

Rethinking the Sweatshop: A Conversation About United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) with Charles Eaton, Marion Traub-Werner, and Evelyn Zepeda

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Abstract

United Students against Sweatshops (USAS) was conceived in 1997 by a handful of organizers and student interns at UNITE (the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Technical Employees). With chapters at 200 universities and colleges, USAS has come a long way from its origins as an advocate for no-sweat licensing policies at campus bookstores. A founder of the Worker Rights Consortium,* it is by now a broad political movement, campaigning for labor rights inside and outside the university; for economic justice; and for peace in the era of globalization. The evolution of this organization is the subject of an interview with three USAS leaders who came to the organization at different moments in its development. Topics range from international organizing to graduate student unionization. Questions of race, gender and sexual identity have preoccupied USAS since its inception. They figure prominently in the current discussion. The interview was conducted in August, 2001 and edited a few days after September 11, allowing us to include a few reflections on that day and its aftermath.

United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) looks a little different today than it did in 1997, when it was just a gleam in the eye of a few organizers and student interns at the New York City-based Union of Needletrades, Industrial, and Technical Employees (UNITE). The evolution of USAS is the subject of an interview with three student leaders who came to the organization at different moments in its development. As Naomi Klein has pointed out, contemporary youth movements are part of a far-flung and decentralized global anti-corporate movement. The USAS campaign is one of many that Klein says are “linked to one another much as ‘hotlinks’ connect their websites on the Internet.”¹ Like the movement as a whole, USAS relies heavily upon electronic communications; this conversation about USAS is no exception. It was conducted in August–September 2001 in a series of worldwide e-mail sessions. Charlie Eaton, now a senior at New York University, participated from Argentina where he was studying for a semester. Marion Traub-Werner, a graduate of the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, was in transit between Guatemala and Toronto when we began. She last wrote me on September twelfth from China, where her plane was grounded the day after terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C. I was never sure where Evelyn Zepeda was when she wrote. A student at Pitzer

College in Claremont, California, she spent the summer of 2001 shuttling between New York, Mexico, and Los Angeles. I am indebted to these globe-trotting activists for taking the time to answer my many questions and for offering thoughtful reflections on the potential of a broad-based academic labor movement. To make our conversation more intelligible, I offer a brief and very general summary of USAS history.

The idea for a campus-based anti-sweatshop movement originated in discussions between union staffers and student interns at UNITE in the summer of 1997. Returning to Duke University that fall, intern Tico Almeida helped organize the sit-in that would inspire a wave of building-occupations at other campuses. These and other forms of direct action signaled the emergence of a recognizable student movement and put USAS on the activist map. Since that time USAS has sustained a national network of undergraduates struggling to eliminate sweatshop conditions in the production of university-licensed apparel.

USAS was a founder of the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC), an independent global monitoring organization that seeks public disclosure of working conditions in apparel factories and remedies for violations of its code of conduct. USAS representatives sit on the WRC governing and advisory boards along with university officials and representatives of unions, religious organizations, and NGOs from both the U.S. and the global South. Campaigning aggressively to get universities out of corporate-dominated monitoring organizations, USAS has brought over 90 universities into the WRC since it was launched in April, 2000.²

I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that USAS is one of the most successful human rights organizations in the country today. Yet it continues to struggle with a critical contradiction. University-based and mainly white and middle-class, it acts on behalf of impoverished workers struggling to survive in the developing countries of Asia and Latin America. To its credit, USAS has been making determined efforts to address this contradiction in its own internal structure. Matters of race, gender, sexual identity, and class are central to an ongoing discussion of USAS goals. Importantly, USAS is examining its political relationship to the workers it cares about. In the process, it is re-visioning itself as a broad movement for labor rights and social justice. In doing so, leaders of the organization are redefining the sweatshop, in part to draw attention to the struggles of exploited workers on their own campuses.

The Living Wage Campaign at Harvard attracted national attention and achieved some concrete results. For twenty-one days, students occupied a campus building. They had the support of several hundred faculty members and prominent labor leaders including AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations) President John Sweeney and former Labor Secretary Robert Reich, who joined local unions and community groups at a demonstration in support of the campaign. On May 5, 2001, Harvard's President at the time, Neil Rudenstine, capitulated. In a statement issued that day, Rudenstine announced the formation of a university committee to "consider the economic welfare" of Harvard's lowest-paid workers. The committee includes students and union representatives along with faculty and administrators. In ad-

dition, Rudenstine pledged to work with campus unions “to achieve common goals.” In another example, 2,500 undergraduates at New York University signed a petition urging the university to recognize and bargain with the Graduate Student Organizing Committee, a duly elected union of NYU teaching and research assistants affiliated with the United Auto Workers.³ University President L. Jay Oliva received this petition on the morning of a scheduled strike-authorization vote. Several hours later, the union and the university signed an agreement setting terms for collective bargaining, which began on April 2, 2001. When NYU decided to negotiate, were they estimating the number of undergraduates who might support a strike by graduate assistants? My guess is, they were.

