Subject: Alexander Bores (AB)  
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Interviewer: Milli Lake (ML)  
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ML: It’s the 18th of October 2011, around 5:30. My name is Milli Lake. This interview forms part of the Brand Responsibility oral and digital history project housed at the University of Washington. Could you begin with stating your name and title for the record?

AB: Sure, my name is Alexander Bores. I’m a third year student at Cornell University in the school of Industrial and Labor Relations.

ML: Okay, thank you. So the first question we want to ask you is in what capacity you are involved in labor issues here on the Cornell campus?

AB: Yeah absolutely. So, there are two labor groups on Cornell’s campus, The Cornell Organization for Labor Action, COLA, and Cornell’s Students Against Sweatshops, which is a chapter of the national United Students Against Sweatshops. They work closely together and meet together and at times indistinguishable, but are technically two groups. During the Nike campaign (the calendar year of 2010), I was president of Cornell’s Students Against Sweatshops. So, I helped to organize some of the efforts at Cornell’s campus and since then I’ve been involved in other issues at Cornell’s campus including the Sweat Free Ithaca Bill that we passed through Ithaca and a few other initiatives.

ML: So if we could begin with the Nike case and I’ll ask you to speak about what the key issues in that case were, and how they first came to your attention, and then what course of action you as a president of COLA?

AB: Absolutely. So, the main issues in the Nike case were the closing of two factories in Honduras, both of which closed without paying workers legally mandated severance pay. Both of whom produced primarily for Nike. I think, for one, up to 80% of their merchandise was Nike, and the other was 60% Nike. In one of them in particular, workers had been denied healthcare for a few months leading up to the closing of the factory, in that the employer of the factory had not been paying the contributions to the government for the workers’ healthcare, and the workers only found out about that when one worker got deathly sick, went to the hospital and couldn’t get treatment and later actually ended up dying of cancer. Not to say that that necessarily could have been prevented, but they were unable to get healthcare. Those were the immediate issues. When I first heard of what was going on, it had been over a year since the factories had closed. They had been closed in January of 2009 and I heard about the situation along with other Cornell students in February of 2010 when we went to the United Against Sweatshops National Conference in Nashville, Tennessee. And so, that’s when we heard about what had gone on in Honduras, how the workers at this point, 13 months later, were still without any sort of severance, without any compensation. That’s when we got involved in trying to do something about it, and I think the most encouraging thing was hearing, at that point, the plan that we had in place to do something about it, which was to, like in the Nike case, use the power that our universities have over
licensees to influence their behavior. So, it was to target our university to pressure the licensees, such as Nike, to change what was going on. I went to that conference with two other Cornell students, Casey Sweeney, who is now actually on the coordinating committee for United Against Sweatshops, and Bill Peterson, who was a senior at that time. Both Casey and I were freshmen. On the drive home, we basically started planning out a Cornell specific strategy. How we thought we could raise awareness of the issue, get students, faculty, staff behind it, and get the University to actually take action. I remember the car ride home just being incredibly exciting. I normally fall asleep in any car ride I’m in, but I was up all 12 hours planning the whole time because I felt so empowered that we could actually do something. So we started with kind of educational events. We held ‘teach-ins’, which are open information sessions about the actions Nike had taken. We would quarter cards, just pass out little index-size sheets of information also telling people about the ‘teach-ins’. We always wanted to link it to the next event that was going on to slowly spread awareness. We used campus media as much as possible. So, every time we were doing an action, we sent a press release to the Cornell Daily Sun, just so that people who might not have seen the action, could read about it the next day and get involved. One of the first things we did, was actually give a letter to the president of the university, kind of before we did anything else, explaining what had gone on in Honduras, explaining Nike’s relation to the factories, explaining Cornell’s relation to Nike, which at the time was pretty substantial, Nike both sold a [power line] in the bookstore and was the main sponsor for most of Cornell’s athletic teams. We explained that connection and then we explained why we thought it was Nike’s moral responsibility to pay the severance pay that was owed to these workers. Then after we delivered the letter and got a response basically saying: ‘we have a good relation with Nike, we will look into it’, not promising any concrete action, that was when we started doing the informational events. I think the big moment was when we actually got two workers from the factories in Honduras that came to Cornell as part of a worker tour. Administrators came, students came and actually got to talk to people who had been laid off. We were talking about these issues, but when they are right in front of you, that’s something else.

