

**THINKING ABOUT THE ANTISWEATSHOP MOVEMENT: A MODEST
PROPOSAL**

by Jeffrey C. Isaac

In the past two years an antisweatshop movement spearheaded by students has swept across American campuses. Student groups, most of them affiliated with a national organization called United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), have called attention to sweatshop labor abuses at factories producing sports apparel with university-licensed logos--a multimillion dollar industry for universities--and have demanded that universities seek an end to such abuses. They have asked that universities require contractors to disclose the locations of all of their sub-contracted factories; adopt codes of conduct requiring that contractors agree to produce only in factories where sweatshop labor abuses have been remedied and where workers are free to organize; and affiliate with the Workers' Rights Consortium (WRC), a group established in 2000 to assure monitoring of factories by independent, on-site grass-roots worker groups and their international NGO supporters.

This latter demand has proven the most controversial, for it involves a repudiation of an alternative group, the Fair Labor Association (FLA), whose formation was brokered by the Clinton administration and its Apparel Industry Partnership, and whose board includes the very corporations whose factories it is supposed to monitor. The FLA is a corporatist entity premised upon the constructive collaboration of corporations, labor and human rights supporters, and universities. It is governed by a board of directors that consists of six industry representatives,

six representatives of labor and environmental groups, and a single representative of the over one hundred affiliated universities (plus one Executive Director). The board works on the basis of a qualified majority rule principle that affords effective veto power to the industry representatives.

The FLA is thus at odds with the central premise of the student-supported WRC--the idea that corporations and their subcontractors cannot be trusted, and that independent monitoring is essential to the achievement of labor rights. For this reason, the FLA is anathema to USAS, a hostility that is reciprocated by the FLA and especially by its corporate affiliates, who have disparaged USAS, and the WRC, as "ideological" and "unprofessional." Yet in spite of this ideological antagonism, the FLA can be seen in part as an effort to coopt the pressure that USAS, along with other anti-sweatshop campaigners, has successfully generated on campuses and in the broader society.

The students' greatest success has been their ability to press many major universities to affiliate with the WRC, thereby committing to the principle of independent monitoring, and also agreeing to provide financial and moral support to sweatshop workers themselves and to labor and human rights groups that support them. The WRC is an interesting and unique organization, a consortium consisting of three distinct and autonomous constituent groups--USAS students; universities (principally university administrations); and an Advisory Council consisting of human rights and labor NGOs and unions. The WRC Governing Board consists of fifteen members--five representatives of USAS; five representatives of the university constituency, which is organized as a University Caucus; and five

representatives of the NGOs. The Governing Board works according to majority rule. If the first constituent group provides the moral and political energy, and the second provides the economic "weight" and substantial funding, the latter group provides the labor expertise and the ties to local workers that make the reporting of abuses and their subsequent independent monitoring possible. The WRC, then, is both a monitoring group and a direct link to sweatshop workers and union activists. In both respects it aims to empower workers.

The success of USAS--typically working along with supportive faculty and other allies-- in getting universities to support such an organization has been nothing short of extraordinary. This effort, undertaken primarily during the 1999-2000 academic year, involved an ingenious combination of tactics, from direct action campaigns and sit-ins at major universities such as University of Wisconsin-Madison, to teach-ins and public relations campaigns, to savvy negotiation with university administrations. The overall result of these efforts is a national campaign with significant momentum.

While I am not a labor activist, over the past eighteen months I have been actively involved in the campus antisweatshop issue. I drafted a widely circulated faculty petition at Indiana University/Bloomington--signed by well over a hundred faculty within two weeks--supporting the university's negotiation with No Sweat! (the Indiana University USAS group), a negotiation that led to Indiana University's decision to affiliate with the WRC (this decision played an important role in the subsequent decisions of the University of Michigan and the University of Wisconsin-Madison to affiliate with the WRC). I have

served as an IU representative to the founding conference of the WRC in New York, and to the University Caucus meetings in Chicago; and I am an active member of the IU Sweatshop Advisory Committee. I have thus spent much time and intellectual energy thinking about the sweatshop issue and its significance.