The emergence of an undergraduate movement focused on labor rights is receiving its share of attention. Surprised by its power and vitality, observers of this movement have been at pains to analyze its particular character. In part, undergraduates have become more labor-conscious as a reviving labor movement has become more conscious of them. Recognizing the potential of youthful, educated organizers, the AFL-CIO has been recruiting undergraduates into “union summer” programs and training institutes for several years now. Some students have found their way into union internships and even permanent union staff positions. For these young activists, unionism is more than a bread-and-butter movement or a vehicle for democracy in the workplace; it is a way forward in their quest for a more just society, in which wealth and power are distributed more equitably. The conversation that follows explores the potential as well as the limits of a student-led labor movement.

Speaking of USAS

Kitty Krupat: Since 1997, when USAS was conceived, the organization has been through a number of “vision-setting” conferences and has continued to discuss the scope of its endeavors. Some USAS leaders have maintained that USAS should remain sharply focused on the university and its connection to the apparel sweatshop, especially in the global South. Others have wanted it to become a broad social justice organization. Some observers, including myself, have described the organization as a student labor movement, still focused on the university and the apparel sweatshop, but also involved in other university labor issues including union drives and living-wage campaigns.

At the August 2001 USAS conference in Chicago, delegates passed a resolution that defines the organization as a movement dedicated to fighting corporate globalization and the exploitation of workers in every sphere of the economy. It offers an inclusive definition of the sweatshop and sweatshop workers:

Workers, people of color, and students are routinely dis-empowered in garment factories, computer factories, strawberry fields, fast food restaurants, hotels, prisons, and even our own universities. . . . Our opposition to sweatshops and what they

embody enables us to build a larger organization that addresses the social justice concerns of students outside our progressive circles.

Charlie, since the resolution was based on a speech you made at the conference, let me ask you to clarify something. Who are the students “outside our progressive concerns?” Why are they “outside” and how can they be brought inside?

Charles Eaton: People outside of progressive circles are people who are not exposed to progressive ideas and are conditioned by corporate media and mainstream culture to not question or challenge a system and a society that they feel uncomfortable with or oppressed by. For example, maybe a student feels uncomfortable with the cultural norm that says she or he needs to wear \$150 Nike sneakers and unaffordable designer clothes in order to be cool. Maybe that student is annoyed by patronizing Gap advertisements that say she or he should wear Khaki because “everyone is in Khaki.” As organizers, we need to connect that marketing barrage with the sweatshops, where paying substandard wages to workers allows corporations to free up resources for advertising campaigns. And to bring students inside the progressive circle, we need to engage those folks in a dialogue that reveals that they are right to feel uncomfortable with a system that enables corporations to exploit workers on the job, students in the university, and all of us through media mind tricks. Even more importantly, we need to show students that we can challenge corporate power at its root and make real change.

KK: In talking about the effects of corporate media and mainstream culture, you’ve used the terms “progressive” and “system” in a rather general way. That reminds me of something the journalist Liza Featherstone has noted. She’s been following the student movement for a while now, most recently interviewing USAS members for a book. She finds that many student activists are comfortable with an anti-corporate and anti-global rhetoric but not so comfortable with an analysis or critique of capitalism. In fact, she says, the language of anti-corporatism has become a euphemism for capitalism.⁴ How do you react to that? Is the student movement short on theory?

CE: I think that folks in USAS are starting to break down our analysis to a simpler but more comprehensive level than being anti-capitalist or anti-corporate. People are asking fundamentally—who gets to make decisions in all spheres of life, whether it’s in the home, at work, in the community, or in government. The answer is a small group of very rich and connected people, who, more often than not, by virtue of racism, sexism, and homophobia, are straight, white men. I personally want to challenge that system of decision-making and introduce democratic decision-making that empowers all people at work, home, and in government, regardless of race, class, gender, or sexuality. If capitalism is incompatible with that, then I suppose I oppose capitalism. Corporations as they exist are certainly undemocratic, so I suppose I am anti-corporate. But capitalism in particular, I think, is not a useful word for organizing or analysis because it is stigma-

tized. It is more useful to ask, in simpler and thus less stigmatized terms, who gets to decide? Everyone, or an elite few? And who should get to decide? That said, while workers and students are in their own way disempowered and excluded from decision-making, we need to recognize and challenge oppression of people because of their race, gender, and sexuality, no matter if they are a student and a worker. In other words, I think we should be careful not to imply that people of color, women and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, transgender, bi-sexual, queer) folks are only oppressed because they are students or workers. Conversely, I think it's a mistake to say that only students and working-class people suffer from racism, sexism and homophobia.

