novel, empowering, and positive way to express solidarity with farmers and workers, as the Fair Trade campaign made greater inroads into mainstream retailing, corporate appropriation of USFT's work became commonplace. By 2005, numerous US companies took notice of the work activists were doing to increase awareness of the FTC label and to create new retail channels on campuses. Equal Exchange, a Fair Trade pioneer from Boston, and Pura Vida Coffee, a 100% Fair Trade and non-profit retailer from Seattle specifically targeted campuses and utilized student activists as a means for drumming up support. Green Mountain Coffee Roasters, one of the largest FTC coffee suppliers to campuses, realized the importance of courting activist groups to help facilitate the growth of their FTC coffee sales. As a large institutional supplier, Green Mountain already had contracts with food service providers such as Sodexo and Aramark and was an approved vendor at many universities and therefore was poised to benefit from such strategies. USFT was seen as a critical space for businesses to brainstorm, strategize, pilot programs, and create value for the businesses engaged in rolling out Fair Trade branding and re-branding campaigns. But students were getting suspicious about the commercial motives of these businesses. Who were they working for? Students had volunteered to work in solidarity with farmers, not for multi-million dollar corporations.

In 2005 FairTradeUSA began pursuing partnerships with transnational giants Wal-Mart, McDonalds, and CocaCola and USFT was put in a precarious position. They were asked to campaign for companies whose business practices they opposed. Wal-Mart had been the target of numerous student activist campaigns for their labor abuses at home and abroad. While FairTradeUSA celebrated Wal-Mart's entrance into the Fair Trade system as a windfall for farmers, movement organizers balked at the idea. In the minds of activists, Wal-Mart was one of the worst perpetrators of unethical trade and now they were strange bedfellows, threatening the image of Fair Trade that activists had carefully cultivated through their work. Then, when McDonalds began carrying Green Mountain Coffee Roasters coffee in October 2005, students were again faced with an awkward compromise. FairTradeUSA asked USFT to campaign on New England campuses to encourage college students to buy coffee at McDonald's. USFT activists were stunned. McDonalds and Green Mountain announced their partnership at precisely the same time that McDonalds was targeted by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW),<sup>4</sup> demanding living wages for farmworkers. Students within USFT were involved in the CIW campaign. How could they celebrate increased sales of FTC coffee while simultaneously scorning McDonalds for labor abuses domestically? FairTradeUSA made this contradiction even more stark by asking USFT organizers to support McDonald's move. In email communications with USFT leaders, FairTradeUSA suggested that student activists hand out coupons for McDonalds coffee. When USFT did nothing to support or denounce McDonalds, FairTradeUSA staff pushed

USFT to do more, claiming that if they did not ensure the success of McDonalds' pilot project, they would be sabotaging farmers that would have benefitted from those sales.

Relations reached a boiling point in 2007. FairTradeUSA offered a license to a CocaCola brand called Far Coast. FairTradeUSA reached out for support from USFT leadership to support Coca Cola's efforts. While Far Coast's adoption of FTC coffee would dramatically increase the visibility of the Fair Trade cause and contribute to greater volumes of FTC imports from small-scale coffee farmers, USFT leaders and affiliates could not stomach it. Over the previous years USFT affiliates were deeply involved in the Stop Killer Coke campaign, a high-profile boycott against the brand for alleged violence, exploitation and abuse of union leaders and workers affiliated with SINALTRAINAL<sup>5</sup> in Colombia. Activists affiliated with USFT had successfully pressured 13 large universities to break their contracts with CocaCola, costing the company millions in reduced sales and a severely battered brand image, especially among college-age youth.

