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**Strategic Public Relations, Sweatshops
and the Making of a Global Movement**

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When an estimated 40,000 marched in Seattle to protest the World Trade Organization's meeting, months of organizing by environmental groups, trade unions, human rights organizations and others, came to fruition.¹ Organized publics in the form of trade unions, human rights groups and political elites succeeded in linking labor, environmental concerns and human rights to the WTO. The citizens who took to the street succeeded in drawing the attention of the reading and viewing public through the media to what they contend is the human and environmental costs of the "free trade" in the global economy. Although many reporters, especially television newsmen, were keen to capture the dramatic visuals of breaking glass, Darth Vader cops, and a youthful protestor running off with a Starbucks espresso machine, the overall impact of the protest shifted the media frame on the globalization debate in the press initially by expanding the coverage of genetic engineering and labor conditions in the developing economies. (See **Table 1**)

The environmental, human rights, labor rights and sweatshop issues culminating in the protests against WTO were years in the making, and strategic public relations professionals working with grass-roots organizations and NGOs were integral in shaping them. They publicized a vision of the global economy that countered one based on profits, market-share and high returns on financial investments for stockholders. One of their greatest successes has been in linking consumers to the producers of consumer items through the anti-sweatshop campaigns against Nike and Kathie Lee Gifford.

This paper has two objectives. First, it tracks the role of these public relations professionals in the shaping and defining of the sweatshop awareness movement, and second, it examines the campaign against Nike as a window into an emerging form of political activism suited to computer-savvy youth, life-style politics, global interdependency and consumer choice. Linked by E-mail, the Net, and common symbols, these political actors under the age of 30 are becoming increasingly visible players in the debate about transnational corporate responsibility.

Now, a word of caution: my analysis of the anti-sweatshop campaign is provisional and intended to spur discussion. New information is coming to light daily, and this can set off a chain of actions and reactions shifting, focusing and transforming the issues and debates. For example, the anti-sweatshop campaign is expanding its gaze beyond clothing and shoes to working conditions and wages in computer and electronics assembly factories, toy factories, and other industries in export and industrial zones in Asia, Latin America, and the United States. How will governments, transnational corporations, non-governmental organizations, workers, the media, and consumers respond?

Cracks in the coalition are beginning to appear when some coalition members, such as Global Exchange, want to declare victory on Nike and move on to other targets, such as the GAP and Starbucks, or coalition partners take opposite stands on foreign trade debates, such as whether the U.S. should grant China new, normalized trade privileges despite its human rights record and the concern that it will further accelerate the exodus of U.S. manufacturing jobs.² Another factor is financial: the reluctance of some foundations, such as the Ford Foundation, to fund advocacy campaigns that target one particular company rather than industry-wide strategies to spur structural reform.³ Whether the anti-sweatshop campaign presents an enduring form of civic consumerism or a step toward conscious global citizenship, is unclear at this writing, yet in the short term, a dynamic coalition of groups has been successful at putting the underside of the global economy on the front pages of the newspapers. Students, in particular, have been extremely successful in politicizing the decisions of marketing and sports establishments at major U.S. universities by focusing media attention on the production-consumption chain of

university merchandise.⁴ This is no small task.

Table 1 This Lexis/Nexis full text search based on these key words ten days before and after Nov. 30 indicates the increase with which media linked WTO to issues of human rights, child labor and democracy. It also shows that turtles did better than butterflies in capturing the attention of print media.

Search Words	Nov. 21 to 30, 1999	Dec. 1 to 10, 1999
World Trade Organization	981	1,422
WTO and environment	304	510
WTO and human rights	154	211
WTO, human rights and workers rights	26	31
WTO, human rights and labor rights	22	32
WTO and child labor	64	144
WTO and democracy	72	143
WTO and unions	364	607
WTO, democracy and unions	36	71
WTO and turtles	51	108
WTO and butterflies	12	23
WTO and free trade	256	379
WTO and fair trade	16	32

Academic Frames: Controversy, Strategic Communication and Post-Materialism

Communication scholars have observed that the press increasingly mediates the political process. In a political/media system where press coverage largely filters how and what general publics have an opportunity to know, if groups don't have a voice in the media, they usually don't have a voice at all in public dialogue or in political decision-making.

The pernicious influence of a corporate perspective has long influenced the media's filter on economic globalization, but in recent years, the anti-sweatshop campaign has had an impact on this equation through two effective media strategies that make news by making controversy: one targets a highly visible company, such as Nike, and the other targets a highly visible celebrity as a way to capture the attention of the press and the concerned publics. Data linking producers to consumers have anchored the news in a tangible reality.

In the anti-Nike sweatshop awareness campaign, grass-roots activists and NGOs working with savvy media practitioners have successfully subverted corporate public relations campaigns for a fraction of the corporate budget, muted the impact of saturation advertising, and challenged

routine pro-company coverage in the press. By subverting symbols, and with the active cooperation of some reporters and columnists, the Nike “swoosh” is recast for the public as the Nike “swooshtika,” and Michael Jordan who signed a \$20 million multi-year endorsement deal with Nike, has been tagged the “Pontius Pilate of American sports.”⁵

The anti-sweatshop movement exemplifies what Lance Bennett calls “life-style politics”: a preference for issues based on “a la carte” personal identity issues close to home rather than a grander scheme of political party politics or a set menu of alliances.⁶ Activists have framed the sweatshop issue to their contemporaries in terms of individual consumer choice - a mark of personal identity politics – and put their creativity to work by staging “Sweatshop Fashion Shows” at Nike Towns, GAP stores, and Abercrombie and Fitch. They make political protest fun, and want to make it irresistible to consumers and their peers.