Much of the literature on the antisweatshop movement has fallen into two fairly predictable genres--activist celebration and conservative or neoliberal disparagement. Student idealism is either lauded for its passion for justice or disparaged for its naivete. But in neither case is the real political significance of the movement soberly considered. What I hope to offer below is precisely this--a serious consideration of its significance and limitations. My basic point is that while the antisweatshop movement responds to some of the problems thrown up by globalization, it is a mistake to view it as a global challenge to corporate capitalism or an incipient form of radical political transformation. The campus antisweatshop movement is a partial, limited, and fairly modest effort, capable of producing only partial, limited, and fairly modest results. But this is no reason to disparage it. For there is little reason to believe that anything more grandiose is currently possible. And the results it can and does achieve are eminently good ones.

The Movement As It Is

1. The antisweatshop movement is an exemplary sign of both student idealism and a resurgent idealism within the activist leadership of the American labor movement. The movement has affinities and overlaps with a range of cross-

border labor solidarity efforts--from Press for Change and Global Exchange to the Campaign for Labor Rights and the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras--that have been spearheaded by citizens, clergy, and union leaders. And USAS activism is clearly at least in part the fruit of the AFL-CIO's Union Summer Program, and other union efforts to reach out to college students. As a spark of idealism fanned by politically sophisticated union leaders, the student movement is a very promising development.

2. The antisweatshop movement is a response to new forms of globalization based upon the hypermobility of capital and the development of ever more integrated global consumer and financial markets. The movement dovetails with living wage campaigns, community-labor alliances, and other forms of resistance to unrestrained capitalist globalization that have emerged in the past few years. USAS activists have also been active in anti-WTO protests in Seattle, Washington DC, and elsewhere. In an article in the Nation, Liz Featherstone explicitly drew this connection, arguing that this student movement represents a challenge to the "corporatization" of the university.

Thesis 3: The campus antisweatshop movement does challenge the effects of capitalist globalization and the corporatization of the university. It is motivated by two moral principles. The first is that the wholesale commodification of labor is a moral evil that ought to be opposed by all conscientious individuals. The second is solidarity with those who labor under sweatshop conditions. These principles challenge corporations and the sweatshops with which they subcontract, and also the growing

ascendancy of market values within society and the university itself. But it is an unusual kind of challenge. For the movement, and the Workers' Rights Consortium that has been its principal achievement, is based, it seems to me, on the following, distinctively non-revolutionary premises: (a) our society is saturated with brand name consumerism, and this is unlikely to change in the near future; (b) just as the mass consumption of logo items is promoted by massive corporate advertising campaigns often linked to college and professional sports teams and events, so the abuses behind these items can be exposed through publicity campaigns that exploit the symbolic power of logos and brand names; (c) contemporary universities are corporate universities that derive substantial income from licensing their logos to the corporations that mass market sports-logo items, and the corporate interest of such universities in continuing to do this can be the basis for their involvement in promoting more decent labor conditions; (d) corporations such as Nike and Reebok make billions of dollars selling such merchandise and, because their brand names help them to market their goods, and because their profits rely in part on their university contracts, they can be pressured by socially concerned universities into remedying labor abuses if the right combination of strategies is applied; and (e) it is a good thing when students, faculty, and community members can cajole university presidents to join together to promote such socially responsible corporate activity on the part of universities.

The proximate goal of the WRC is thus to involve corporate universities in negotiations with corporate behemoths such as Nike and Reebok, so that the billions of

dollars worth of consumer goods marketed by these corporate behemoths in our consumer society can be produced under marginally less exploitative labor conditions.

4. The WRC is not a mass organization, nor are its constituents mass movements. It consists of a small number--one or two dozen--of dedicated and strategically located worker rights groups in places such as Guatemala and Thailand; a few American trade unions--most notably UNITE, which provided crucial early support to the formation of both USAS and the WRC--in possession of resources, expertise, and organizing zeal, but also stretched thin by declining memberships and proliferating challenges; well over a hundred student groups across the country, each of which typically consists of less than fifty activists, and each of which is typically capable of mobilizing no more than a few hundred students at best on campuses with as many as thirty or forty thousand students; and over seventy universities and colleges, usually represented in the WRC by administrators who are often legal or financial officials and are most definitely not social activists. Together these constituents are committed to ending specific abuses through publicity and ingenious negotiation with companies like Nike. They pursue these negotiations from what can only be described as relative weakness. For while these parties have moral standing and some economic weight, they lack the financial resources, the organizational unity of purpose, and the sheer power of the corporations with which they deal.

