Preface

The Continuing Relevance of Progressive Student Activism in an Age of Right-Wing Populism

In this book, I examine the evolution of the strategy of the U.S. anti-sweatshop movement, focusing on the period from the mid-1990s to 2007 (when I conducted my research), with special attention to three groups organized, supported, or inspired by U.S. college students: United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC), and SweatFree Communities. USAS in particular was a dynamic force, taking advantage of the particularities of the social environment on college campuses to effectively advance the cause of workers’ rights in sweatshops around the world. In part, this book explores how the college campus facilitates such activism. While the vagaries of my life and career intervened between my research in 2007 and the publication of this book, my findings have much to tell us about activism today, particularly the continuing power and relevance of progressive student activism. This includes student activism on labor issues in a political climate in which right-wing populists seem to have co-opted much of the white working class in the United States. While I focus on USAS in this book, it is only one of the student activist groups that have leveraged the distinct features of college campuses to advance progressive causes. In fact, the college campus remains a crucial site for the advancement of social justice activism in response to the current resurgence of right-wing activism, even as conservative activists and political leaders work to make the campus a contested environment for progressives.
The case study of anti-sweatshop activism explored in this book is striking because it took place in a context in which the labor movement in the United States and globally had weakened. Indeed, the decline of organized labor has been intimately tied to the rise of sweatshops. The ability of business owners to move production from locations with strong labor unions, such as the northeastern United States, to sweatshops overseas, where unions were weak or nonexistent and labor laws were poor or unenforced, played a major role in undermining organized labor. In many cases, business owners were able simply to move sites of operation away from strong unions. Even when they did not physically relocate production, the threat of doing so could extract significant concessions from once strong unions. Even when sunk costs would, in reality, prevent business owners from relocating production, the threat of moving was a powerful management tool, since workers were in no position to know for sure whether such threats were empty or real (Anner 2011; Luce 2014; Moody 1997).

Moreover, in many places, including the United States, organized labor contributed to its own decline. Many labor leaders clung to models of unionization that, problematic even in their heyday, now actively undermined the labor movement’s ability to respond to these developments. In many cases, in the period following World War II and during the consolidation of the welfare state, the labor movement had ceased to be a true movement, growing close to and comfortable with those in power, both in business and in government. In the United States, this took the form of what is known as “business unionism,” where labor leaders saw the job of the unions not as challenging business and trying to alter the balance of class power in society, but as acting as its junior partner in a system of cross-class collaboration for the betterment of businesses and their employees. Most U.S. unions focused on ensuring that their members received benefits, such as health care, pensions, and higher wages, rather than concerning themselves with the fate of nonunionized members of the working class—one of the contributing factors to the lack of national health care in the United States today (Fantasia and Voss 2004; Luce 2014; Moody 1997).

In many developing countries, labor unions had a clientelist relationship with those in power, providing labor support in return for material benefits for the unions—but again without an alteration in the balance of class power. Labor union leaders would subordinate the union’s agenda to that of the state or an established political party, supporting their patrons by mobilizing people to vote for them in elections, rallying people behind
their policies, and such. In return, the union would be rewarded with various benefits from the elites controlling the state. In the better cases, frequently under authoritarian populist regimes, such benefits extended to all members of those labor unions that remained loyal to state power holders and resulted in an increased standard of living for much of the working class, but at the long-term cost of its demobilization and disempowerment. In the most corrupt cases, the benefits extended to only those in control of the union, with the rank and file left out in the cold as union leaders lined their pockets with members’ dues (Anner 2011; Moody 1997; Skidmore and Smith 2005).

Such accommodationist approaches, whether in the United States or the Global South, meant that, when business owners turned against organized labor, abandoning the old collaborative or clientelist relationships and attempting to undermine any power the unions held, old-guard labor leaders were unprepared to respond. Instead of developing new strategies, many old-guard union leaders further undermined the power of organized labor by clinging to models that no longer worked. In some cases, old-guard leaders were unable to grasp the scope of the situation, mistakenly believing that the assault by business on organized labor was a temporary phenomenon that would cease when the economy improved. In some cases, old-guard leaders may have feared that an innovative approach to unionism would result in loss of their power, with organizing drives bringing in new members who might vote in new leaders (Fantasia and Voss 2004; Luce 2014; Moody 1997).