ML: Can I ask you who coordinated that tour?

AB: As far as I know, it was USAS. We helped raised funds, but they organized the whole tour. Gina and Lowlee came to visit, met with administrators and that was really important. One of the things our school did early on, that a lot of schools in general had done when faced with these kinds of students movements, is they form a committee to look at it. So ours was called the Cornell University Licensing Oversight Committee. It featured seven administrators and two students: me and Bill Peterson. It included someone from Athletics because of the Athletic sponsor, someone from the Cornell store, along with a variety of other administrators. So many of them got to actually meet with Gina and Lowlee when they were here, which I thought was particularly powerful that they could directly communicate with these workers who had been affected. But as we gain more momentum, as more people heard about it, we started doing more to show how much support we had and to really kind of push the university to say we’ve been talking about this for a few months, it’s time to take some action. So, we gathered signatures, or endorsements from over 30 organizations, student organizations. We, in a span of a week, collected 1,100 signatures of students who were in support. We got the student assembly to pass a resolution, of 1,100. We got the student assembly to pass a resolution endorsing the cause and the university assembly, which was important because at Cornell each kind of constituency has
its own assembly, so there’s a student assembly, the graduate student assembly, the faculty senate, the employee assembly, and then the university assembly has people from every constituency and is involved in overseeing the other assemblies. It also has direct control over the Cornell store – or, I shouldn’t say direct control in that they make day-to-day decisions, but oversight over the Cornell store. And so, we came and they were asking for us to pass a resolution, because we could just pass a resolution cutting off the Cornell store from selling Nike things, and we said no, we think it should be a university-level decision, we just want to have enough support behind it. So when they passed it [the resolution] that was a big step in actually getting the campaign forward.

ML: When you would hold awareness raising events and things like that, what kind of participation would you get?

AB: The first ‘teach-in’ that we did, which was a conducted by myself, Casey Sweeney, who I mentioned, Lance Compa and Professor Sarosh Kuruvilla who was also a professor at ILR. For that ‘teach-in’ we went to teachers or professors of most labor related classes and asked if they would be willing to give extra credit to their students for going, and most were, so students turned out in droves. I think that one we had about 75, 80 students packed into a room for 60 to hear. So that was really encouraging. Depending on the event and how much extra credit we got teachers to give out, but you know, at times we turned out a substantial amount of people.

ML: You mentioned raising funds for the tour, the campus tour, how did you do that? What kind of fundraising?

AB: That’s not that difficult. Cornell is very good about giving funding to student organizations. So that was filling out a form and there wasn’t much fundraising involved in that.

ML: When you were doing these ‘teach-ins’, and you said you were talking to faculty about presenting in student classes, but how much of your attention was focused on raising awareness and activism among the student population and then how much was trying to build support from faculty and administrators and more senior-level people?

AB: You definitely have to do both. While we thought we could make a very plausible and good case before them [the university administrators] both on a moral grounds and just on a strict ‘clearly violated our code of conduct’ grounds, we thought from the beginning the only way that we would actually get them to do something is if we had widespread support. So, getting to have these events, we were routinely turning people out to getting coverage in the newspaper, and especially getting faculty support and getting faculty to write in, we thought it was incredibly important to urging the administration to move on this faster.

ML: You mentioned the code of conduct. Does Cornell have its own code of conduct as well as the WRC and FLA code of conduct?

AB: Yes. So Cornell has a code of conduct. What I’m specifically referring to is that Cornell follows the collegiate licensing companies standard contracts, which came about in like 2003 that a lot of universities adopted. One of the things is that you’ll be held responsible for your
subcontractors and so that’s what we said that they were violating - that clause, those were the contracts that we said Nike violated.

ML: So, at University of Washington a lot of the discussion was around two specific code of conduct provisions. One was whether University of Washington specific goods were being produced in those specific factories. Then, the other was whether these companies were obligated to disclose that. The resolution was that they couldn’t be sure whether Nike was producing UW goods [in those specific factories] but that Nike was in violation of the code in terms of the disclosure of information. I was asking Mike and Lance about these specifics and Lance was speculating that he didn’t think that was necessarily such an issue for Cornell. That the issue really was whether Nike goods were being produced at those factories at all and that was it as far as Cornell was concerned. So could you speak a little bit about that and what those kind of discussions were like?