The youthful activists in the anti-sweatshop campaign exhibit what political scientist Ronald Inglehart describe as “post-materialist values,” and their politics as “an elite-challenging form of political participation.”⁷ It seems an appropriate form of political engagement for a generation suspicious of traditional parties and electoral politics. Inglehart observes that post-materialists place “quality of life” at the top of their priority lists.⁸ Self-expression, subjective well being and an emphasis on ontological concerns, such as “the meaning and purpose of life” distinguish “post-materialists” from “materialists.” The anti-sweatshop activists enjoy the relative affluence and security of individuals in economically developed post-modern societies. Their values contrast starkly with both older activists in the anti-sweatshop movement – many associated with trade unions who exercise more traditional forms of political participation (working through political parties and hiring union lobbyists for example), and also with workers in the sweatshops for whom material survival is the salient motive for action.

Finally, as a mode of engagement, the anti-sweatshop campaign could be seen as a reasonable response to the flexible, fragile nature of work – and life - under the “new capitalism” as articulated by Richard Sennett.⁹ The anti-sweat activists are forging a community translating shared beliefs and values into concrete, daily practices.¹⁰ They are creating a cyber “we” through E-mail and the Internet.

E-Mail Magic and the Organizing of a Movement

The flow of information is the life-blood of the anti-sweatshop movement. New communication technologies provide effective means to organize and mobilize supporters with the click of a mouse, circumventing traditional channels of political communication. International list-servs link activists across national boundaries within seconds. News articles about factory conditions, wages, and strikes in Jakarta newspapers circulate to more than 150 university campuses through the United Students Against Sweatshops network.

In this new media environment, linked together by communication technologies, student groups have proved successful in raising the visibility of global concerns. Advocacy groups monitor powerful transnational corporations and seek to use the media to provide alternative channels of information, with measurable and significant effects.

Through internet communication, local or regional activists mobilize protests. “Right now, every time we do an action, we send out an E-mail and a hundred people show up,” Medea Benjamin of Global Exchange explained. “It’s like magic. We couldn’t do it without E-mail.”¹¹

E-mail and websites also serve as effective channels between NGOs and labor advocates abroad, and U.S. or Europe-based activists. Employees afraid to speak out publicly in their own country for fear of retaliation can filter the information to NGOs and an international audience. The same information can filter back to the source, mediated by the internet, and turn a local

dispute into an international matter to be discussed and acted upon. Transnational activist networks, such as *www.nikeworkers.org* of Press for Change, and the National Labor Committee's *www.nclnet.org*, provide a forum through which these voices can be heard, and interested parties can argue, develop strategies and exchange information. These networks are predictably selective and often biased, and some voices are amplified while others are ignored. Like the partisan press, users of the net presume their information comes with particular agendas. Yet in a world where certified experts, shadowy WTO leaders and political elites dominate the discussion of vital trade and environmental issues, these communication networks serve as a caldron of alternative visions and information that can find their ways into national and international debate. E-mail and the internet websites suit well the rapidly relationships in world politics, enabling information to reach enormous audiences within minutes.

While these new channels of communication internal to the movement have shrunk geographical and linguistic divides and knitted together players who are physically far apart into a cyber “we” of mutual interest, external means of communication require different channels. Strategic decisions must be made about how to reach the broader public, key decision-makers, and effect meaningful change.

In the sweatshop awareness movement, two related strategy have been used: one targeted a company to tell the larger story of globalization, and the other, a celebrity with huge entertainment connections.

Target Selection: Why Nike? Why Phil Knight?

Why did Nike become a target rather than Reebok? Why Kathie Lee rather than Ralph Lauren?

Every social movement needs a visible villain, especially when working with the news media, and the anti-sweatshop activists couldn't have asked for a better one than Phil Knight, the founder and CEO of the largest sports-shoe business in the world, Nike.

The company, founded in 1964, contracts with manufacturers in Indonesia, Vietnam, China, Taiwan and elsewhere, and its history exemplifies the broader economic changes in the late 1960s when U.S. based companies began to shift their production outside the country attracted by lower labor costs and the promise of higher profits.

In 1989, the U.S. Agency for International Development provided a human rights grant to the Asian American Free Labor Institute-Indonesia (AAFLI) to do a minimum wage compliance survey of factories that produce goods for the export sector. In a survey of several hundred factory employees, lawyer, labor advocate and researcher, Jeff Ballinger, found the workers were paid just under 14 cents per hour. The plants that manufactured Nike shoes were the worst offenders.

In Indonesia, low wages have made the country a destination for companies like Nike, and Indonesian labor has been a key part of the company's economic profitability. During 1988 and 1989, sporadic signs of labor discontent appeared in the international and Indonesian press. In 1992, the minimum wage in Indonesia ranged from 50 cents a day to \$1.50 a day.¹² A survey carried out in 1989 by the Asian-American Free Labor Institute found that 56 percent of the companies were paying less than the Indonesian minimum wage. Subcontractors at Nike factories would avoid paying the minimum wage by keeping them at the training wage level for months or years at a time. Employees objected with their feet. According to the Indonesian government's own figures, there were 190 strikes in 1992, up from 130 in 1991 and 60 in 1990.