5. The university members of the WRC are corporate universities in every sense of the term; and they are in

the process of developing a new, flexible form of organization, that is closely tied to the new forms of flexible accumulation in the broader society. The institution of responsibility-centered budgeting, the move toward temporary and part-time faculty and the use of graduate student instructors, the ascendancy of professional schools within universities and the corresponding crisis of liberal arts education, the ascendancy of a consumerist model of curricular choice--all this is well documented. Yet these universities are also unique spaces in the society, for they have, at least in principle, certain pedagogical and civic goals that allow for fairly robust forms of social criticism, and make it difficult for their rulers to remain utterly immune to serious moral challenge. For this reason many of these universities, in spite of their corporate identities, have chosen both to commit themselves to standards of labor decency at least regarding their apparel contractors, and to contribute funds to the support of labor rights advocates and monitors in other parts of the world. If the student success in pressing this result is extraordinary, the willingness of university administrators--sometimes under duress but also, to be sure, under minimal pressure compared with the student activism of the sixties-- is equally extraordinary. And it suggests that we should be wary of overgeneralizing about the conservatism of the corporate university.

The Limits of the Movement

While USAS and its allies may talk about putting an end to sweatshop labor and struggling against global

capitalism, the WRC is really about remedying specific abuses as they arise in specific locales and, in a broader sense, about publicizing labor abuses and seeking to enlighten consumers and citizens. It is not possible for an organization such as the WRC to do more than this, for it is essentially a monitoring organization that offers support to workers who labor under repressive conditions, lack independent union representation and are subject to labor law regimes that do not afford them very much freedom of association. Furthermore, these workers live in low-wage economies that rely upon such a comparative advantage to sustain even minimal forms of capital accumulation and economic growth. For this reason, even the best case scenario for the WRC would seem to involve: (a) the continued mass production and consumption, on a global scale, of overpriced Nike and Reebok apparel and sporting goods; (b) the continued flourishing of Nike, Reebok and other purveyors of these typically superfluous consumer items; and (c) the continued existence of serious global labor disparities and indeed even sweatshop labor conditions beyond the reach of effective remediation through the WRC's methods. The WRC's practical vision, in other words, is neither revolutionary nor even radical. It is meliorist.

While the WRC commits itself to the remedy of verifiable sweatshop abuses, it is incapable of putting an end to sweatshop labor conditions. Scarce time and resources make it impossible to effectively monitor, publicize, and remedy labor abuses at all of the thousands of factories--run by subcontractors, labor intensive, easily closed down and moved to other locations if "labor trouble" arises--that operate throughout the world. And

even should abuses be remedied at specific sites, similar scarcities of time and energy make it impossible for the WRC to furnish real institutional guarantees that backsliding will not occur. The WRC, in short, is basically a consortium that supports the work of labor NGOs in labor-repressive locales. It is not a government, nor does it have the enforcement powers of governments. It does not promise, and it cannot deliver, a new regime of labor rights in those places where labor rights are not codified. The most that it can promise is that when workers have serious complaints then the WRC will listen and will try to make others listen, and that when such complaints are verified universities will be encouraged to seek remedies.

And yet the establishment of the WRC has been the central goal and the central achievement of the campus antisweatshop movement to date. The movement then, at its best, can generate only modest effects. It is not a mass social or political movement. It is connected to no powerful political parties or even national labor organizations in any place other than the United States (and even in the U.S. it would be a mistake to exaggerate the commitment of even the most progressive trade unions to global labor rights). It works through creative involvement of labor and human rights activists, trade unionists, students, college faculty and administrators, lawyers, accountants, and corporate officials—taken together, hardly a revolutionary bunch. It exploits the mass media to publicize labor abuses. And it makes use of the new internet technologies, and new forms of networking pioneered by flexible capitalism, to do its business. The antisweatshop movement, in other words, is both in and of the system of globalization whose effects it contests.