There have been two responses to this crisis of organized labor. The first has consisted of various attempts from within to revitalize the labor movement, reform existing unions, start new unions, develop strategies that respond to the new circumstances labor finds itself in globally, and return organized labor to its roots as a social justice movement. The second has consisted of moves by right-wing populists to step into the void left by the decline of organized labor, co-opting elements of the working class by appealing to legitimate grievances and fears through scapegoating other vulnerable, marginalized social groups and empowering charismatic, authoritarian leaders—sometimes people drawn from the very class of business leaders actively undermining labor rights and the living standards of the working class. In the United States, this second trend is most obviously visible in the 2016 election of Donald Trump to the presidency with the support of large portions of the white working class, especially in the deindustrialized Rust Belt region. But Trump’s election is best understood as symptomatic of a wider trend that goes back decades before Trump became engaged in politics.
The revitalization of segments of organized labor as a labor movement is often referred to as “social movement unionism” or “community unionism.” In this conception of unions, labor leaders focus on aggressively organizing new constituencies—often groups that historically have been at the margins of both society and organized labor, such as women, people of color, and immigrants—while adopting new, more confrontational strategies to improve conditions for workers. To do so, labor unions increasingly partner with other progressive groups, including civil rights activists, progressive religious congregations, community organizing groups, and student activists. In such campaigns, the goal is not just to put in place policies that benefit union members but also to fight to protect members of the working class more broadly and build broad-based movements for social justice (Fantasia and Voss 2004; Luce 2014; Moody 1997). Although much of the discussion of social movement unionism has focused on the alliances built within the United States, for many segments of the labor movement, it has also included building new alliances globally, including supporting the anti-sweatshop movement and trying to raise labor standards for all workers globally (Luce 2014; Moody 1997). The activist groups that are the focus of this book—USAS, the WRC, and SweatFree Communities—are an important part of this global movement. The struggles of these groups and their allies to coordinate and strategize collectively must be understood as a central element of the growing movement to organize for workers’ rights worldwide. The dynamics of coordination among these various groups of protestors are therefore essential to understanding the workings of not only the student anti-sweatshop movement but also student movements and workers’ rights movements more broadly.

Even as labor activists and their allies seek to revitalize the labor movement, they must contend with the rise of right-wing populist movements that appropriate working-class grievances. This rise has been facilitated by the fact that many historically left-of-center parties—including the Democratic Party in the United States under the influence of the Democratic Leadership Council (the “New Democrats” such as Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, and Hillary Clinton)—have increasingly embraced the very neoliberal (“free market”) policies that undermine the standard of living of their working-class base and unions’ ability to exercise power, leaving many white working-class people disaffected and open to recruitment by the right. For instance, Democratic president Bill Clinton played a central role in the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement, which facilitated the movement of production by U.S. businesses to sweat-
shops in Mexico. This turn to the right by its traditional political allies has significantly weakened the U.S. labor movement and increasingly alienated working-class voters from the Democratic Party (Frank 2004; Fraser 2017).

This situation has helped right-wing populists capture the loyalty of white working-class people. Populist rhetoric and movements have a long history in the United States, on both the left and the right. Populism involves championing an ill-defined group, “the people,” who are characterized as producers—productive contributors to the economy—and pitting them against people who are characterized as nonproductive, parasitic members of society. While in left-wing populism activists defined large capitalists as nonproductive enemies of society, in right-wing populism capitalists are counted among the productive classes, as entrepreneurs and job creators. Right-wing populists have instead traditionally characterized socially marginalized groups such as poor people, people of color, and welfare recipients as idle and a drain on the nation’s resources. In the period following the social upheavals of the 1960s, right-wing populists also increasingly targeted vaguely defined, out-of-touch, amoral liberal elites as controlling the government, the media, and higher education and seeking to impose their values on ordinary, traditional Americans (Kazin 1995). Thus, populism and the contestation of who can speak for “the people” have a long history in the United States. Since the 1960s, student activist groups on both the left and the right have participated in this conflict. Therefore, understanding the successful strategies that campus activists have developed over the decades is important to considering the future of political activism and movement building in the United States.