Marion Traub-Werner: I agree with Charlie that we run the risk of marginalizing ourselves if we use the language of anti-capitalism, a message with limited appeal that doesn't move many people. For me, the point is to make USAS work accessibly enough to move someone like myself from being horrified by sweatshops to working to support unions on our campuses and in other parts of the world.

Evelyn Zepeda: Charlie and I agree about a lot of things, but I'm a little uneasy about something he said. Those of us who grew up in the inner city didn't gain our social and political consciousness because our parents were hippies or because we took a class on racism in college. Racism is something we live, and society's message that we need to assimilate has always been very clear. So I feel uncomfortable with the notion that USAS needs to educate these "other" folks. It's important for us to be aware of our role in a larger youth movement and to realize that we can't go into a community like Compton, California and talk to African-American boys about their Nike shoes. What we need to do is identify where those folks are already organizing and see where we fit in. What I learned from a UNITE action called Hip-Hop against Sweatshops is that there is an interest on the part of inner-city, minority youth in international issues. So, it's not that USAS needs to enlighten "them." People organize differently in different communities. The USAS model isn't always applicable. We need to provide a venue for their activities; we need to show up for their events and organize our resources to facilitate communications between different groups doing different kinds of work on issues we care about.

KK: USAS has been very successful as an anti-sweatshop organization, narrowly focused on university-licensed merchandise. Why is it necessary or important for USAS to redefine the sweatshop and to revision itself as a broad movement on behalf of workers' rights?

CE: USAS from its inception has focused on promoting international solidarity. I think that most folks in USAS believe students and workers need to mobilize together at an international level to empower ourselves. This can't be done by only fighting garment sweatshops. That would contradict the idea that student and worker power lies in our solidarity with each other. Student/labor solidarity means students supporting all worker struggles for empowerment and social justice, and workers supporting student struggles for empowerment. We cannot

overcome the global power of multinational corporations if we only build solidarity between a small group of students and garment workers who make up a tiny fraction of the global workforce. We need to look for other winnable campaigns for student and worker power.

KK: Marion, can you give an example of the sort of broad-based international work Charlie is referring to? You've been in Guatemala for the last year and a half, working with STITCH, known also as Organizers for Labor Justice. What is the relationship between STITCH and USAS?

MT-W: STITCH is a network of women and union activists in the U.S. committed to international solidarity. In Central America STITCH coordinates leadership exchanges between U.S. and Central American women and internally among Central American women from different countries. For a while the link between STITCH and USAS was somewhat personal through me. For the year 2000, I worked quarter-time for USAS and three-quarter time for STITCH. Interestingly, many STITCH activists are women staffers at U.S. unions and are as interested in supporting women's leadership in Central American unions as they are in the U.S. So the link makes sense; STITCH folks are using a common interest in international work to reach out to USAS activists and guide them to a good place in the U.S. labor movement for them as young women.

KK: The vision of young women and children earning pennies a day in a Guatemalan factory or a shop in Haiti is repugnant to most college students, and we know that they will support a campaign to end exploitation of workers in the conventionally-defined sweatshop. But will they respond with equal enthusiasm to the broader labor-rights agenda that USAS has set for itself?

CE: I think the last year has proven that students will respond with the same enthusiasm. Ohio State's successful month-long building occupation in support of their striking sanitation workers in Spring 2000 proved it. Unionization of graduate students at NYU proved it. Fifteen hundred people rallying behind the Harvard living-wage campaign proved it. American University terminating its contract with Sodexo-Marriot Corporation because of its private-prison operations proved it. Students are mobilizing for social and economic justice all over the country and winning.

KK: Looking ahead, what kinds of campaigns do you think USAS will (or should) undertake?

CE: I expect more living-wage and campus worker-rights campaigns, more student government takeovers, application of licensing contracts as leverage to support unionization of collegiate garment workers, drives to secure union rights for students, and efforts to sever university ties with the private-prison industry. In short, the resolution passed last summer mandates organizing intended to make American universities institutions that empower their students and employees, as well as workers at institutions that rely on our universities. Being out of the country now, it is extremely difficult for me to think and comment on how USAS and the student movement should react to September eleventh. I can only

say that I do not see how a war could end terrorism. I can only see more innocent deaths and racist scapegoating coming from war. I think USAS should mobilize for peace in the interest of its members and social justice. But I hope we can avoid subverting our struggle for student and worker power to a peace movement. Instead, I hope we can find a way that the two are mutually reinforcing.

KK: Right after the attacks, USAS issued a strong anti-racism and anti-war statement and the Coordinating Committee made a decision to support peace activities.

