

On Tuesday, April 16, 2002 I interviewed Melissa Schweisguth, the Fair Traded Coordinator for Global Exchange. This was my first interview and I therefore chose Global Exchange as my subject because of its relatively centralized location within the sustainable coffee activist network. Global exchange is a California based activist organization that has organized on of the two national sustainable coffee campaigns that are currently in existence. The interview was helpful in formulating a basic understanding of several network features and allowed me to form some basis hypothesis about intra-network activity.

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1) What are your goals for both the Starbucks and Folgers campaigns?

“The basic goal is to get both of these companies to convert at least 5% of their line to Fair Trade certified sources. We also have a specific demand with Starbucks: we are asking them to brew Fair Trade coffee as the ‘coffee of the day’ at least once per week. They recently agreed to do it once a month, but prior to this they were not doing it unless you asked.”

2) Once you achieve these goals, will you move on to other companies, or will you pursue additional goals through these same companies?

“We have not yet talked about our strategy after these [goals have been achieved] and we expect the Folgers campaign to go on for a while. One of the reasons why we are targeting Folgers is because they are one of the four largest [coffee companies], and we certainly want to send the same message to the other three large coffee companies. It is possible that we would start targeting them, but we would just have to see how we felt about the Folgers campaign and what we felt the next logical move was. We definitely want to reform the industry, not just Folgers—the same thing with Starbucks. We also work on other companies. Some of our activists have done some targeting toward Whole Foods—they have their own coffee line. So we are targeting other companies, just not as prominently, not with a full campaign on our website.”

3) On your website, there is a list of Fair Trade coffee-farmer coops that are in the coffee producing and exporting countries. How would you describe the interactions you have with these coops, if you, in fact, interact with them at all?

“We do not work with the coops, so we do not have a regular direct relationship. Our Fair Trade director Deborah James led a delegation to one of the coffee cooperatives. She went along with a number of other individuals who were interested in learning about the coffee crisis—what life is like for coffee farmers—we call them reality tours, or educational tours. They went down to a cooperative in Nicaragua. So we do have some direct contact with them, but the Fair Trade labeling organization, the Fair Trade Labeling Organizations International are really the ones that really have direct interactions with the cooperatives. What we do is work with the grassroots activists.”

4) Where does most of your information come from? Is it passed along to you from on-site groups or do you conduct research yourselves, using indirect or secondary sources?

“We get it from many different sources. When we start a campaign that is going to be targeting a company, we do background research, but that is mostly secondary sources. We would search Folgers’ web site, look for web sites for organizations that do business analysis. As far as the cooperatives, we get that information from the Fair Trade Labeling Organizations International. We get a lot of information from our coalition partners, and we have some people who we work with who have video footage of coffee cooperatives. We do also have some direct dialogues with producers from various countries, and then they give us first hand information.”

5) Now, we could say that Global Exchange is mainly a human rights organization. You have some other concerns; however, it would be correct to say that you focus on human rights?

“Human rights and social justice, and while we see human rights as one of the issues with coffee, we also see environmental preservation as a human rights issue because these are indigenous communities, and not only are they paid low wages, but they often bare the brunt of the environmental damage resulting from highly pesticided coffee. We see all those issues as falling under social justice and human rights. The labor issues, the living wage issues, things like that.”

6) *What about the organizations that place their main emphasis on migratory birds, Do you see these groups as using their resources to their full potential, or would the movement be better served if they were to focus their efforts on human rights first and birds second?*

“I think that their focus is appropriate because there are different constituencies of concern in our society [Framing the coffee crisis in terms of their area of concern] is going to pull them into the other issues, the fairness issues, the other ecological issues, and the other human rights issues that are often behind rainforest destruction. If everyone were highlighting only human rights issues, then people who were really concerned with the environment, or about birds, would not be pulled into the issue [of Fair Trade coffee] as much. So I think it is important to have different angles. We even do that with our own work, for some people we will really emphasize the environmental impact of Fair Trade coffee. If we are speaking to a group around Earth Day, or at an Earth Day Festival, we are going to highlight the issues of pesticides and hybridized crops, things like that.”

7) *Using a bird as a symbol of the movement, something other than the image of a coffee farmer, do you think that such a symbol may fail to resonate with coffee farmers or on-site activists who may resent the fact that some people in western countries seem to be more concerned about birds than people?*

“Since I have not talked to them, I would have difficulty speaking for them. But, I think that there might be people in other countries that are really concerned about [their environment], for instance, the fish that are living in a river. And I do not think people would be insulted but putting emphasis on birds instead of people because, for them, the birds are also an important sign of the preservation of their environment—the health of their community. I do not think that they would feel insulted and feel that the birds were being put above human lives, but just say that, ‘see this is another example of how the coffee industry is harming this community.’ I think they would see it as a positive step that it is raising awareness [of the larger problem].”