The paradox of endorsing CocaCola was simply too much to bear. How could USFT affiliates simultaneously advocate for a boycott of CocaCola for alleged abuses against labor unions and endorse CocaCola's Fair Trade offerings? USFT and NGO allies pressured FairTradeUSA to refuse CocaCola entry into the Fair Trade system, but they were largely ignored. Rather than respond to activist concerns, FairTradeUSA pushed activists to promote the brand. FairTradeUSA, in an odd turn, seemed to be selling USFT activists on the value of working for CocaCola, defending their brand in the face of activist opposition. FairTradeUSA campaigned USFT leaders to come on board, arguing that CocaCola's record was better than their competitors and claiming that CocaCola regularly met with unions. In an even more suspicious line of argument, FairTradeUSA representatives also highlighted the fact that Far Coast, as a subsidiary of CocaCola, was branded without a clear link back to CocaCola. In this logic, FairTradeUSA asserted, USFT could campaign without seeming to endorse CocaCola. USFT leaders pushed back asking FairTradeUSA to not certify CocaCola since to do so put USFT in jeopardy of undermining relationships with their movement partners on college campuses such as United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS)<sup>6</sup> and Killer Coke. In response, FairTradeUSA encouraged USFT to meet with CocaCola staff to hear them out. USFT leaders responded saying:

We feel that we cannot start a dialogue with them without threatening our relationship with the organizations that are working to get Coke to address known human rights grievances . . . we don't have much to say to Coke unless they start working with USAS and Killer Coke to address Coke's human rights record. We also do not want to engage in a meeting where the Coke representative is telling us all the great things that Coke is doing. Again, it is the morality of the issue—one good work [i.e. selling Fair Trade coffee] does not outweigh or erase another, horrendous act.

FairTradeUSA would not pay heed to USFT's concerns. Such unresponsiveness from FairTradeUSA made it clear to USFT activists that they had no control over corporate partnerships or what companies would receive a Fair Trade license. At a 2007 meeting with FairTradeUSA, USFT leaders walked out in protest.

## A Lost Cause

After this series of spats with FairTradeUSA over corporate endorsements, USFT activists and USFT leaders had a profound change in consciousness. What had become clear was that all of USFT's work in the past and in the future would benefit whomever FairTradeUSA decided to endorse. By carrying out local and national campaigns promoting FTC products, activists successfully brought the cause to market, but they effectively passed on the power of bargaining with corporations and licensing the use of their social brand to FairTradeUSA, the owner of the FTC label. Not only had the label become corporatized, but they also had become corporatized. Like Tom Sawyer who convinced the neighborhood boys to do his work for him whitewashing a fence (Twain 1986 [1876]:13–14), FairTradeUSA thought it could get USFT activists to fairwash corporations. This led to discontent among activists associated with USFT, as well as many pioneering retailers and NGOs who felt that their work had been taken advantage of to persuade and facilitate the growth of the FTC label without a voice in how, and with whom, FairTradeUSA would bargain. USFT took issue with corporate partnerships because corporations could leverage Fair Trade for rebranding with minimal entry barriers while they “simultaneously profited from a ‘social brand’ built up through long years of activity by a core of Fair Trade supporters and consumers” (Barrientos, Conroy and Jones 2007:58).

Although highly successful in persuading consumers and retailers to increase sales of FTC products, many of our informants “lost faith” that the campaign was achieving the ambitious goals of creating economic alternatives for farmers and workers in the global South. From the perspective of activists, it seemed that the actual beneficiaries of the FTC label were simply companies with lucrative campus contracts. Sometimes in the course of just a few months activists would be, as Noelle from UC Santa Cruz said, “set on fire by the idea of Fair Trade”, only to see that excitement dampened once they reached the point of actually getting FTC products offered on campus. After successfully running campaigns, many activists reacted ambivalently to their work. Some, like Bill from University of Denver, claimed that they had “lost their innocence”, highlighting their lack of control over the marketplace, their feelings of naiveté, and their complicit role in advertising for companies whose engagement in Fair Trade was ambiguous, if not wholly opportunistic. “The party was over”, Jenna, a Coordinating Committee member from Northwestern, lamented. Fair Trade no longer looked like a positive step, it was looking like a dead end.