EZ: Yes. But while the Coordinating Committee has endorsed peace activities, it also wants USAS to stay focused on our local campaigns. I don't think we can put all our resources into the peace movement when workers are losing their jobs left and right.

KK: How neatly can you separate those two things? The economy was turning sour before the terrorist attacks, and unemployment was rising, but we saw a dramatic turn for the worse right after September eleventh. That suggests to me that USAS, as a labor movement of sorts, has concerns in common with a peace movement that also cares about workers' rights.

CE: I think that the student/labor movement is obligated to help build a peace movement to save innocent lives. Historically, major wars have disproportionately sacrificed the lives of working-class youth and people of color to advance elite interests. Bush seems intent on waging just such a war. And it is in our own interest and the interest of social justice to stop his militaristic policy. But at the same time, we need to continue to question our system of government that accords Bush and a narrow elite the privilege of making such oppressive policy decisions. Opportunistically, Bush, the Republicans, and most Democrats have circumvented our already weak democratic process to give the President a blank check to attack other nations and peoples without Congressional consent or even debate. Meanwhile, media conglomerates, controlled by an equally exclusive elite, confuse and distract us from Bush's undemocratic move to restrict civil liberties, racially profile Muslims, and wage war. Moreover, Bush and company are bailing out airlines and their stockholders but leaving laid-off workers high and dry. Universities are being told by Dianne Feinstein, from my home state, that a moratorium should be placed on foreign student visas. In short, corporate America and their political allies are using this tragedy to take advantage of American students and workers. For that reason, I think USAS must intensify our efforts to organize labor unions and student unions, elect progressive candidates to government, and build non-corporate media. That way, the next time crisis strikes, we will be the ones making the decision not to go to war but to bring all terrorists to justice through law and due process.

EZ: In the 1960s and 1970s anti-war activists were going one way and the AFL-CIO was going the other way by supporting administration policies in Vietnam. Now, so many peace activists work for unions. This time it could be different. I

hope that because USAS has a stake in both movements we can help to bridge a gap if it develops. We have a really important role to play.

KK: I agree with you, but can I add something for the record? There were always peace activists in unions. Sure, it's true that the AFL-CIO supported the war in Vietnam, but thousands of union members and some individual unions were on the front lines of the anti-war movement. I learned about organized labor and met progressive trade unionists in the early 1970s when I became active in the anti-war movement. It was a very logical step for me—and many other young activists—to move from the anti-war movement into the labor movement.

MT-W: If USAS wants to stay on the cutting edge, we need an expanded social and political critique that allows us to articulate connections between so-called terrorism and the question of economic justice in the world. To give an example from STITCH: we are asking ourselves why we should do solidarity work now; why is it important? USAS needs to do something similar for students. Deep organization and analysis shouldn't get sidelined. When things get scary you have the choice of locking down—locking yourself in—or reaching out and looking for more global communication, because that will help us to overcome our fears. You know, I just realized something bizarre and ironic. Although we have paid some attention to conditions in Pakistan and India, the Middle-East has never been on the USAS map. And that's too bad. It's a big omission in our work.

KK: Marion, you were a USAS activist and leader almost from day one. In retrospect, what is gained and what could be lost as USAS and the student movement in general expand beyond the original target, university-licensed apparel?

MT-W: We used to talk about how our power is on campus and so we want to use our influence on the university to make change. That's still true, but nowadays I see it in a different way. USAS focuses on direct links to the university and uses student leverage to influence labor conditions. It attracts students because they can feel that their actions are making a concrete change. In some way, the USAS movement builds on the student/consumer paradigm. USAS seeks to construct the student as the ultimate conscientious consumer. And we want the university to be responsible. This approach has had broad appeal because it fits neatly into mainstream consumer movements and is a key to USAS' mainstream success. When we began, however, we never challenged the idea that students should consume and we never questioned the university athletic industry as a whole or the university as a marketing machine. I think USAS can move, and has moved, beyond its limited field. However, if this transition happens too quickly or in a politically exclusive or narrow way, USAS could lose its broad appeal and become as marginalized as some of the factions it has had to fend off.

KK: Well, you've propelled us into a discussion of factionalism. Anyone who follows discussions on the USAS listserv will know that USAS has been plagued by factionalism on the left and that it has been resisting incursions by such groups as the Progressive Labor Party (PLP) and the International Socialist Organization (ISO).

MT-W: Don't forget the anarchists!