In the 1970s, U.S. conservative leaders began harnessing right-wing populism as a way to undermine white working-class support for liberal policies. U.S. conservatism comprises several distinct but interwoven ideological strands. What unites them is not, contrary to common rhetoric, support for small government. Instead, as Sara Diamond (1995) argues, conservative politics involve opposition to the use of the state as a means of redistributing resources but support for a strong, even repressive, state in maintaining social order. For the purposes of this brief overview, the two most important elements of contemporary U.S. conservatism are free market libertarianism and moral traditionalism. The free market strand of conservative thought sees ownership of private property as the foundation of individual liberty. Therefore, the state should act to protect private property. However, libertarians view any taxation that goes beyond what is needed to provide this level of order and security as an immoral theft of people’s property. Thus, they oppose welfare programs and the like, which seek to foster some minimal redistribution of
resources to the poor. Moral traditionalists add to this a belief that the state should act to uphold traditional morality by promoting the central public role of religion, particularly Christianity, and conservative norms around gender roles and sexuality, such as opposition to abortion and gay marriage (Diamond 1995; Horwitz 2013).

The paradox of right-wing populism is that it represents itself as opposing the establishment while it actually supports many aspects of the political establishment and the historical privileges of the dominant social groups in U.S. society—for example, Christians, whites, men, heterosexuals, and those who are well-to-do (Dietrich 2014; Horwitz 2013). While right-wing populism is often represented as primarily a white working-class phenomenon, much of its leadership, in fact, comes from the white middle class. Nonetheless, it holds strong appeal for many white working-class people, who historically supported the Democratic Party and the protections for labor unions and working-class people that it promoted (Hardisty 1999). As the leadership of the Democratic Party moved to the right on economic issues, working-class people increasingly found little reason to support it. At the same time, by moving to the left on issues of race relations, gender roles, and sexuality—supporting affirmative action, abortion rights, gay rights, and so on—the Democratic Party leadership alienated many socially conservative white working-class people (Fraser 2017; Hardisty 1999). The New Democrats foolishly assumed that white working-class people would have nowhere else to go (Frank 2004). But, of course, many members of the white working and middle classes simply stopped voting. And others were drawn to right-wing populism, as conservative leaders tapped into the resentments of white working-class and downwardly mobile white middle-class people about the changing social terrain by appropriating the language of social conflict and anti-elitism that traditionally had been the territory of the left. The conservative leadership did so by scapegoating poor welfare recipients, people of color, immigrants, feminists, secular humanists, and LGBTQ people as the sources of the nation’s problems, including the economic hardships that downwardly mobile members of the working and middle classes increasingly faced (Fraser 2017; Hardisty 1999). Thus, right-wing leaders squared the circle of anti-establishment conservatism by falsely painting liberals and members of historically oppressed groups as the new establishment, threatening the rights and freedoms of socially conservative, Christian, heterosexual, white working- and middle-class people. They appealed to the sense of traditional morality among white working- and middle-class people—including respect for traditional, oppressive hierarchies of race, gender, religion, and the like—to secure their support for the very neoliberal economic
policies that undermined their economic security and left them feeling vulnerable and exploited by the elite.

It is worth stressing that, although some right-wing populist groups and leaders engage in explicit hate mongering, others do not. Even as conservative leaders play on privileged groups’ fears of the loss of their privileges, they often avoid the use of language that is explicitly bigoted and instead use language that is nominally inclusive. Instead of explicitly attacking people of color, for example, they use coded language that criticizes welfare recipients and urban crime, playing into negative stereotypes about blacks and Latinos. While they attack undocumented immigrants, they leave open the possibility that immigrants might become “real Americans” if they immigrated legally and assimilated culturally. This allows people in right-wing movements to view themselves as tolerant and inclusive, working for the common good (Dietrich 2014; Hardisty 1999). People who are drawn to right-wing populism typically feel as though liberal elites—people in federal government agencies, Hollywood, and academia—hold their adherence to conservative religious values on issues of gender and sexuality in contempt. In their view, having worked hard and played by the rules, they are entitled to a piece of the American dream of economic success. But, instead, even as the American dream becomes harder to achieve, they see liberal social policies as allowing other groups whom they view as not having worked as hard, such as immigrants and people of color, to cut in front of the line and leave white working- and middle-class people behind (Hochschild 2016b). While playing to this perception, right-wing populists in general, and President Trump in particular, set themselves up as saviors (Hochschild 2016a).

The solution to the growth of right-wing populism is progressive movement building, not only stressing issues of economic exploitation and class conflict but also incorporating broad-based considerations of how different forms of oppression interact and intersect. Activists need to emphasize that far from causing white working-class people’s economic hardship, poor people, welfare recipients, people of color, immigrants, and LGBTQ people are facing the same struggles. Such coalition building is hard work, but those who promote social movement unionism are already actively undertaking it. Student groups are often important partners in such coalitions.