Phil Knight, the billionaire who cultivated a hip image, proved a visible target for anti-sweatshop activists. With its high-profile in the media presence through its “Just Do It”

advertising slogan, high-priced athlete endorsements, the openings of Niketown mega-stores around the country, and the increasing, ubiquitous presence of “the Swoosh” on clothing and on college campuses, activists could build a campaign around Nike subverting the advertising and marketing that have become Nike’s hallmark in popular culture.

The hooks were obvious. Consumers can ask: if a pair of Nike Air Jordans retailed for \$130, but cost a fraction of that to make, aren’t they overpriced? Where does the rest of the money go? Employees in factories producing the shoes can ask: if the shoes sell for so much more than they cost to make, why can’t the company pay at least a living wage and provide decent, safe working conditions? How about an extra dollar a day?

How Progressive Public Relations Gave Legs to the Anti-Sweatshop Campaign

In this media-driven campaign, iconic symbols, research and celebrities have brought the sweatshop issue into the realm of personal identity politics. Buying clothes or shoes became a defining act for consumers in a globally interdependent economy. But this effort to politicize consumer choice could only take place after the groundwork was laid by documentation and research that had filtered through to the press, and then to reading or viewing publics.

Between 1989 and 1995, only 21 news articles appeared in the U.S. press linking Nike to strikes in Indonesia, but 1996 was a pivotal year in the anti-sweatshop campaign. (See **Table 2**) Seven years of survey research, international studies on globalization and human rights and organizing by NGOs came to fruition. Yet it took a celebrity and a fired Nike worker to put a human face on the sweatshop issue in the U.S. and push the conflict from the margins into the mainstream of American media.

Table 2 A Lexis/Nexis General News full text search of key words *Nike* and *Indonesia* in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* turned up these results:

Year	Nike and Indonesia <i>The New York Times</i>	Nike and Indonesia <i>The Washington Post</i>
1988-1990	0	0
1991	3	1
1992	3	2
1993	2	2
1994	5	3
1995	4	1
1996	19	5
1997	31	10
1998	22	5
1999 (to Oct.)	7	4

Behind every media event lies the people who make it happen: journalists, sources, and in these cases, politically committed publicists working in the non-profit sector. In 1996, two key connections transformed the anti-sweatshop campaign. First, Jeff Ballinger of Press for Change hooked up with Global Exchange, a San Francisco-based non-profit dedicated to human rights and promoting socially responsible businesses. With its own internal public relations person, Tony Newman, Global Exchange transformed a simmering issue into a hot news story. As Ballinger described it, “Global Exchange turned my rundown, VW bus of a campaign into an 18-wheeler.” (See **Table 3**)

Table 3 This data is from a Lexis/Nexis General News full text search 1989 to 1999 (Dec. 4). Lexis/Nexis turned up no stories between 1989 and 1992. In 1996 and 1998, Nike, Ballinger and Medea Benjamin appeared in one story each year, and in two stories in 1997.

Year	Nike and Ballinger	Nike, Medea Benjamin, and Global Exchange	Nike and Global Exchange
1992	2	0	0
1993	1	0	0
1994	1	0	0
1995	1	0	0
1996	14	2	6
1997	10	29	41
1998	7	14	26
1999	4	17	22
Total	38	62	95

Second, the National Labor Committee headed by Charles Kernaghan listened to the media savvy Ellen Braune who helped him see the logic in launching a campaign on a morning talk-show host who lent her name to discount clothing made in maquiladoras. When Kathie Lee Gifford cried on her morning talk show sobbing that she “didn’t know” her clothes were made by teenage girls working 14 and 16 hour days in Honduras, the sweatshop issue burst into the living rooms of TV-watching America. Charles Kernaghan, tagged “the guy who made Kathie Lee cry,” used the media exposure to tell the listening and viewing publics about the poorly paid workers who worked long hours for little money. In his routine before live audiences, television cameras and still photographers, the former psychology professor would hold up a garment, read the label identifying where it was made, and then the retail price. Like a dealer on the *Antique Roadshow* his audience frequently gasped when told the items they bought for \$24.95 only cost only \$1.00 to manufacture in labor and materials in the export zones of Latin America. Then he

would explain the workday of a typical teenage girl, and if she were present with him, she'd describe the conditions herself through a translator.

The press coverage over sweatshops and Kathie Lee Gifford set in motion the call to develop standards on working conditions in apparel and other product sectors. In August 1996, the Clinton administration responded by creating a presidential task force - the Apparel Partnership Initiative - inviting corporations and some representatives of labor and NGOs to develop minimal standards at apparel factories in the U.S. and abroad. Representatives from labor unions, human rights groups and corporations, including Nike, Liz Claiborne and L. L. Bean, made some progress on child labor and anti-harassment practices, but deadlocked over what constitutes a sweatshop and any clear commitment to "a living wage." (Labor and human rights groups argued any factory requiring more than a 48 hour week should be considered a "sweatshop," whereas the apparel companies argued only factories requiring workers to work more than 60 hour work week should qualify.)

This coalition did not last long. By the time it had evolved into the Fair Labor Association (FLA) in 1999, most labor and human rights groups including the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE), had withdrawn from the group because corporate members proved unwilling to develop independent monitoring mechanism to enforce labor standards and conditions, or pay wages labor and human rights organizations considered sufficient for workers to meet their basic needs.