KK: Right! From time to time, these and other groups, even within USAS itself, have accused USAS of red-baiting and even racism. During the last national conference, for example, members of the PLP invaded caucus meetings meant for students of color, claiming that the exclusion of whites was a form of racism. One of these PLP-ers set off a debate on the listserv that went on for weeks. An African-American student at Northwestern University jumped into that debate with an impassioned response. Although she is not a participant in this conversation, I'm taking the liberty of incorporating a brief excerpt from her e-mail, as a starting point for talking about diversity:

I have been frustrated with USAS in the past for its, may I say, disregard for race or pushing it to the background, when in fact it is integral in the machinery of sweatshops (and global exploitation). I say this as a working-class, African-American female activist. But I will say that although I only was at the conference for a short time, I was able to stop by the [People of Color] caucus, and had some of the best discussions I've had with other activists. The only way those came about was because of the safe space that [the caucus] offered. By talking to other people of color, sharing stories, experiences, etc., of working in organizations which many times do not reflect our cultural backgrounds, [we were able to] to articulate this to USAS as a whole. Now caucuses are by far not the only way to address an issue, but most of the people of color I talked to really benefited from the caucus; so rarely do we get to be in a space with so many other radicalized POC, working on issues we care about.

KK: This student is talking about the People of Color caucus in USAS, but there are others: Caucuses for women, LGBTQ students and working-class folks, for example. How well has the caucus system worked?

EZ: I agree with this student about caucuses in USAS, but I want to add something. Caucuses need to be safe spaces, but they also need to be places to brainstorm and move towards a constructive agenda. We have a long way to go. Folks who identify with the caucuses need to feel supported by the organization both morally and institutionally. At the same time, caucus members have special responsibilities. Our experience in the POC caucus this year was that we couldn't do what we had done in the past: Make a "To Do" list and hand it over to the organization. We realized that the work needs to be done by those of us in USAS who have links both to communities of color and to USAS.

KK: It seems to me that USAS is more diverse today than it was in 1998. Am I correct in thinking it has more people of color and more women in leadership?

EZ: I've been actively involved in the organization for the last two years. USAS looked way different two years ago. I remember being at the annual conference in 2000 and making a comment that there was not one workshop on race in the movement. Now there are more people of color in the organization in leadership roles. I am not sure what the local groups look like. As for more women in leadership roles, I believe that was institutionalized and guaranteed a couple of

years ago. The result is there are more women on the Coordinating Committee and in other leadership positions.

KK: Yes, I think you're right about early efforts to promote leadership among women. I attended the first couple of "vision-setting" meetings and there was lots of attention paid to questions of gender equity in the organization.

MT-W: At one of those early meetings we actually set quotas. We said there had to be an equal number of men and women on the Coordinating Committee and that the staff had to be half-and-half as well. Now the staff is *all* women.

KK: Despite the fact there are more women in USAS leadership and more students of color, the organization is still sometimes caricatured or trivialized as a do-good, feel-good organization of upper-middle-class white kids who cry when they see human suffering in far-off places like El Salvador or Bangladesh. Some people even within USAS have criticized USAS for addressing racism and sexism abroad while avoiding it at home. How do you respond to those criticisms?

EZ: I believe that taking part in the work of organizations whose end goal is human rights has really helped shape the way students view workers in other countries. The National Labor Committee (NLC), for example, was strongly associated with USAS in its early days. They're famous for their exposés of conditions in El Salvador and other Central American countries and currently in Bangladesh.

KK: They're probably most famous for outing Kathie Lee Gifford as a sweatshop entrepreneur.

EZ: Despite all their accomplishments, I feel that NLC has had a somewhat paternalistic "lets do this *for* people attitude" that has rubbed off on USAS. We've been characterized as having the same attitude. But there are folks in USAS who actively work to deconstruct that myth and help push the conversation in another direction, one that breaks down these stereotypes that are offensive and that don't acknowledge the fact that workers are three-dimensional beings. USAS has a book-learned analysis of racism but is going through the growing pains of understanding how to implement that analysis in the work we do.

KK: Evelyn, you're of Latin American heritage and you come from a working-class family. Even if the majority of university students are still white and middle-class, there are plenty of students like you. Why aren't they more present in USAS?

EZ: Because they're organizing around other things, like affirmative action and unjust immigration laws. There are also deep-rooted stereotypes about USAS. Or as one friend put it: "I can't deal with all that barefoot, cell-phone-toting, consensus shit." Plus USAS is a huge commitment. Most working-class students have jobs or other obligations. Because USAS work can be all-consuming and dramatic, it is difficult for these people to plug in.

KK: That leaves us with the same old question: How can USAS address the concerns of impoverished workers, mainly women and people of color, if the orga-

nization itself bears little relationship to this constituency? Or to put it another way, how can USAS work on behalf of a constituency it does not reflect or represent?

MT-W: In some ways, STITCH is an example of that problem, with so many white women doing solidarity work in Central America. On the other hand, we're trying to be part of the solution by working with women both inside and outside the labor movement and in both the U.S. and Central America to figure out how solidarity work can develop women's leadership in labor's struggle.