FairTradeUSA consolidated control over its board of directors, and over the next few years, USFT's closest NGO partners such as Oxfam America, Catholic Relief Services, Lutheran World Relief, and others stopped campaigning for the FTC label, sensing the same lack of accountability, dialogue, and respect for their concerns regarding corporate partnerships expressed by USFT. “Some of our staunchest NGO supporters simply walked away”, said Jenna. Internally, USFT faced problems as well. Just 2 years before, USFT had worked from a \$175,000 operating budget, but by 2009 was struggling to get any funding support at all. USFT's once solid core of supporters too began to question which way they should take the organization. USFT splintered into three directions. First, a very small group of committed student

activists who ran successful conversion campaigns on their campuses tended to remain loyal to FairTradeUSA and the overall strategy of promoting FTC products. When FairTradeUSA launched its Fair Trade Universities (FTU) campaign in 2009, students in this group continued to support their efforts to convert campuses to Fair Trade and assisted FairTradeUSA in recruiting a new student activist labor force.

A second group pulled their support for the Fair Trade label altogether, withdrawing their labor from campaigns and encouraging their peers to do the same. They would not lend legitimacy to FairTradeUSA and by extension to companies that they considered their sworn enemies. A third group of students reframed their understanding of Fair Trade, unwilling to concede their work-in-solidarity to corporate retailers. This group sought to deepen their connection to farmer and workers communities by building direct relationships with cooperatives in the global South. Moreover, they re-oriented the organizations objectives from promoting ethical consumption to promoting anti-oppression and cooperativism as core values of the Fair Trade movement. This group talked about Fair Trade “in terms of small f, small t”, according to Trisha, signifying their rejection of the corporatization of the FTC label and their desire to work-in-solidarity for a broader set of movement goals. Ted expressed the sentiments of this group within USFT:

We’re not just a consumer movement. You know, just increasing the volume of certified products sold. Our goal is also that of a social justice movement even though we may come at it from a market angle. We are trying to create solidarity and empowerment—Fair Trade is about creating communities. And there are more ways of making that a reality than just through certification and the market.

The reformists began to explore alternative forms of solidarity with farmers and workers and adopt a new language of anti-oppression organizing and alternate recipes for creating social change, treating conversion campaigns as a “gateway drug” to other activist pathways rather than as ends unto themselves. Ultimately, the reformists captured control of USFT, but without a label and a clear direction the Coordinating Committee struggled to continuously recruit an active base, and starved of funding, struggled to continue growing and to remain relevant within the rapidly corporatizing Fair Trade marketplace.

## **Boycott Fair Trade?**

Recent actions by FairTradeUSA, however, have triggered a revival of USFT’s goals of working-in-solidarity with farmers and workers. In a press release on 15 September 2011 FairTradeUSA stated their intention to withdraw from Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International effective from 31 December 2011, a shocking move that angered movement actors, farmer and worker representatives, and business actors alike (FairTradeUSA 2011a). FLO not only set policy at an international level, but was also responsible for auditing cooperatives in the global South. Moreover, FairTradeUSA’s decision was announced at the same time that producer representation on the FLO board reached parity for the first time in its 15-year history. In a particularly unabashed statement of their intentions, FairTradeUSA

claimed that they abandoned FLO “because it will be easier to make business-friendly decisions and double U.S. fair-trade sales by 2015” (Clark 2011).

In response, USFT leaders issued a statement that was 5 years in the making: they publicly withdrew support for FairTradeUSA and called for a boycott of all FTC products. USFT’s announcement followed the coattails of a joint statement from the CAN Alliance made up of three Fair Trade producer networks, NAP,<sup>7</sup> CLAC<sup>8</sup> and FairTradeAfrica. The CAN Alliance represents over 800 producer organizations in 60 countries condemning FairTradeUSA for unilaterally resigning from Fair Labelling Organizations International without consulting them. USFT criticized the autocratic decision-making and lack of democratic accountability in FairTradeUSA. USFT claimed that FairTradeUSA was abandoning producers and seeking to water down standards and kowtow to corporate interests threatened by the potential of growing producer power through their ownership stake in FLO. Working-in-solidarity with farmers and workers, USFT’s negative advertising against FairTradeUSA challenged the sincerity of the certifier’s engagement in the Fair Trade movement. Moreover, returning to principles of solidarity conveyed in Roland’s sentiments above, USFT sought to stand behind farmers by demanding fair representation in FairTradeUSA decision-making. Indeed, at the core of the USFT boycott remains a demand that FairTradeUSA create a majority board representation of “farmers, producers and workers, community and student activists, academics, and 100% Fair Trade businesses” (USFT 2011). This is a demand from farmers and activists which FairTradeUSA continues to defy.