AB: Sure. Before I should go back and mention the licensing oversight committee. Mike Powers was the chair of it and Lance Compa sat on it along with Sarosh Kuruvilla.

ML: Were you on that committee as well?

AB: Yes. So Bill Peterson and myself were the two student representatives. Sarosh Kuruvilla and Lance Compa were the faculty representatives. Mike Powers chaired it. There was Larry Quant from athletics, Kyle Kubick from student activities, and Catherine Holmes from the Dean of Student’s office, and I might be forgetting some. There were nine people total and seven that were active and came, just to connect all the dots.

ML: That’s helpful

AB: So, but to the question, it was certainly brought up whether Nike goods were made or, Cornell goods I should say, were made in the factory. It was clear that Nike goods predominately were. So, it was more that Nike had violated the code. I think it would be a pretty tenuous moral claim to make that just because it wasn’t Cornell, that it was some other school, that we were fine with what was going on. I don’t think that. I would agree with Professor Compa that that wasn’t a huge issue.

ML: That’s really interesting. So, you were talking as well about the moral responsibility of Nike, was your position (either you personally, or COLA), did you take a position on whether Nike was in violation of Honduran law or was it just the code of conduct and the moral responsibility that you were focused on?

AB: So, I think looking at the technicality of it, Nike wasn’t in violation of Honduran Law in that the people who were responsible by law are the factory owners and not who ever they sell to. Even though there was some ruling by Honduran authority that these workers were just owed money still, not necessarily naming Nike. We basically portray them as going through a loophole of Honduran law and we said they’re definitely violating our code of conduct, they are going through a loophole in not violating Honduran law and regardless of what the lawyers would say about either of those, they are clearly acting immorally. We attacked it from all angles.
ML: So, you also talked about, you know at the beginning when you were driving home [from the conference] and kind of strategizing that universities like you wanted to leverage the universities institutional purchasing power, so could you say something about COLA and USAS in general, and the strategy of targeting universities. Just, why universities represent such significant actors in terms of multinational corporation contracts like these, because they don’t necessarily represent the biggest financial percentage of these companies’ revenue.

AB: Sure. With Nike in particular universities represent under five percent of their revenue. I think it was more like two. So it wasn’t an economic case, but still two percent of four billion is a lot of money. But, with universities I think it’s not so much that United Students Against Sweatshops or Cornell Students Against Sweatshops was targeting universities so much as these corporations target universities as places they could sell their wears, and it’s just important that when they do that, the people of the university, the students along with the faculty and the staff, have a say in what the standards are. So, most of the universities have already had codes of conduct, they had already agreed upon standards and so while Nike might have not been violating Modell’s code of conduct, Modell’s sporting goods, they were violating Cornell’s. As a student of Cornell, I felt like if they’re going to do business with Cornell, they should follow our rules.

ML: Why do you think this specific case, and you know the Russell case as well obviously, but these two cases represent, fairly big victories. I can only ask you to speculate about what Nike’s and Russell’s concerns were, but if I could ask you to do that and also talk about why they were successful at the campus level because it was only you know Cornell, University of Wisconsin Madison and University of Washington I believe that actually took that action to threaten to allow the contracts to expire.

AB: I think Brown did too.

ML: Brown too.

AB: But like they didn’t publicize it. We found out about Brown after we found out that Nike had turned around and paid the workers. But apparently they technically had done it. So, as to why they were successful from the corporate standpoints - like what changed the behavior, with Russell I really think the workers, the students, everyone who was working on this, really actually hit them in their wallets. They went from being the eighth most popular collegiate licensee to the twentieth in the course of the campaign. They were dropped by a major retailer, that’s now escaping me, if it was Sports Authority or Dicks, but one of them dropped Russell in something they had claim they would never do. So it was reaching outside of just universities as well. I mean they, I think they didn’t want to turn around and they were basically forced to by overwhelming support from people all over the country. I mean there is no way it could get done with just people working in Honduras or just students working in the United States. It was the fact that Russell was getting bombarded from all over that changed it. With Nike, clearly they hadn’t reached that point yet. My speculation is that a) they saw the light at the end of the tunnel and they saw where it was going. Russell had just happened six months before. But b) Nike is
very brand sensitive and in the past has gone through bouts of huge anti-sweatshop protests and so I think they kind of wanted to nip it in the bud before it got steam. But, how quickly they reacted shows how much these issues can resonate with people once they are made aware of them. People weren’t aware of what happened in Honduras in either case and when they were told about it they were angry and they acted.