This is not necessarily the way many of its activists see their activity. Many view it as part of a broad global challenge to capitalism itself. As one USAS activist put it: "The demands we posed in Wisconsin reflect a growing movement taking place on campuses today. Most often it is portrayed as a movement of students against sweatshops. Internally, however, this movement is rapidly changing. It is become part of the movement of global solidarity against the rule of corporate power." For many activists, the movement corresponds to what Arif Dirlik has called a "resistance to capitalism" that is intended to serve as a "building block for the future." Such activists have hegemonic, or rather counter-hegemonic, ambitions. They seek what David Harvey has called a new "synthesis" of struggles against capitalist globalization, linking the campus antisweat effort to other corporate campaigns--like the campaign against Starbucks--and to protests against the WTO, the IMF, and the World Bank. The goal is nothing less than a radical transformation of global capitalism. But these activists also understand that global capitalism cannot be challenged head-on. So they promote specific efforts, what Dirlik calls "local experiments," as part of a broader totalizing vision of change.

It bears some emphasis that the antisweatshop movement is a continual work in progress. There is no single narrative or interpretation that is shared by all participants. Indeed, it is precisely because of this indeterminacy that serious discussion and debate is so important. Nonetheless, there does seem to be a dominant narrative, articulated by leading writers and publicists, that frames the campus movement as part of a broader anti-capitalist struggle. This narrative is not dogmatically

postulated. Anticapitalist struggle is not decribed as the necessary outcome of the dialectics of history. Instead, it is viewed as an aspiration, as an historical project, a way of rectifying undeniable global inequalities. To the extent that this project is advanced in a pragmatic spirit, as a hypothesis about probable causes and links between various activities, it is impossible to pronounce final judgment on it. There is no way to forecast the future. We may well be witnessing the birthpangs of a new order. There are nonetheless reasons to be profoundly skeptical about this scenario.

One such reason is the tension, noted by sympathetic left observers, between the distinctive themes and strategies of the antisweatshop movement and the global struggle against capitalism with which it is often linked by antisweat activists. Martin Hart-Landsberg, for example, writing in Monthly Review, argues that while many of the recent expressions of opposition to capitalist globalization hold great promise, "there is nothing automatic about the future direction of political developments." What is lacking among many activists, he argues, is a serious consideration of political strategy focused on the challenges to building a truly oppositional anti-capitalist movement. In this context he notes with dismay that "some antisweatshop campaigns come dangerously close to presenting sweatshops as an historical anomaly that can be ended by using consumer campaigns to encourage capitalists to change their behavior. As a result, many participants begin thinking in terms of good capitalists versus bad capitalists rather than developing an anticapitalist consciousness." The antisweatshop movement, he argues, is too moralistic, too issue-specific. It is, in

short, a campaign rather than a movement, an attack on a certain category of capitalist abuses rather than an attack on capitalism itself.

A similar point is made by Naomi Klein. "Anticorporate activism," she writes, "enjoys the priceless benefits of borrowed hipness and celebrity--borrowed, ironically enough, from the brands themselves." While such a politicized consumerism represents a genuine form of empowerment, it also has serious drawbacks. "International solidarity," she writes, "is becoming so dependent on logos that these corporate symbols now threaten to overshadow the actual injustices in question. Talk about government, talk about values, talk about rights--that's all well and good, but talk about shopping and you might really get our attention." The danger of activism centered on exposing malign corporate logos is that such campaigns might "degenerate into glorified ethical shopping guides." Even when such moralism can be avoided, she continues, the antisweat movement essentially relies on civil society initiatives, corporate codes of conduct, and mechanisms of voluntary compliance. Such an approach represents "a haphazard and piecemeal mess of crisis management"; and it is antipolitical in its disregard of legal mechanisms and of the political power to change the law.

Klein's basic point, like Hart-Landsberg's, is that the antisweat movement is not necessarily as radical as its activists believe. These critics don't question the radical aspirations behind the movement. Indeed, their criticism seems geared toward helping the antisweat movement better to see the limits of its strategies so that it might over time better advance its radical objectives. Klein, for example, sees the antisweat movement as a tributary in a

larger stream of anticorporate efforts that together are beginning to form "a citizen-centered alternative to the rule of the brands." While she is quite wary of efforts prematurely to unify or impose discipline on these tributaries, she remains hopeful, indeed convinced, that this unification will come about.