The FLA supports voluntary codes of conduct and required its members to pay workers at least the minimum wage in their own countries, setting the minimum age for workers at 15 years old, and companies who joined the FLA could not require workers to work more than 60 hours per week. Companies joining the FLA also had to establish internal monitoring systems to enforce these rules, yet the result of this monitoring would be confidential and limited in scope.¹³

The One Company Strategy: Jeff Ballinger, Nike and Global Exchange

The effective collaboration between Ballinger and Global Exchange shows how media relations can give legs to research, and effectively shape the press framing of a social issue. The selection of visually compelling and contrasting characters who spoke out against sweatshop conditions in the apparel and shoe industries resulted from the combined efforts of long time activists who had been tracking the issue and compiling data years before they joined forces with media relations professionals. Based on the accessible research of the long-timers, these media professionals then honed the messages, arranged media events, coordinated publicity, and created the highly visual and dramatic media events that the anti-sweatshop campaign lacked earlier. This was a crucial turning point. Its success can be measured in its "media bounty," how the issue of sweatshops became an on-going story long after the initial "media hits," and the organized activism and proposals for reform that followed.

Jeff Ballinger is a one-person, non-governmental organization. A former textile union organizer, a lawyer, and human and labor rights advocate, Ballinger spent nearly four years in Indonesia monitoring working conditions and wage compliance at factories producing goods for transnational corporations. Among the factories in Indonesia where sports shoes carried the labels of Nike, Reebok, Adidas, Bata and others, Ballinger discovered that factories producing Nike shoes had the most violations and among the lowest wages.

Ballinger lit the first match in the mainstream American media based on his wage survey at Nike plants in Indonesia. In 1989, he received a human rights grant for \$40,000 grant from U.S.A.I.D. through the Asian-American Free Labor Institute-Indonesia (AAFLI) to do a minimum wage compliance survey. (The AAFLI is affiliated with the AFL-CIO, and indicates

an interest on the part of U.S. based organized labor to document the activities of transnational corporations.)

The Nike-producing shoe factories were among the worst violators. Ballinger and his associates found systematic violations of minimum wage standards, poor working conditions, military personnel in factories. Among the worst violators were factories manufacturing sports shoes for Nike, the leading manufacturer of sports shoes in the world.

Based on the previous study, Ballinger received a major grant for \$600,000 from U.S.A.I.D. to conduct a much larger survey of wage compliance, this one involving 165,000 workers in the export-sector manufacturing zones.

Since 1990, he has been quoted as a source in news stories, referenced by authors, researchers and journalists in reports as an authoritative source, and compiled research that has placed the anti-Nike campaign on a quantitative foundation.

In August 1992, *Harper's Magazine* published Ballinger's annotated blow-up of a wage-stub belonging to a woman named Sadisah, "The New Free-Trade Heel: Nike's profits jump on the backs of Asian workers." The annotation explained Sadisah earned 14 cents per hour, \$1.03 per day for a 7.5 hour workday; the labor costs to manufacture a pair of Nike shoes that retail in the U.S. for \$80 is about 12 cents. Sadisah worked 63 hours of overtime receiving an extra 2 cents per hour over 7.5 hours. For an entire month of work – 6 days at 10.5 hours a day - her net earnings amounted only to about *half* the retail price of *one* pair of the athletic shoes she makes in the factory.

Ballinger himself has worked other jobs while maintaining his research and monitoring of plants where Nike shoes and apparel are made. In eight years, he has spent about \$50,000 tracking Nike, and for years worked out of the basement of his in-laws in New Jersey. In 1996, he wanted to bring another fired Nike worker to the U.S. for a publicity tour, but he didn't have the funds to do it.

Medea Benjamin, then the executive director of Global Exchange, heard Ballinger on Pacifica radio discussing the situation of Nike workers like Sadisah and Cicih Sukaesih (Su-KAY-zee), but she was already primed to do something on the Indonesian situation.

"I felt like 'here's this guy with all this information, and how come we haven't heard about this?' Benjamin told me. She phoned him to find out more and to see if Global Exchange could help and the strategizing for a high-profile, newsworthy event linking grass-roots groups in 5 cities around the country began.¹⁴ Within two months, Global Exchange had raised the funds to bring the fired Nike worker to the U.S. on a 5-city tour, July 15 to July 27, and do the necessary outreach to the press and public.¹⁵ "We charged the universities an honorarium so we knew all we had to do was pay for the plane fare, and we'd get reimbursed for the whole thing. So it was just having the organizational capacity to make it happen. We didn't have to put up more than \$1,500 in airfare."

Global Exchange had its own internal public relations wizard: Tony Newman, a graduate from University of California at Santa Cruz, an enthusiastic, smart redhead, then in his twenties earning a typical non-profit salary of about \$22,000 a year.¹⁶ Newman knew how to position the story, and set about laying the groundwork for the summer tour. Newman interested New York Times columnist Bob Herbert, in an interview with Sukaesih prior to her arrival in the U.S., and his column, "Trampled Dreams," appeared on July 12, 1996, just in time for Sukaesih's the trip. Herbert explained how this 32-year-old shoe worker was fired with 23 others for helping organize a walk-out of 600 workers who were demanding that their employers pay them the Indonesian minimum wage which was then \$1.30 a day, instead of about a dollar a day they were

earning. He noted how an estimated 88 percent of women workers in similar situations were malnourished and nailed Phil Knight. “Dreams fade into nothingness in the long, grim hours in the factories...The system works fabulously for Mr. Knight and his team of celebrity hucksters, led by inimitable Michael Jordan.” Knight’s worth was then about \$5 billion. This was just one of several columns Herbert wrote about the sweatshop issue.

Prior to Global Exchange’s entry into the anti-Nike campaign, the major print news media coverage could be counted on one hand. But that coverage increased nearly three times the year Global Exchange entered the partnership, and a prominent *New York Times* columnist, Bob Herbert, and reporter Steven Greenhouse entered the story.