USFT’s press release also criticized four specific business-friendly maneuvers by FairTradeUSA. First, USFT leaders criticized FairTradeUSA’s plan to source coffee and cocoa from plantations with hired labor rather than cooperative organizations. In the US, Fair Trade coffee was always supplied from small holder farming cooperatives and solidarity with farming cooperatives had been central to the identity of USFT activists. Second, FairTradeUSA made changes to the percentages of a final product that must be certified in order to receive the FTC label. For example, Ben and Jerry’s ice cream could be labeled as FTC even if it only used FTC cocoa, but not sugar or vanilla. USFT criticized the “halo effect” this would create even though less than 25% of the ingredients qualified under Fair Trade standards. Third, USFT criticized FairTradeUSA’s launch of a Fair Trade apparel program negatively evaluated by the Workers Rights Consortium and their ally USAS. USFT argued that the labor “standards are regressive and undermine much of the work achieved by the anti-sweatshop movement in recent years rather than setting the bar higher” (USFT 2011). Fourth, USFT criticized FairTradeUSA’s revenue model, claiming that their dependence on income from FTC label licensing compromised their third-party status as autonomous from corporate retailers. “So long as Fair Trade certifiers are funded by businesses wanting access to Fair Trade markets . . . we see them rule in favor of businesses and management and dilute standards over time. . .”

FairTradeUSA responded to USFT’s angst much like any brand manager might; by dismissing their concerns and merely replacing USFT as their foot soldiers of Fair Trade. FairTradeUSA decided to work around the disagreeable, disillusioned and volatile USFT leadership by running campaigns directly on specific campuses, co-branding with high-profile corporate retailers and recruiting

celebrities. FairTradeUSA has secured financing for its Fair Trade Universities Campaign through a partnership with Green Mountain Coffee Roasters.<sup>9</sup> To stimulate new campaigns on college campuses, FairTradeUSA has also teamed up with Ben and Jerry's and Green America to run a traveling concert series called the Campus Consciousness Tour. Celebrities too have filled the employment void now that USFT has withdrawn their labor enabling FairTradeUSA to reach even larger audiences than activist networks can. Like Goodman (2010) described in his paper on the cult of celebrity in Fair Trade campaigns in the UK, in the United States, FairTradeUSA has recently worked with Ben and Jerry's to recruit celebrity Jimmy Fallon to co-brand the FTC label and launch a new ice cream flavor called Jimmy's Late Night Snack. According to FairTradeUSA, Fallon will donate the proceeds he earns from promoting Late Night Snack to the Fair Trade Universities, subsidizing new campaigns to increase sales at colleges across the country. The replacement of potentially volatile student activists by paid celebrities and corporate partnerships is well underway.

## Conclusion

As student activists participate in campaigns that commodify causes it is critical, we argue, to reflect on work they do and who benefits from the value they generate. As we have demonstrated, the concept of ethical consumption does not adequately account for the role of activists within the Fair Trade campaign in the United States. The dialectical concept of affective labor, we feel, more accurately represents the nuanced activities and sentiments of activists. For the USFT activists we studied and worked alongside, Fair Trade campaigning was considered an act of work-in-solidarity; they believed their labor would benefit farmers and chose to donate their labor in service to a cause they believed in. Faced with the subsumption of their work-in-solidarity into ethical branding, however, USFT leaders came into consciousness of the power and the role of their affective labor. In turn they reappropriated control over the value they produced, first by pressuring Fair Trade USA to stop building corporate partnerships with sworn enemies of allied organizations, then withholding their labor and then by attacking FairTradeUSA.