But even once we have made the strategic corrections urged by sympathetic left critics, there are still two further reasons to be skeptical about the global significance of the antisweat movement.

The first regards the voluntarism that it shares with the anti-globalization movement more generally. The mobilization of public sentiment against corporate power has clearly produced impressive results. But it has thus far failed to generate any significant programmatic political alternative to the neoliberal status quo. Though the movement focuses much of its ire on the new hypermobility of capital, the anti-capitalist rhetoric of its leaders fails to appreciate what is truly new about post-Fordist accumulation and about postmodern politics and culture-- its flexibility and its fluidity. Flexible accumulation means more than the ability of capital to move wherever the conditions of exploitation are most favorable; it means the development of new networks of finance and production that simultaneously corrode the power of nation-states to regulate accumulation and the organic solidarities that have historically supported such forms of social democratic regulation. As Manuel Castells observes: "the social relationships between capital and labor are profoundly transformed. . . Labor is disaggregated in its performance, fragmented in its organization, diversified in its existence, divided in its collection action. Networks

converge toward a meta-network of capital that integrates capitalist interests at the global level and across sectors and realms of activity; not without conflict, but under the same overarching logic. Labor loses its collective identity, becomes increasingly individualized in its capacities, in its working conditions, and in its interests and projects. Who are the owners, who the producers, who the managers, and who the servants, becomes increasingly blurred in a production system of variable geometry, of teamwork, of networking, outsourcing, and subcontracting. . . " What Castells describes at the level of social structure is also analyzed by Richard Sennett at the level of social psychology--the "corrosion of character," the erosion of social and political identities, the development of a new ethos based on the premise of "no long term."

In such a society, politics increasingly becomes a sphere of appearances emptied of real content, centering on mediated spectacles and celebrity events and electoral campaigns organized on the logic of mass advertising. The dispiriting political consequence of these developments is nicely summed up by Zygmunt Bauman: "a situation in which sovereignties have become nominal, power anonymous, and its locus empty. If the traditional question 'What is to be done? . . . is asked ever less frequently, and if when asked it tends to be quickly dismissed on the ground of a TINA (There Is No Alternative) creed, this is not so much for the lack of ideas as it is [for lack of] agencies which could conceivably carry them out. The assessment of the feasibility of actions and the practicality of projects is a function of the relative strength of the agent and its adversary; and under present circumstances the main

question. . . [for] which no clear answer is in sight, is the query 'Is anybody capable of doing whatever needs to be done?'"

If this is right, the same social structures that produce the harms against which the antisweat movement work also function to undermine the possibility of a global opposition. Thus the absence of a politically powerful left within the advanced societies and within the world as a whole. Strangely, this is not a problem that has received much attention from the partisans of global anti-capitalist activism, for whom, it seems, corporations like Nike, Starbucks, and Microsoft are essentially no different than General Motors or U.S. Steel. Such corporations are attacked for their greed, but rarely analyzed in terms of their role in creating a new, post-industrial and post-materialist culture with global reach, that generates a politics of tactics and shifting alliances rather than of long-term strategies.

This analytic failure is ironic, for in some ways the diverse forms of anti-globalization activism, including the antisweat movement, are symptomatic of this new environment. For while these campaigns, boycotts, and demonstrations are usually quite emphatic about what they oppose--Nike factories, Starbucks cafes, IMF policies, WTO mandates--they project neither a compelling alternative vision nor a serious political movement capable of vying for political power. Naomi Klein notes this in her recent essay "Does Protest Need a Vision?" She points out that the new activist model "mirrors the organic, interlinked pathways of the internet." She treats this decentralized activity as "an ingenious adaptation to changes in the broader culture. . . Like the internet itself. . . [these

networks] are infinitely expandable systems. . . as with all things online, we are free to dip in and out, take what we want and delete what we don't. It is a surfer's approach to activism, reflecting the internet's paradoxical culture of extreme narcissism coupled with an intense desire for external connection." Klein notes the weakness of such activism: "there is no question that the communication culture which reigns on the net is better at speed and volume than at synthesis. It is capable of getting tens of thousands of people to meet on the same street corner, placards in hand, but it is far less adept at helping those same people to agree on what they are really asking for before they get to the barricades--or after they leave." Yet she credulously believes that it will produce a new anti-corporate "synthesis."