Celebrity Strategy: The National Labor Committee and Kathie Lee Gifford

During the same period when Ballinger was targeting Nike, Charles Kernaghan and Barbara Briggs of the National Labor Committee were focusing attention on sweatshops south of the border and, eventually, to the celebrities who lent their names to clothing made there.

Kernaghan had just returned from a research trip to central America with a bag full of clothing labels that were sewn into clothing assembled at various sweatshops. Back in New York, he dumped the labels out on a table. Ellen Braune was there and saw that several labels carried the name, Kathie Lee Gifford. “He didn’t know who she was,” Ellen told me over a Chinese lunch. “He doesn’t watch TV and didn’t think anybody would be interested in a morning talk show host. We knew better. It took some convincing, but eventually, Charlie came ‘round.’”¹⁷

She was right. The press went for it, and the tabloids had a dream story. In addition to major television exposure, including *Entertainment Tonight* and Kathie Lee’s own talk show, dozens of stories appeared linking Kathie Lee Gifford and Charles Kernaghan by name in the mainstream press in 1996. (See **Table 4**)

Table 4 Here is the data from the Lexis/Nexis search full text general news search.

Year	Kernaghan and NOT Kathie Lee Gifford	Kernaghan AND Kathie Lee Gifford
1992	7	0
1993	3	0
1994	10	0
1995	22	0
1996	13	63
1997	5	10
1998	7	10
1999 (to Nov. 16)	11	15

In July 1996, both campaigns converged at a "Fashion Industry Forum" called by then-Labor Secretary, Robert Reich. Kathie Lee Gifford and Cicih Sukaesih smiled for the cameras, but then they went returned to their designated roles in the media drama.

The Fashion Forum had a dark side. Cicih was not allowed to enter the building nor to testify about her experience. Gifford, on the advice of her publicist, Howard Rubenstein, continued to express her concern about sweatshop labor and testified that she would establish her own monitoring system in factories where subcontractors manufacture clothes with her label. She urged other celebrities to do the same.

After being turned away from the Fashion Forum, Sukaesih visited Foot Locker stores to examine and try on Nike shoes. With the press and her supporters in tow, she'd tell her audience the running shoes selling for \$80 price tag were made by her colleagues for \$1.33. She appeared at several Niketown stores on her American tour, sending the Nike public relations staff and hired security guards into a tizzy, whispering into walkie-talkies as they guarded the store. She also tried to meet with Michael Jordan and Phil Knight, but neither agreed to meet with her.

This chronology is a glimpse of a movement that continued and continues to expand. In 1997, Thuyen Nguyen visited Nike plants in Vietnam, and wrote a report detailing physical abuse of workers, unsafe working conditions, and mandatory overtime. Nguyen, a New York businessman, mailed his report to journalists he thought would jump at the story, but nobody responded. Puzzled, he contacted Global Exchange and its associate, Communication Works, sent along his report and press release. As a *pro bono* job, the press release was rewritten and polished.¹⁸ Tony Newman arranged a press conference in New York overflowing with reporters. Soon, Garry Trudeau picked up the sweatshop story and incorporated it into his editorial comic strip. That same year, moviemaker Michael Moore asked Phil Knight in the film, *The Big One*, if it bothered him that 14-year-olds were working in Indonesian shoe factories making Nikes. Knight's answer was "no," reinforcing the CEO's image as a rich, callous, bad guy.

Cracks in the Coalition: Medea Benjamin, Nike and the Anti-Sweatshop Movement

On May 12, 1998, Nike chairman Phil Knight announced his company would change the way it does business overseas, raising the minimum age to 18 for new workers at shoe factories, and raise it to 16 for those at other plants. He agreed to tighten air quality controls, and by 2002, only order footwear from factories that offer after-hours education to qualified workers.¹⁹ Knight was silent on the issues of wages and the length of the workday.

Two years later, at a conference inaugurating the Workers' Rights Consortium at New York University, different responses to Nike's seemingly conciliatory actions caused division within the coalition. In front of an audience of hundreds of activists, Medea Benjamin of Global Exchange applauded Nike for eliminating toxic glues that posed a health hazard to workers in Vietnamese factories. She listed other "victories" resulting from having pressured Nike. In Indonesia, for example, she noted Nike's sub-contractors now comply with minimum wage laws. Several in the audience criticized what they perceived as her conciliatory approach to a corporate bad guy, and were resolute that activists must keep up the pressure on Nike until it pays a "living wage" and ensures that workers can negotiate fairly with their employers without company interference.

A former college soccer coach who resigned rather than wear uniforms with the Nike logo approached the microphone concerned that Nike would use Benjamin's comments to improve its image, "I don't want your quotes praising Nike to show up in their company press releases," he said.

This wasn't the first time Benjamin had come under attack. Columnist Alexander Cockburn of *The Nation* criticized her for "proclaiming that Nike, which pays its workers less than 20 cents an hour, has made an 'astounding transformation.'"²⁰

I asked Benjamin about the criticism she's received from others in the anti-sweatshop coalition. "It's pretty inevitable when you start making some changes – it's the 'glass full/glass empty,'" she told me.²¹ "I was a cheerleader in high school, and I see it from the cheerleader side, and there are those who see it from the old cynic, white man point of view."