ML: And did you have any direct communication with Nike representatives?

AB: Early on we talked; there was a conference call with a few of us and Amanda Tucker, who is head of Corporate Social Responsibility at Nike. We had a 30 minutes conversation with her, maybe it was an hour. In response to the first letter we sent where basically she just assured us everything was fine, we might think about helping them but we’re not responsible, nothing’s going to change, so on so forth. So, I personally didn’t have much communication in the ways of changing their minds. But, I did talk to them.

ML: Did you get the sense, again like yourself personally of USAS or COLA that Nike was grudgingly willing to cooperate, or just very resistant to engaging with this until they were really forced into it?

AB: I think they were always willing to engage. I don’t think they were willing to do anything about it. They’re willing to talk us to death and you know, they were wise enough to not think ignoring it would be the way to go forward, but one of the humorous aspects after the campaign was they put up a website about what’s going on here in Honduras and one of things on there was this line that was basically: ‘we will never pay, we will never take the financial responsibilities of a subcontractor’, right, we think that’s a separate issue. The day they announced that they were actually paying the workers they hadn’t yet taken down the website. So there is a screen shot in my email somewhere that was sent over USAS of that website saying: ‘we will never pay’, right next to ‘Nike announces..’ that they would.

ML: I know Nike was pretty careful in the wording of the compensation of the package, not to set a financial legal precedent that they were taking legal responsibility for this. So, did you feel dissatisfied with the wording of the compensation package or was that kind of what you expected?

AB: Yes, I think to anyone that studies what happened or what was involved in what happened, it was very clear what it was. I obviously wasn’t involved in putting out the final wording, but from my perspective I wouldn’t want the workers waiting even an extra day over the wording of the thing. I think that was much more important. But to Nike, it’s clear that the legal precedent is important. Hopefully establishing the practice helps there to be accountability through this system because the way it’s set up now, there’s no accountability and these severance laws are near impossible to enforce.

ML: Why did the students at Cornell mount such an effective strategy in terms of pressuring the administration?
AB: I don’t think it was pressure in terms of ‘you need to do this or else’. The only ‘or else’ was how foolish you look when all of these students and members of the community support this and you are saying no, like who are you protecting?

ML: So I guess I’m just interested in your thoughts on why you feel that Cornell did take this course of action that a lot of other US schools didn’t yet take and whether you got a sense of the kind of domino effect that was about to follow from your colleagues at USAS chapters around the country? Why did Cornell take such a leadership role in this? Was it to do with the students, or the fact you had such a good relationship with the administrators and faculty or what?

AB: Yes, well answering the first part about the domino, I definitely think it was clear that momentum was building because there’s always the question of ‘no other school’s done it, why should we?’ Then once a few schools have cut and said it’s violating the contract, [the question is] why we still with them if other schools [have cut]. So when the University of Wisconsin cut first that was a fairly large contract they cut, and it was very substantial. But Nike wasn’t their athletic sponsor so it wasn’t a “Nike School”. Cornell was a Nike school and so when they had a big contract at University of Wisconsin Madison cut, and then at Cornell, a relatively smaller contract, but still at a Nike school, I think it showed that Nike could lose wherever it was and that was a real possibility going forward. As to why the campaign was effective, I think we had a few benefits going for us. I mean we had the School of Industrial Labor Relations, which gave us interested faculty, faculty that did research, people that were willing to help us. We had an administration that was willing to work with us. Then we had an incredible group of students. So I mean almost half the club were seniors and they were all very active, very involved, knew what was going on and were willing to step in. And at the same time when they saw how passionate Casey and I were, even though we were freshmen, they let us really step in and lead and keep the energy high. So I mean we had a lot of factors that played in our favor.