USFT's use of negative advertising against a brand that they once helped build offers important insights into the growing frustration over the private control of social movement symbols and the cynical use of ethical branding by corporate retailers. But it is more than just a show of angst. Through the lens of affective labor, it is also a radical, threatening, and even dangerous act that demonstrates a desire to manifest a deeper commitment to work-in-solidarity within the networks created through Fair Trade. In standing behind farmer and worker organizations angered by FairTradeUSA's decision to leave FLO, USFT's boycott reflected the relations of solidarity historically at the center of the movement but lost in translation to the market mainstream.

USFT's call to boycott the FTC label lays out the future battle lines for consumer movements in today's ethical brandscape. Their audacity to challenge an ethical brand that seems so reputable represents a reinvigoration of a spirit of protest, accountability, and debate long lost in the rapid expansion of ethical branding but

once at the root of consumer politics. As celebrities and corporate retailers replace activist networks and consumerist brand culture colonizes retail space (Goodman 2010; Richey and Ponte 2011), we believe we are on the verge of a new round of anti-branding activism that strategically targets ethical brands, certifications, and labels and attempts to hold them accountable for the claims that they make. This backlash is originating not from those who consume ethical commodities such as FTC products, but by those who produce them; grievances are coming from farmers, workers and activist networks who question the lack of democracy and ineffectiveness of Fair Trade to deliver on its promises.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> As Brown and Getz (2008), Freidberg (2004), Goodman (2010) and Hawkins (2011), Kaplan (1995), LeBillion (2006), Mutersbaugh and Lyon (2010) highlight, the politics of ethical labels are often rooted in a neo-colonial imaginary of North-to-South benevolence in which boundaryless consumers “help” or “save” poor farmer and worker victims locked into unjust conditions in the third world. Ethical labeling campaigns reinforced the primacy of consumer sovereignty (Roff 2007) while reducing workers and farmers to objects who “depend on” or are “indebted to” the consumer agents who make ethical shopping decisions in their name.

<sup>2</sup> FairTradeUSA, formerly TransFair USA, audits and certifies transactions between US companies and their international suppliers, monitoring contracts to ensure they are compliant with international Fair Trade standards, set by Fair Trade International (FLO). FairTradeUSA is structured as a non-profit organization with an appointed board constituted by 8–10 North American business people and one to two producer organization representatives. Unlike other national Fair Trade initiatives, FairTradeUSA’s board does not include Fair Trade movement actors.

<sup>3</sup> While feminist geographers have developed an extensive literature around the concepts of emotional labor and caring labor in healthcare, services and home care (Dyer, McDowell and Batnitzky 2008; England 2010; Lawson 2007; McDowell 2008) and we are attentive to a growing literature on geographies of care which have emphasized the work of caring (cf McEwan and Goodman 2010), we have elected to use the concept of affective labor due to an explicit framing of the dialectical relationship between what we call work-in-solidarity in social movements and branding work in commercial retailing conceptualized by Hardt (1999).

<sup>4</sup> The CIW is an organization of low-wage workers, particularly farmworkers. CIW has coordinated national boycotts against Taco Bell, McDonalds, Burger King, and other fast food companies to advocate for higher prices paid to tomato pickers.

<sup>5</sup> SINALTRAINAL (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Industria de Agro-Alimentos) is a food industry trade union based in Colombia.

<sup>6</sup> USAS is a student and youth-led organization that runs student-labor solidarity campaigns.

<sup>7</sup> FairTrade Network of Asian Producers’ mission is to be an organ of representation, coordination, exchange, and collaboration for the empowerment of small-scale farmers’ and farm workers’ organisations from Asia within the framework of FTC.

<sup>8</sup> Coordinadora Latinoamericana y del Caribe de Los Pequeños Productores de Comercio Justo (the CLAC) is an organization of Fair Trade cooperatives focused on small farmers, democratic organization, and promoting the Fair Trade products their members produce.

<sup>9</sup> On 22 September 2011, FairTradeUSA issued a press release stating that: “GMCR recently made a \$300,000 grant to FairTradeUSA to support the Fair Trade Towns and Fair Trade University programs. These programs unite volunteers in local communities and colleges to encourage Fair Trade purchases, and increase consumer awareness and understanding of the role Fair Trade products play in fighting poverty and protecting the environment” (FairTradeUSA 2011b).

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