The friction between Benjamin and her critics isn't *personal*, but rather it signals a deeper divide and challenge for the anti-sweat movement since *different strategies reveal specific and sometimes conflicting alliances*. Coalitions bring multiple agendas to movements for social change, and a divisive point is deciding when, and under what conditions, to call an end to the protests. For example, some students may rest content if their particular college lends its logo to companies that adhere to a "clean clothes" policy, or their friends buy running shoes made by New Balance and Sacony rather than Nike and Reebok. Some labor activists want labor rights written into trade agreements. Others just want the workers in the global economy to have the right to organize democratic trade unions without interference from employers or anybody else, and receive a "living wage" based on recognized standards of living in each country.

Activists, such as Ballinger and Kernaghan, are in the marathon struggle for global labor rights, and their motivation stems in part from a profound direct connection to the workers who are seeking the means to improve their lives. They have also conducted the research themselves. Activism arising from years of commitment, of close relations with the workers, can grate on those who share similar, broad goals, but have scripted different strategies for getting there.

Public relations activists, like Benjamin, live in a media world where they engage with various campaigns on an intermittent basis. When they adopt a particular campaign, such as Nike, Starbucks, the Gap, they're more like sprinters rather than long distance runners: they're in it for the media hits and incremental reform. The constraints of their work-world also requires flexibility, the ability to focus on multiple issues, a keen sense of timing, and the knack for recognizing ways to capitalize on the political moods of journalists and political decision-makers to forward the agenda of the moment. From the perspective of the long-time, single-issue activists, the public relations activists may seem flighty, or even parasitic, when they capitalize on years of steadfast research. From the perspective of the public relations activists, the long-timers may seem inflexible and unrealistic given the political and journalistic "realities" of news making.

This poses a dilemma for long-term activists seeking to use media to create enduring change in an era of media-driven politics: their issues can be trapped not only by the prevailing media's framing, but also by the complicity of the public relations activists who reinforce it. For example, public relations activists know how to use the prevailing media frame of "heroes and villains" to make news, but this framing comes at the cost of distortion, elevating the drama between a few main characters and obscuring the economic forces that led to the conflict at hand. In the course of the transaction, media activists also risk redefining the goals of a campaign in terms of symbolic, incremental acts that they can use to declare victory and then move on. This approach can undermine the long-term goals of long-time, one-issue activists who have their eyes on the prize of the workers in sweatshop factories.

"This struggle isn't about a tiny NGO in San Francisco beating up on Big, Bad Nike," Jeff Ballinger argued.²² "The media's focus *should* be on the situation of the workers living in substandard conditions and earning less than a living wage."

In the current media-driven political world, both types of activism are essential to build an effective social movement: the Ballingers and Kernaghans need the Benjamins and Braunes. The difference is that the former are irreplaceable.

In the anti-Nike campaign, data and information have proven crucial by clarifying what's at stake for workers, activists and progressive public relations mavens when they consider calling an end to protests. Despite Phil Knight's seemingly conciliatory remarks, working conditions in Nike plants continue to prove unsatisfactory.

In October 1999, Jeff Ballinger of Press for Change released a survey of 2,300 workers at 5 Nike factories in Indonesia employing a total of 45,000 workers. More than half said they had observed colleagues yelled at or mistreated, and a third said they were forced to work overtime. Ballinger's strategy is to continue doing research and holding the company's feet to the fire until Nike and its subcontractors sit down and negotiate directly with their workers in a fair, safe, independent fashion.

The anti-Nike campaign has expanded with data collecting to include data from China and Vietnam, but Nike in Indonesia remained a focus of his research, and remains so, today. (Nike has also contracted with a factory in China whose employees said they worked 11 and 12 hour days with only two days off a month, and earned 16 cents to 19 cents an hour with no overtime.) The story isn't over yet, and it probably won't be until wages and conditions are deemed acceptable to both the workers in the factories, *and* their identified supporters in the sweatshop awareness movement.

On April 7, 2000, the United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) launched the Workers Rights Consortium (WRC), a coalition with labor unions and human rights groups.²³ The WRC received huge publicity in a few weeks later when Nike CEO Phil Knight withdrew \$30 million commitment to his alma mater, the University of Oregon in Eugene, because the university has joined the WRC. He also cancelled contracts with the University of Michigan and Brown University.

"Nobody would have paid any attention to the students if Phil Knight wouldn't have gone ballistic," Ballinger said. "He slipped off his leash. The students have code of conduct with teeth in it."²⁴ Ballinger is on the WRC Advisory Council.

The core components of the WRC are the following:

- *Code of Conduct.* Although the WRC does not require a specific code of conduct, it does require that all member schools have a code of conduct that includes the following provisions: a living wage, the right to organize and collective bargaining, protection of workers' health and safety, compliance with local laws, protection of women's rights, and prohibitions of child labor, forced labor, and forced overtime.
- *Forced disclosure of information.* Companies contracting with member institutions must disclose information about wages, working conditions, and health and safety conditions in factories where their goods are manufactured.
- *Verification system.* WRC will create an agency that will operate independently of industry representatives and university licensing offices. This agency will receive and verify worker complaints and violations of the WRC Codes for Conduct.
- *Pro-active investigations.* Where workers are severely restricted from exercising their rights and when licensees have a history of violations, the

WRC agency will coordinate pro-active investigations with local, independent non-governmental organizations and human rights groups with experience in the region.

The Governing Board of the WRC makes policy and consists of six representatives from the Advisory Council, three university administrators, and three student representatives from United Students Against Sweatshops.

The core components of the WRC resulted from a dynamic dialogue about strategy and goals, and largely a reaction to the White House backed Fair Labor Association, an organization comprised of representatives of major apparel corporations such as Nike.