EZ: I think it's a difficult thing to balance. Ideally there should be droves of young working-class people of color leading this movement. I, for example, have some stuff in common with workers in other countries; "That could've been me" pops through my head pretty often. When this happens I shake out of it to realize if that were the case I'd also fight like hell. Because it could've been me, I can't help but realize that these women don't spend their whole lives thinking about how miserable they are. Believe me, they don't! Living in the U.S. and going to college already makes it so that I will probably never know how it is. I already feel that disconnect. I can only imagine how hard it is for a middle-class white woman from Indiana. Because USAS does not reflect the constituency it works on behalf of, it really needs to continue seeing its role as an ally. We have to make sure that our internal politics do not overshadow the work at hand.

KK: The student from Northwestern added a postscript to her comments: "USAS has a problem in dealing with dissenting voices and that has caused many more problems. . . . Don't try to silence people, it just ends up blowing up in your faces." As an independent, democratic, and progressive organization somewhere on the left, how should USAS deal with diversity of political opinion and dissent?

MT-W: Caucuses, clear decision-making structures, and good organizing. One thing in particular comes to mind: The link between political diversity and racial/ethnic/sexual diversity is complicated. Repeatedly, fringe political groups have tried to use caucus spaces, dedicated to the other diversities I mentioned, to promote their factionalism. From the earliest days in USAS, we have acknowledged the fact that there is racism, homophobia, classism, and sexism in the organization. Because of that, USAS has tried to create very deliberate safe and inclusive spaces to deal with these issues. When political factions infiltrate those spaces to take advantage of their inclusiveness in order to push a political agenda, too many times we have been too weak in our analysis of oppression to call that shit out. You know what I'm saying? You are *not* oppressed because as an anarcho-syndicalist nobody will listen to you; it doesn't matter what color you are.

EZ: It's always important to keep in mind why an organization exists. Basically, the reason USAS exists is because we wanted to build an independent, democratic, and progressive organization. But even as we strive to create a space for dissenting opinion and differing political ideologies, we have to make sure that

these divergent points of view are not inconsistent with the principles of our organization. We can be as inclusive and progressive as we want—include Republicans as well as PLP people—but if we don't share a common mission, what good is all that inclusiveness?

KK: USAS has worked hard to achieve democratic governance, and there's been a lot of debate about it. In the interests of efficiency some folks have favored relatively centralized administrative structures. The majority, however, seem to distrust formal structures, centralized authority, and bureaucracy. While USAS has a staff, committees, boards, regional organizers, etc., it limits the authority of individuals and groups within the organization and appears to strive for broad consensus in decision-making. I've been struck by the fact that process in USAS is almost as important as substance. Why? What is at stake in the "process" of decision-making and the "process" of implementing policy? What are the pros and cons of USAS' organizational M.O.?

MT-W: I think our hyper-focus on process is in reaction to so-called progressive movements of the past, student and other, that were hierarchical and male-dominated. It is also linked to a lot of the theory in vogue at universities that raises questions of subjectivity and agency. And it has a lot to do with identity politics, which got us into an examination of process: looking at how organizations operate as well as at the content of their work. But in my opinion the results have been mixed. I was not at the conference this year. But on various delegations and at the conference last year, I have felt that the process of debate has impeded our function and ability to focus on what we are trying to do other than navel-gazing. At USAS' 2000 conference, the process debates effectively railroaded our discussions and in the end I could only tack up twenty-six hours of plenary-talking about structure to our own political immaturity. I remember students saying "I am so glad we are all friends here and we want unity." Well yeah, unity is important, but at some point we need to recognize that we aren't all friends just because we are (mostly) young folks in a cool organization. We are political allies/partners, *compañeras*, and holding out for hours for consensus because of fear of offending members is a big problem.

KK: With or without navel-gazing, USAS has a pretty impressive record. It was a founder of the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC) and has helped to put it on a sound footing by bringing more than ninety universities into the fold. In some respects that is USAS' most far-reaching achievement. How effective has the WRC been so far and how important is it to the future of USAS?

MT-W: From my perspective the WRC's main accomplishments have been its provisions for full public disclosure—where factories are, what the conditions are—and its efforts to support union drives. The best examples of that are the reports WRC published about union-busting at the Kukdong factory in Atlixco, Mexico, which produces for Nike and Reebok, and at the New Era factory in Buffalo, New York, which manufactures baseball caps for the major leagues. In the case of Kukdong, workers who had been fired for trying to organize an in-

dependent union filed a complaint with the WRC in January 2001. Later that month, the WRC sent a fact-finding mission to the plant and filed reports that not only exposed exploitative working conditions but also violations of Mexican labor law. Students then put pressure on universities that had agreements with Nike. As a result of the reports and the subsequent USAS campaigns, Nike was obliged to pressure the company into rehiring fired workers and permitting them to organize with the union of their choice.⁵

KK: We should give the happy ending. In the fall of 2001 the Kukdong workers signed a union contract. They are the first workers in a *maquiladora* in Mexico to win an independent union.