8) *You have mentioned that you have connections with many environmental groups. Would you describe those connections? The frequency of your interactions and the amount of information you exchange.*

“The Seattle Audubon Society, the Northwest Shade Coffee Campaign and the Songbird Association are the ones that we work with most closely. And, if for example, there is an Earth Day event, or if they are going to be talking about the environment, we would probably issue some kind of joint statement or endorse a statement that they made that was related to Fair Trade coffee. There are actually a number of interactive list-serves; one of them is ‘Responsible Coffee’ [another is “shade-coffee’]. So we have direct communications with them in that respect, and, in addition, we have an educational flyer [dealing with the migratory bird issue], and part of our website deals with the environment—so we have specific information about those organizations on that part of the website. [We have] indirect contact as well. A concrete example of how we work together: In December, there was a Fair Trade promotion day that was sponsored by about 20 different groups. [We co-sponsored the day with environmental groups such as] the Seattle Audubon society, the Songbird Foundation, the Organic Consumers Association—they work specifically on issues of genetic diversity, biodiversity, and genetic engineering—which also touch on a lot of environmental issues. We work very closely with them, especially on the Starbucks campaign.”

9) *Could you elaborate on your connections with organic food activist groups such as the Organic Consumers Association?*

“The one we are most strongly tied with is the Organic Consumers Association. We launched the Starbucks campaign in 1999 and we started out with [a] really really highly Fair Trade [oriented strategy], but we started working more with the OCA. [Since then] they have really really picked up the Starbucks campaign and they have continued to help organize major days. They just had a day of action with 300 actions across the world at different Starbucks stores—leafleting events. T[he OCA’s main demands are that Starbucks] remove genetically modified coffee and rBGH milk from Starbucks stores, but they also really make the Fair Trade demand prominent and, they

have told us that even if the GMO issue is settled with Starbucks, they will still continue to press for Fair Trade. And we very much support their demands for organic coffee and for coffee that has not been genetically modified because we realize that technified coffee has been one of the causes of over production and has also lead to a lot of destruction via pesticide use, destruction of the rain forest. Technified coffee is sun-grown, not shade grown, so we really do overlap on a lot of those demands.”

10) So, would you say it benefits the movement as a whole to have a wide range of viewpoints among activist groups?

“Oh certainly, because there are people who do not yet understand about technified coffee, and that it is sun-grown—all these agricultural issues—they just do not want to consume a product that has been genetically modified. So to have an organization that is saying ‘hey, Fair Trade is usually organic and shade grown,’ it is going to tie those people in, and if you do not have that emphasis on the benefits for the American consumer, those people would not be tied into the issue. So again, having that coalition is really critical, and in all our work we look for people who have different reasons for investing in the issue, and for people who have different constituencies that might be interested some aspect of the issue, and then try to pull as those groups together.”

11) Do all these different messages in the movement serve to bring people together, or do they fragment the movement?

“They are not necessarily different messages; because [the overall message is common]. All of us support Fair Trade. The reasons why you support Fair Trade could be slightly different, and that is critical if you are going to have a campaign that has sufficient size to meet your demands. If all we had were people who were concerned about labor issues, then we would be missing a lot of people. Some people in the US just are not interested in the labor rights of people in foreign countries, but they are really interested in songbirds, or in eating only organic products. So definitely having those different angles is critical, and that is a major backbone of our work. You look at the issue, you look at Fair Trade coffee, you look at every minute aspect of it, and then you look for groups who are concerned with all those aspects and pull them together.”

12) How do you form connections with these other groups? How did you originally form your connections with the songbird groups and the organic food groups?

“Most of it is through meeting in person, sometimes you would check out their website, and then you would send them an e-mail or you would call them. But, when you are ready to do real work together, then you would want to meet with them. It is really critical to meet with those people face-to-face.”

13) Do these meetings occur all the time or are they rare? Do you meet with other organizations on a regular basis?

“Not really face-to-face meetings because of the cost and the time. For us to be flying to New York or D.C. all the time is very consuming, so it would be an initial meeting and then maybe [an in-person meeting] every six months, or sometimes even once a year.. Also, [a lot of groups we work with attend the same conferences we do]. So if there is a conference, then we would schedule a caucus and have a meeting since we are already there. They are closer, if they are in the Bay Area or in California, we might meet with them more, but, especially if they are in D.C., the regular communications are more via phone and e-mail. Conference calls are definitely something we do. We have regular conference calls for all the people who are on the Fair Trade coffee task force for example so that once a week, or once a month, everyone has an hour, two hours, to talk about things as a group.”

14) Who makes up this Fair Trade task force?

“The Fair Trade task force: it is part of the Specialty Coffee Association. Since I am not on it, I could not tell you who all the members are. But, [it includes] a representative from TransFair, and representatives from major coffee companies such as Starbucks, and Deborah James—our Fair Trade director.