ML: Okay. So in your participation in the licensing oversight committee meetings, how did the discussion in those meetings go? Was there a lot of consensus among the different parties or disagreement or discussion? Also, if you could talk a little about the process of those meetings as well - the kinds of questions that were coming up and how you got to the final resolution?

AB: Sure. So there were a number of actual times we sat down and met. The early ones were much more fact finding, discussing the workers’ rights, reports where we got all the information about what was going on and also kind of discussing how to engage with Nike, like setting up the calls with Amanda Tucker and the letters and drafting how we can ask questions without threatening and things like that. Then as it got later and it got clear Nike wasn’t going to do anything, it came time for people to actually take action. I think the final recommendation to the president to actually cut the contracts, if I remember correctly, passed six to one and then technically eight to one because the two people that hadn’t come to meetings were like ‘Yeah, I like it’. But the vote when it happened was six to one. The one person being the representative from athletics. So you know eventually everyone who was there came around and actually Lance Compa in one of the final meetings was very pivotal in that he brought a draft of the letter. So we were coming to discuss what our final recommendations would be and he brought with him a recommendation to cut, already worded in the way a letter [should be] and it made it very easy to just say ‘yes, that’s what we should do’.
ML: So prior to that point when you knew that was the course of action that you were going to take, were their discussions over what the best strategy to play with Nike was? Whether to have a more gentle approach or whether to go onto the attack immediately and stuff like that, were you talking about that?

AB: Right, there were definitely talks about how we should go forward. That’s why I think there was a slow escalation of a letter, then a ‘you guys need to do something’ letter, and then finally the last one.

ML: Were you, at any point frustrated with the pace of how things were moving?

AB: Constantly, constantly. Just being an impatient freshmen, delays were rather frustrating. But, it was part of the process and as long as people were actually working on things it was bearable and rarely, I wouldn’t say never, but rarely did I get the feeling that they were just stalling to stall. So that made it easier to deal with.

ML: That’s a definite contrast with the University of Washington case, where I think there was a sense that there were people on the committee who were stalling.

AB: Yeah and I will say that’s not the unanimous view of members of Cornell’s Students Against Sweatshops. There are certainly people from the group that would tell you they were stalling just to stall. One of the examples was actually we were trying to get the licensing oversight committee to meet towards the last week of school, we realized time was running down, and they couldn’t find a day to meet, even though Bill and I were literally like twenty four seven, and we just hadn’t met for a while and then President Skorton came to the student assembly meeting on a Thursday, which he just does every so often just to give updates and then they allow open questions and one of our seniors, Andrew Wolf really tore into them: ‘why has the licensing oversight committee not met yet’, ‘why are you stalling’, ‘let’s actually take action on this’. Two days later, we had an email that said we are meeting on Monday. So, there are certainly people that would point to that and say they were just stalling to stall, but generally I didn’t get that feeling.

ML: Did you get the sense that the president was fairly receptive to what the licensing oversight committee would recommend?

AB: Yes and no. Not entirely, I never felt like what we were deciding was the decision, but I felt like having a strong recommendation would be taken to heart and we knew it would always be reviewed finally by President Skorton, Vice President Murphy and Vice President Bruce to make the final decision. And it’s probably worth pointing out that the letter that Cornell sent to Nike was a step back from what the recommendation was. So the recommendation was an immediate cut of the licensing contract.

ML: Oh really?
AB: Yes, and what Cornell sent out was ‘we’ll let it expire’. We won’t renew it at the end of the year.

ML: I got the sense that the recommendation of the committee was to allow the contract to expire.

AB: No. The recommendation was to cut. And then President Skorton decided to let it expire.

ML: Can I just ask what involvement you’ve had since the settlement and Nike’s decision to settle, how involved you’ve been with monitoring how the settlement has been implemented and how satisfied you’d been with that?

AB: I haven’t been that involved myself, Lance Compa has been rather involved. But to the best of my knowledge, not a single worker has been rehired yet and one of the things in there was priority rehiring and making sure that they actually got their job and all the training in the world isn’t worth anything if you don’t have a chance to use it. So that’s incredibly frustrating; that they lost their livelihood and still aren’t being taken seriously about that loss. I would like to see them all rehired and I’d like to see them all working again.

[END TAPE]