But Klein cannot have it both ways. If this style of activism is an adaptation to the culture, then the culture that forces such adaptations needs to be taken seriously: it resists precisely the kind of synthesis that she believes is necessary to oppose global capital. Klein cannot bring herself to draw this conclusion. She correctly criticizes those who disparage the new activism for what it is. But she wrongly refuses to accept it for what it is, and to recognize the anachronistic quality of much of its anticapitalist rhetoric. For while this rhetoric may represent a new form of hipness, and surely resonates with various tactics of "resistance," it does not resonate with the public at large or point toward a substantial political movement.

So there are good theoretical reasons to be skeptical of the more grandiose claims often made on behalf of the antisweat movement. For the prospects for a serious

alternative to corporate capitalism are quite dim. But there are equally important practical-strategic reasons to be skeptical: metanarratives about the anticapitalist significance of the antisweat movement are not simply misleading; they are positively unhelpful, misdescribing what actually has been accomplished, and setting unrealistic expectations. This problem is most evident in the vehemently anti-corporate rhetoric often voiced by USAS activists, epitomized by their denunciations of the FLA. The FLA, it is claimed, is a sham because it is corporate controlled. As one sympathetic journalist put it: "the FLA represents a compromise with corporations" that students and universities have no reason to make. The FLA is corporate controlled. And it is a good thing that USAS activists have pressed for the formation of the WRC as an alternative, for they are right to insist that corporations cannot be trusted objectively to monitor their own abuses. But the FLA is not a sham because it is corporate controlled, for we live in a corporate controlled economy. And, while antisweat activists might like to imagine that their hands are clean of "compromise" with corporations, this is not the case.

Consider some of the basic commitments of the WRC. First, it is committed to the investigation of worker complaints, which requires that contractors allow WRC monitors access to their factories. This can only be assured through some kind of negotiation with corporate management. Further, the WRC is committed to remedying labor abuses through negotiation with contractors, and it is opposed to a corporate strategy of "cutting and running" from factories in violation. But such remedies also require collaboration between the WRC's university members and

corporate managers, and some measure of trust among independent monitors, workers, and management. Indeed, the laudable WRC goal of empowering sweatshop workers to form independent unions also involves the establishment of regular collective bargaining arrangements between these unions and management. In each of these instances antisweat activists are correct to insist that there are serious conflicts of interest in play. But such conflicts are not inconsistent with negotiation or even with some forms of constructive, if mistrustful and wary, cooperation. The WRC, in short, is not anticorporate in function. It requires for its successful operation some working relationship with the corporations that it seeks to monitor and change. Perhaps this is why the Guatemalan worker organization COVERCO, a constituent member of the WRC Advisory Board, also belongs to the FLA. Michael Posner of the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights has been criticized for his organization's continued affiliation with the FLA, and his insistence that the WRC and the FLA are not necessarily mutually exclusive efforts. But his view makes much sense.

The truth of Posner's observation is evidenced by the labor crisis still unfolding in the Kukdong factory in Puebla, Mexico that produces sports apparel for Nike and Reebok. In Fall 2000 reports of labor abuses in the Kukdong factory began to circulate among antisweat activists. Soon thereafter four Kukdong workers contacted the WRC to outline these abuses and to request assistance. The allegations included low wages, unsafe working conditions, the use of child labor, and the physical maltreatment of workers. But the most serious abuse concerned the suppression of efforts to form an independent

union, the harassment and firing of union activists, the violent breaking of a strike, and the expulsion of the many hundreds of workers involved in the strike. Within a short period of time the WRC kicked into gear and USAS activists across the country publicized this incident and pressed universities to enforce their codes of conduct. In response to this pressure Nike and Reebok agreed to investigate the allegations. The WRC sent a team of investigators to Kukdong. The factory, at Nike's urging, eventually allowed this team access to the factory and its workers (unsurprisingly, confidential access to workers within the factory remained difficult, and the WRC investigatory team, while tolerated by management, was hardly welcomed). At the same time, Nike and Reebok sought some mediation of the labor conflict and an investigation of their own. They commissioned a Mexican labor attorney associated with the International Labor Rights Defense Fund to investigate and to open lines of communication with both management and workers. Nike, through the FLA, also commissioned Verite, a private monitoring organization, to undertake a more complete investigation of the Kukdong situation.