The WRC seems to be seeking a synthesis between two approaches to reform that coexist in the anti-sweatshop progressive movement as activists in the post-industrial countries hope to shape the standards for a global economy. One approach stresses the minimal “codes of conduct” that universities must support to create living wage standards in the developing world. This is an effort to create universal standards *for* the workers, but those standards are not necessarily *by* them. In its extreme, this approach is a top-down model for reform that runs the risk of a situation where progressive activists in the U.S. *tell* workers in developing countries what they *should* seek, and demand. This approach, while well intentioned, can undermine local organizing efforts, and the development of grass-roots leadership.

Another approach inside the movement seeks to provide a space where workers can articulate *their own demands in their unique circumstances* and *uses* the activists in the developing world as *communication conduits and partners in solidarity*. Workers in the export-zone factories see the activists as vital players in the political and economic equation who can be allies in the effort to improve working conditions. Activists in the developing world can exercise their contacts as consumers and people of conscience to pressure transnational corporations and their sub-contractors to sit down and negotiate directly and fairly with their employees. This is an empowering model that doesn’t presume that the activists in the more affluent economies *know* what’s good for those in the poor economies. A drawback of this model is that it can undermine unity by leading to a patchwork of standards and prove unworkable in larger bargaining efforts.

The Workers’ Rights Consortium is seeking a practical working synthesis between these two approaches. Whether the WRC will be successful in creating a workable, dialectical synthesis, and significant change, will be answered in the future. In the short term, it offers promise.

Post-Script: Trust, Cyber Video and the Fragile Cyber “We”

Richard Sennett observes that bonds of trust develop when people learn on whom they can depend. Lack of social bonds between members of the group can threaten the workings of any collective enterprise. Active suspicion of others undermines the development of trust.²⁵ The tensions are already evident in the anti-sweatshop campaign and they represent in part the shortcomings of progressive public relations and media-driven politics.

Of course, the apparent violations of trust within the anti-sweatshop movement are miniscule when viewed in a wider global frame: the routine violations of trust rampant in the advertising industry, and specifically, in the case of Nike which presents itself as a corporation dedicated to healthy life-styles and all things cool. Yet the recipe for repair may be similar since the restoring of trust is a reflexive act. (Imagine this: Phil Knight *could* restore trust with the human rights and labor activists by requiring his sub-contractors to negotiate fairly with the

workers, and he could become a hero – the Nike swoosh could be a mark of humane, capitalism. After all, he needs the workers, and they need him.)

Ronald Inglehart and Richard Sennett might agree that the activists in the developed world need the workers in the developing world, and the workers need the activists, but for different reasons. The equation is unequal. The workers don't have the luxury of post-materialist practices. They work to survive, but as youthful workers, they aspire to better lives. The activists see the anti-sweatshop movement as a way to create a more just economy, an outlet for life-style politics, and a way to take back their lives from an economic and social world dominated by corporate interests. Ironically this is the logic of business is the logic of need and exchange. In the anti-sweatshop movement, a dynamic exchange continues to take place in the creation of a global, cyber "we," linked together by the flow of information and images through the Internet.

I have some experience of this first-hand. While drafting this paper, I have also produced three short videos about one of the worst fires in industrial history that remains largely unknown in the United States. The Kader Toy Factory Fire located in the export industrial zone near Bangkok killed more than 188 employees on May 10, 1993.²⁶ More than a 140 workers remained missing. There was almost no mainstream media coverage of the incident in the U.S. press.²⁷

I interviewed Naomi Klein, author of *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*; Andrew Ross, a professor at New York University and editor of *No Sweat: Fashion, Free Trade, and the Rights of Garment Workers*; and Jasper Goss, an Australian labor researcher recently based in Bangkok.²⁸ I used E-mail to clear the rights to use photos of the fire from an Australian publisher (<http://www.mehring.org>), and to verify specific information, I connected with the Thai Labour Organization, an international group monitoring labor conditions in Thailand, and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions based in Belgium. I have exchanged scripts and images across geographical boundaries with an NGO in Thailand who sent me by E-mail a script for "The Cries of Master Toy Workers: The Producers of Maisto in Thailand for the Rights that have been Stolen!," a documentary depicting horrific working conditions in a toy factory in that manufactures toy cars and motorcycles. (In the script, employees describe dismal working conditions: toxic fumes from glues and paint thinners, and "unbearably hot" factories with broken fans and air circulation systems only turned on when guests arrive. The interviewees recount stories of workers injured or killed on the job.)

Most of my meetings for the videotaping were arranged through E-mail, and much of my research was gathered from reputable sources on the web. In keeping with this mode of communication, my "cyber video" provides URL links to several NGO websites, Naomi Klein's *No Logo* website (<http://www.nologo.org>), and other sites where interested viewers can access more information about the video, various sweatshop campaigns, working conditions in several manufacturing sectors in Asia, and historical background on New York City's Triangle Shirtwaist Fire of 1911 that spurred significant labor reform legislation in the United States.

The cyber videos are accessible globally on the website of the Center for Communication and Civic Engagement at the University of Washington for those with the capacity to download or watch video at <http://www.depts.washington.edu/ccce>. In addition, I have edited two of the video segments for VHS distribution to educators as "conversation starters" in the classroom: *Naomi Klein: Sweatshops on Fire* (8 minutes), and *Andrew Ross: History Lesson* (4 minutes).