15) *When you have achieved your goals against a target company, and decide to move on, do you coordinate your departure with other members of the coalition?*

“Yes, when you start the campaign, if you are working with a coalition, the best way to start a campaign off on the right foot is to sit down with the coalition and have some joint demands from the beginning, so you know ‘where are we going with this campaign.’ You would set goals for the coalition, and when you are dialoging as the campaign goes on, say, ‘are we meeting these goals,’ and reassess your strategy. It is definitely a constant process of checking back with your coalition. Then, when you are done—let’s say we get Folgers to go Fair Trade—we would say, ‘OK, where do we go from here.’ And you would need to get the input of all the coalition members, because, if you do not, if you just take off and make [the campaign] yours, not focusing on issues they think are important, you might lose coalition members. It would really be a way of disrespecting everything they have done up to there.”

16) *Is this true for all coalition members, including songbird groups, and organic food groups?*

“Primarily so. Obviously, there are going to be ways where we diverge. Sometimes there will be a day of action that certain groups do not participate in; for example, some organizations do not participate in anti-corporate actions. Therefore, if we had a day of action against Folgers, some of them would not participate in it, but if it was a day of action to go to a store and encourage people to buy Fair Trade, they would. So it is not like if we plan the strategy everybody has to do everything, but we would consult the members of the coalition. And many people are different, there are some people who are more central and really want to be involved in the decision making process, and some who want to be involved more peripherally. As you work in a campaign you will realize that and you might weigh input differently according to how much the members want their input weighted, or how much they want to be a part of the decision making process.”

17) *Would you generally try to convince coalition partners to stop a campaign when you do?*

“I guess it depends if all the demands have been met and it depends if we really think it is time to move on. But I do not think we could tell them to stop a campaign if they still felt like their issues were not settled.”

18) *Do you try to reward the targets of campaigns if they comply with your demands? If so, how?*

“One thing we would do is just encourage people to go out and start supporting that company if they start offering Fair Trade—encourage people to buy [their Fair Trade products]. This is something we always tell the companies when we first correspond with them: ‘we think this would be good for your business, and, if you would convert to Fair Trade, we would use you as a model of a responsible company.’ But it has not yet come to the point where we have had enough success where we felt like we really wanted to reward a company. Starbucks, yes, they are carrying Fair Trade, but they are not carrying a sufficient amount. So we say, ‘it is good that you are carrying it, we are happy [that you are offering Fair Trade coffee once a month], we will let people know it is out there,’ but we are not yet going to pat them on the back and move on. Part of the best way of rewarding them is just to stop targeting them, to let people know the campaign is over and that they have met our demands. Just that in itself would be a reward for the company.”

19) *On your website you list the individual members of your organization that are working on the coffee campaign, for instance, there is one activist here at my school; how much contact do you have with these individual activists?*

“We have a list-serve so that at least once a week we are sending some type of information to our activists—and the list-serve has thousands of members, it goes well beyond the people on that page [of our website]. But, that is kind of a passive way of being involved, of being in contact. Another way we are in contact is every time we organize a day of action—this year it has been about every six weeks that we have been having some kind of major action—we would e-mail all the activists. First, you send a general e-mail, then you send a specific one to [each activist], and then you start calling them. So at least every six weeks you are in touch with your activist base. With the people who are listed as coffee campaigners, we really try to cultivate close relationships with them. One of the most specific parts of my job, one of the most important parts of my job, is to coordinate all those schools, so once a month I will write them and say, ‘hey, how are things going, please send me an update.’ If I do not hear from them within a couple of months, then I would try to call them, or send them a more personal e-mail. Just to make

sure they are still out there and with us. Also on the list-serve, we post a ‘campaign of the month.’ Every two months we will post an example of a great campaign so that they can be in touch with each other. Another thing we are really supporting is for us to be in touch with them and for them to be in touch with each other. There is an interactive list-serve that one of the activists—one of the students—set up through a different organization; but we are encouraging all the students to get on that. At least once a month I send a personal check in to the activists.”

...The interview ended here and we then began discussing the nature my research. She suggested a few other campaigns I might want to look at; I also learned a little more about coffee. Here are some excerpts:

“There is a woman in our office [Heidi Quante] who is working on a campaign to get UNOCAL out of Burma. That is a really good example of coalition building and communication across a movement because they actually work across international lines with groups that are in and out of the US.

You mentioned the UNOCAL campaign, are there any other campaigns you suggest I look at?

“There is an organization called the Free Burma Coalition, which is a worldwide international coalition—a worldwide international movement to bring peace and democracy to Burma. They have chapters worldwide. Also, the Free Tibet Movement, which has been pretty prominent in the USA. That is also a huge international movement.”

...We talked for a few more minutes, mostly about what I was researching, and she gave me some names of other people I might want to contact. I then thanked her and we ended our conversation.