Events in Kukdong continue to unfold. But some conclusions are possible. First, the light focused on this incident by USAS activists and the WRC made a tremendous difference, and brought public and corporate attention to the issue that it would otherwise never have received. Second, a series of investigations were commenced and, while these diverged in some respects, they concurred that serious abuses had taken place and that remedies were necessary. Third, Nike and Reebok have taken some initiative--under serious pressure to be sure--to end shop

floor abuses, to have striking workers reinstated, and to make possible a relatively fair union election.

Nothing about this process has been perfect. In many respects the verdict is not in regarding change at Kukdong. And there can be no doubt that, to the extent that changes have been instituted or initiated, this is only because pressure has been brought to bear, by workers on the ground and by their antisweat supporters associated with the USAS, the WRC, and other solidarity groups. Nonetheless, pressure has been brought to bear, there is some forward movement, and USAS and the WRC can feel good about their role. The Kukdong situation was the first test for the WRC, and it passed the test. But it did not pass the test alone. A crucial role has been played by the International Labor Rights Fund, which belongs to FLA, but has an unquestioned legitimacy as an independent labor rights group. The FLA also played an important role, helping to broker the interest of Nike, Reebok and the local factory management, and supporting the ILRF involvement and the Verite investigation. And an important role has been played by Nike and Reebok, which have chosen to deflect bad publicity by taking (some kind of) remedial action. Indeed, in some ways the Kukdong process seems to epitomize the classic good cop, bad cop routine, with the FLA playing the good cop and the WRC playing the bad cop (with USAS functioning as the baddest of the bad), and factory management stuck between them.

Such strategies may not seem ideal for many antisweat activists, who may prefer a more antagonistic and ideological posture, in which the moral boundaries separating good and evil are more clearly drawn. Good cop/bad cop strategies do not and cannot produce dramatic

shifts in the balance of power between classes or dramatic improvements in the conditions of sweatshop workers. They are in many ways unedifying, especially when compared to more dramatic activities like picketing Starbucks cafes or demonstrating against the IMF. But they may be the most realistic way to assist sweatshop workers and to effect some improvement in sweatshop labor conditions in the absence of powerful political movements capable of advancing strong legislative agendas. For the antisweat movement is a partial, improvisational, and bootstrapping effort to develop a moral response to human indignity, and to effect marginal change in the labor conditions of workers for whom even marginal changes can make a world of difference. Indeed, student activists are to be credited for their pursuit of such a strategy, which has been developed in an intelligent way in spite of the discomfiting ideological compromises it has sometimes entailed. Where tensions between ideology and practicality have surfaced, USAS has opted for practicality--a sign, I would suggest, of its political maturity.

As applied in the Kukdong affair, this approach is a model for political activists and for intellectuals in the university. It shows that it is possible to carve out small but meaningful spaces of social responsibility and to work against specific injustices in solidarity with others, elsewhere, seeking to do the same. This is what the WRC represents and this is what USAS has helped to create. And this is good.

There is no global response to globalization. There are only partial responses, of the sort embodied in the WRC. The modesty I propose is not very inspiring. Activists often need to believe in a goal radically unlike

the present, to frame their activity around a grand narrative of good and evil, progress and reaction, what might be and what is. Teleology gives meaning to their efforts. The rhetoric of global anti-capitalism has long served this function, and for some it serves this function today. It is productive of much that is good. It may be necessary. But it is also misleading. It promotes a maximalist approach to the remedy of specific abuses, and it makes for moralism and binary thinking about alliances and strategies. It is too credulous about what it is possible to accomplish and about the power of righteous activism to effect progressive change. And it is also, alas, a failed rhetoric, without much appeal to those ordinary citizens at whom it is aimed. For these reasons, I believe that skepticism can contribute something important to current strategic discussions about the antisweat movement and its long term significance. It might promote a kind of intellectual and political flexibility that is supremely appropriate for the flexible times in which we live.

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