While making these videos, I have corresponded by E-mail with scholars and activists in Belgium, Thailand, Australia and Canada. Most of us have not met face-to-face, and probably

never will, yet together we are establishing cyber relationships based on the exchange of information and an underlying, common sense of mission: to increase the flow of information across international boundaries and time zones so together we can help create safer, healthier, less exploitative working conditions in factories producing goods for consumption in the developed economies. This *a la carte* politics is a form of cyber civic engagement suitable to the present communications environment. It may even constitute a cyber “we.”

But will this fragile, cyber “we” prove sustainable beyond this project? Will it lead to an enduring, cyber community? I don’t know the answer to these questions – yet. I do know the creation of “we” would have been *impossible without the flow of information through the internet and E-mail across national boundaries, and access to computers*. It would have also been unlikely without the years of research on sweatshop conditions, and the progressive public relations professionals who raised the visibility of sweatshop conditions and put human faces on the global economy.

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1. J. Martin McOmber and Robert T. Nelson, “Mayor draws blame - even from merchants who’ve been big supporters,” *Seattle Times*, 12/3/99. The estimate of 40,000 has been disputed. Timothy Egan cited 30,000 peaceful protesters in “Free Trade Takes On Free Speech,” *New York Times*, 12/5/99. *Newsweek* settled on 40,000, “The Siege of Seattle,” Dec. 13, 1999, p. 32.
 2. Joseph Kahn, “Administration Steps Up Effort for Support of China Trade Bill,” *New York Times*, 5/3/00, A-1.
 3. Interview with Lance Lindblom, Program Officer, Human Rights and International Cooperation Peace and Social Justice Program, Ford Foundation, April 10, 2000.
 4. Phil Knight, the billionaire CEO and chairman of Nike, announced he was withdrawing a contribution of \$30 million to his alma mater, the University of Oregon in Eugene, because to the university’s decision to join the Workers Rights Consortium, the student backed monitoring group founded in early April 2000. (See “Nike Chief Cancels Gift Over Monitor of Sweatshops,” by Steve Greenhouse, *New York Times*, April 25, 2000, A-12.)
 5. Jim Dwyer, “These Sneakers Really Stink,” *Daily News* (New York), July 18, 1996.
 6. Bennett, “The UnCivic Culture: Communication, Identity and the Rise of Lifestyle Politics,” p. 755 *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Dec. 1998.
 7. Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Post-Modernization: Cultural, Economic, and Political Change in 43 Societies*.
 8. *Ibid.* p. 42,
 9. Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998).
 10. Sennett, p. 137.
 11. Tel. interview with Medea Benjamin, 12/13/99.
 12. Adam Schwarz, *A Nation in Waiting: Indonesia in the 1990s*, p. 257-263.
 13. For more detail and analysis of the FLA, see “Hitting the Wall: Nike and International Labor Practices,” Harvard Business School case study, Jan. 19, 2000, p. 12.
 14. Telephone interview with Medea Benjamin, 12/14/99. Around the same time she heard Ballinger on the radio, she recalls receiving a visit from Jose Ramos Horta, the east Timorese human rights activist and future Nobel Peace Prize winner.
 15. Telephone interview with Medea Benjamin, 12/14/99.
 16. Interview with Tony Newman, Oct. 23, 1999. Telephone interview, Oct. 29, 1999. The information in the following paragraph is based on these interviews and other conversations with Newman.
 17. Interview with Ellen Braune in New York, Oct. 23, 1999.
 18. Telephone interview with Tony Newman.
 19. Cited in *Consumer Reports*, July 1998, p. 28.
 20. “Trade Wars, Trade Truths,” *The Nation*, Dec. 20, 1999

21 Telephone interview with Benjamin, 12/13/99.

22 Interview with Jeff Ballinger, 5/1/00.

23 In the five weeks since its founding, 49 universities have signed on with the commitment to be sure items that carry the university logos are not made in sweatshops. The WRC intends to send at least three groups of five representatives out to export processing zones to collect data on working and living conditions this summer. See the WRC website for a list of endorsers and the members of its advisory council: www.workersrights.org/ and additional information.

24 Interview with Ballinger, 5/1/00.

25 Sennett, p. 141-142

26 Naomi Klein discussed the fire her book *No Logo*. She first learned of the fire by seeing a photo in a Canadian newspaper, and also recalled a lengthy mention by William Grieder in his book.

27 The only national network news coverage of the Toy Factory Fire in the U.S. was a 20 second story on ABC World News Tonight, "Toy Factory Fire in Bangkok Kills More than 200 Workers," by Peter Jennings, May 11, 1993. It was the sixth story in the broadcast. CBS and NBC didn't mention the story. (Source: Lexis/Nexis, "TVTRACK," U.S. Newswire, Inc., May 11, 1993.) The print coverage in the U.S. was non-existent. The Xinhua General Overseas News Service and Agence France Press covered the story from its beginning, and two citations appeared in the *Montreal Gazette* ("Toy factory fire tool tops 200: Bangkok blaze appears to be deadliest in history," May 12, 1993, and "Grieving Thais threaten revenge on plant guards," May 14, 1993.) According to Lexis/Nexis, neither A.P. nor U.P.I. reported the Kader Toy Factory story, although A.P. covered a toy factory fire at the Zhili Handicraft Factory in Shenzhen China that killed 81 workers seven months later. (A.P., "Electrical Fault May Have Triggered Fire That Killed 81," 11/22/93.)

28 Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*, New York: Picador 2000; Andrew Ross, ed. *No Sweat: Fashion, Free Trade, and the Rights of Garment Workers*, London: Verso 1997.