MT-W: There are few external monitoring efforts that have been able to support unions in a smart way like the WRC has in the case of Kukdong and New Era. The WRC, if it continues to be careful and smart about how it works, could be a real solidarity tool for union-building. It should choose its cases strategically to set precedents in the industry. Because WRC verification procedures can focus on one specific violation, there is the possibility to raise the profile of that violation and set a new standard for remedy. The WRC is also doing this sort of targeted monitoring on the question of freedom of association. The same could be done with violations of women's rights, with a focus on violations of maternity benefits, for example. I mention this example because it is one of those rights violated across the board and it is a right enshrined in labor codes (unlike living wage) so it would make sense to have a U.S. organization work with women's groups to help get that right enforced. As for how important the WRC is to the USAS agenda: I'm not sure. It probably depends on whom you talk to. A big problem with coordinating the work of the WRC (and independent monitoring in general) and the general campaign work of USAS is that the two naturally operate on different time lines. When the WRC takes three weeks to get a delegation together after it has been requested to do so, it creates a lot of frustration among activists because their request to the WRC was made to meet an immediate need. For an organization like the WRC, however, it is important to work carefully and it is simply hard to pull together trips and reports on a campaign time line.

KK: You were in the Kukdong delegation, right?

M-TW: Yes, and I'm speaking from that experience. I've also noticed that WRC work tends to appeal to certain USAS students, those who come from private schools and are interested in a policy focus, rather than a focus on union drives and direct action. There are of course *many* exceptions and the two are not mutually exclusive. Point is, if USAS goes in an organizing direction the WRC would probably take a backseat on its agenda, and that could alienate some mainstream students.

KK: But hasn't the establishment of a WRC code of conduct and verification system meant that USAS has to give a high priority to its role in an international human and labor rights coalition?

MT-W: I think international work is important to USAS because the organiza-

tion understands the fundamental necessity for a coordinated international strategy to fight exploitation by multinational companies. It may be changing now, but for the most part unions haven't put sufficient resources into international organizing, which has stymied USAS' ability to move forward in this direction because of our limited resources and political clout. In general it is hard for decentralized groups with few resources to coordinate international work. For that reason the international work has been the one exception regarding USAS structure. Students, no matter how opposed to structure, understood—at least when I was working with them—that some degree of structure is necessary to continue communication and coordination internationally. USAS' international work includes a loose network of alums who live abroad. When visiting students pass through, these alums hook them up to NGOs in order to support USAS campaigns, investigate university plants, and even spark campaigns. The structured part of this work is the Collegiate Apparel Research Initiative (CARI) and the occasional delegation.

KK: What is CARI?

MT-W: CARI is a summer program for USAS students to partner with local NGOs and work on some of their projects. The idea is that over time we build a relationship with these NGOs and eventually the ability to campaign together. At least that's how I see it. Anyway, it has had mixed success from my perspective. I think it is hard for USAS to run this type of program. It requires a lot of resources and the benefits aren't immediate. It will continue as long as former participants have the enthusiasm to continue it, but I don't think it is or should be a major USAS priority until it is worked into a larger international plan.

KK: How effectively has USAS been able to work with NGOs and unions in the global South?

MT-W: Wow! A lot has been learned. I can only speak to Central America and Mexico, but I think we have successfully coordinated work with some NGOs and unions. The WRC is a good tool to do that because it offers something more concrete than volunteers and campaigns. A lot of NGOs are suspicious of campaigns especially after shitty experiences with other US groups. A lot of times the campaigns end up overwhelming the local groups and these groups lose control of the international strategy. Still, the groups recognize the power of campaigns. I think those of us who went from USAS to live abroad worked to build more stable relationships. We also worked to explain what campaigns mean to activists in the US and to better understand the perspectives of local groups. Connecting with local unions is a bit more complicated because of their structure and the nature of union solidarity. Unions are interested in international solidarity but are also looking for material support to boost campaigns to the point where an international solidarity campaign would be useful. So, in this regard, it makes sense to hook up with a US union or with the AFL-CIO Solidarity Center so they can provide that support and we can campaign around the outcome. This hasn't really happened yet—except with Kukdong.

KK: What has been learned or gained from delegations and tours?

MT-W: I think from delegations we have learned how to better interact with local groups. When I first started working with USAS delegations we would ask groups, "What can we do in the US to support you?" It's a naïve question and people were really honest with us; guided our thinking. They would say, "that's your call, but here's what's going on and our analysis of the situation here." We learned that sensitive solidarity means analyzing the local situation and carefully explaining things we think we could do in the US to make a difference and having local groups evaluate that. In the spring of 2001 there was a retreat in Mexico for USAS members and Kukdong workers. There was this hope that we would sit with workers and strategize the whole campaign together. What happened in reality was that the delegation gave workers the space to strategize on their own while we did the same. Then, we came together and presented our respective ideas and got feedback.

EZ: For me the Kukdong experience was really humbling. Such a contrast between students tabling at their campuses and then going to Mexico and making friends with the Kukdong workers and finding out that they are not two-dimensional. So many people came back with a totally different take on USAS work. I remember one woman, Sarah Todd, saying, "I don't want to run a corporate campaign unless it's attached to real people."

KK: As a way of rounding out this discussion, let's move from the international sphere back to the home front. In redefining the sweatshop to include universities in the United States, I think USAS has laid the basis for a broad academic labor movement. As I see it, this incipient movement has already articulated two main goals: economic justice for campus workers and greater democracy in higher education. I'll take the liberty of using my own school and Charlie's, New York University, as an example. Charlie, in some ways your personal activist history mirrors the trajectory of USAS itself. You started with the NYU No Sweat Coalition and wound up with Students for Social Equality (SSE), a federation of existing student groups at NYU dedicated to democratizing student government and to supporting NYU workers, especially the [United Auto Workers affiliated] Graduate Student Organizing Committee (GSOC-UAW). Does your experience of student activism at NYU contain any lessons or any suggestions for the direction of a national student labor movement?

CE: I am sure that there are lots. I will focus on one that emerged during our student government elections. During that election, we did well, but our Progressive Student Coalition candidate in the most high-profile race lost because we failed to show students that her election and their empowerment in university decision-making would really benefit them. As a result we could only turn out a core of about 200 progressive students to vote for her out of about 6,000. We lost the election by about fifty votes. The lesson is that we need to show students why a solidaristic movement for student and worker power is in the best interest of all students.

KK: As a graduate student and a member of GSOC-UAW, I can attest to the power of solidarity. We were on the brink of a strike in April 2001 when 2,500

undergraduates signed a petition urging NYU to recognize the union and bargain with us. I'm not sure that graduate assistants at NYU will finally achieve a union contract without that support.⁶ Most of those 2,500 students do not consider themselves members of USAS. Some of them probably never even heard of USAS. So, to conclude this discussion, I'll ask you this: Are these students of good will potential recruits for a broad-based academic labor movement?

CE: Absolutely. These students are potential recruits for USAS and a mass student labor movement. Those petition signatories represent the majority that, when given a choice, choose a union, choose social justice, choose solidarity, and choose a deeper democracy. But they cannot make that choice just by signing a petition. Only a mass movement can win democracy and social justice. As organizers our job is to move the majority.

NOTES

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*Founded in April, 2000, the Workers Rights Consortium (WRC) is an organization of more than ninety universities, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and labor and civil rights organizations in the United States, Central America, and Asia. Its goal is to establish codes of conduct and verification procedures that guarantee fair wages and working conditions in factories manufacturing university-licensed merchandise.

1. Naomi Klein, "The Vision Thing," *The Nation*, July 10, 2000, pp. 18–21.

2. Many universities with licensing agreements have belonged, or continue to belong, to the Collegiate Licensing Company, an affiliate of the Fair Labor Association (FLA). Others belong directly to the FLA, which is the monitoring agency of the Apparel Industry Partnership (AIP), created during the Clinton administration. The AIP and the FLA are dominated by such industry heavy-hitters as Nike and Gap. As a consequence, most unions and human rights groups originally associated with the AIP have since withdrawn and thrown their support behind the WRC. Of those universities currently in the WRC, a number maintain dual membership in the WRC and the FLA.

3. Graduate students at public universities have had the right to collective bargaining since 1969, when teaching and research assistants at the University of Wisconsin won the first union contract, covering teaching and research assistants. This right was achieved for graduate students in the private sector on April 3, 2000, when GSOC-UAW won a precedent-setting decision from the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), establishing employee status for teaching and research assistants at NYU. In an election supervised by the NLRB on April 25–27, 2000, NYU graduate assistants voted to be represented by the United Automobile Workers union (UAW).

4. I have taken Featherstone's observations from an untitled draft manuscript for a book about USAS to be published by Verso in Spring, 2002.

5. The WRC delegation investigated conditions at Kukdong between January 20–23, 2001. A preliminary report was filed on January 24. A more comprehensive report, giving details of an ongoing investigation of Kukdong was made public in June 2001. A copy of this report is available through the Worker Rights Consortium. Requests may be e-mailed to: allison.robbs@workersrights.org

6. At the time the interview was conducted, GSOC-UAW was in the midst of contract talks with NYU. On January 28, 2002, the union did win its first contract.