In this context, progressive student activism, including that of groups such as USAS, is crucial. Despite the general rightward shift of politics in the country as a whole and the growth of populist conservative activism on college campuses in particular, often with the intent of quashing progres-
sive groups, the distinct characteristics of campuses facilitate progressive activism and progressive successes. On the one hand, college students have higher levels of “biographical availability” (McAdam 1986) than much of the population: because they are less likely to be constrained by family obligations and full-time jobs, they have more time for activism. On the other hand, college campuses in and of themselves help facilitate activism because they create a relatively self-contained social environment in which students can network with one another for the purpose of movement building. Strong norms of freedom of speech and association on college campuses also facilitate such activities. Finally, the relatively small scale of the campus and the tradition of open protest ease the way for college students to effectively pressure administrators to change campus policies.

Many progressive movement organizations in addition to USAS and other labor rights groups are active on college campuses in the United States—for example, Black Lives Matter and other civil rights groups, the feminist movement against sexual harassment and assault, immigrant rights groups, activists who support environmentalism and oppose climate change, and Palestinian rights groups.

Just as there has been right-wing backlash against progressive gains in U.S. society as a whole, the same has been true on college campuses. Right-wing populist groups are increasingly active on campus, with encouragement from national right-wing media and with funding and training from national organizations such as Turning Point USA and Campus Reform (Kolowich 2018). At the same time, the right has increasingly sought to silence and demobilize the left on campus. Ironically, these actions often take place under the banner of defending freedom of speech. Progressive activists are accused of engaging in disruptive and disrespectful behavior and of failing to conduct themselves in a way that is consistent with college campus standards of open dialogue and inquiry. When they protest against right-wing speakers on campus, the right accuses the left of trying to silence them and refusing to listen to alternative viewpoints. More generally, the right tries to paint a picture of the left as intolerant and puritanical in the promotion of “political correctness.” Palestinian rights activists in particular frequently face accusations of anti-Semitism. Increasingly, not only right-wing leaders but also members of the left-of-center establishment and college administrators demand that progressive student activists adhere to strict standards of civility. In some cases, college administrators seek to institutionalize these expectations in student codes of conduct. In practice, by depriving student groups of one of the main weapons of the weak—disruptive protest—these codes demobilize them,
silence them, and undermine their ability to achieve their goals (Brulé 2015; Sculos and Walsh 2016).

In spite of the increasingly hostile climate for progressive student activism, however, college campuses remain sites of relative freedom for students to organize, mobilize, engage in consciousness-raising, educate people more broadly, and protest (Crossley 2008; Lewis, Marine, and Kenney 2018). The reasons, which are twofold, are explored particularly but not exclusively in Chapters 3–5. First, a college campus is a relatively self-contained social environment whose small scale facilitates the mobilization of people and access to the authorities. Second, despite the fact that college campuses are relatively self-contained environments, they and their administrations have numerous—though in many cases, not immediately visible—social ties with other organizations and institutions. These are pressure points through which students can leverage their power to effect change off campus. This book explores colleges’ connections to the apparel industry through the licensing programs that give companies the right to produce garments that display a school’s name and logo—ties that USAS has leveraged to put in place codes of conduct that mandate that the companies that produce such licensed apparel must be in compliance with labor standards. USAS is only one of the progressive movements on campus that have used the enclosed campus environment to leverage such ties.

Much student activism is an extension of campaigns in the wider society—for labor rights, against sexual harassment and assault, and for immigrants’ rights. The relatively contained environment of the college campus facilitates experimentation with and institutionalization of new social practices. One example is USAS’s fight for labor rights on campus, for both adjunct faculty and campus workers, such as cafeteria and security staff. Although USAS started with a focus on sweatshops overseas—the focus of this book—over time, adopting a more expansive understanding of sweatshops, the organization identified fighting on-campus labor abuses as within its mission. This fight has taken a variety of forms. For instance, USAS initiated a campaign to have colleges discontinue their contracts with Sodexo, a company that provides cafeteria services, which was cited for its union busting and abusive treatment of workers (Grasgreen 2011). Other actions include supporting on-campus unionization efforts and the Fight for 15 campaign by pushing for a $15-an-hour minimum wage on campus (United Students Against Sweatshops n.d.[a], n.d.[c]). In addition, USAS has worked with groups such as New Faculty Majority to pressure schools to give adjuncts greater job security and a living wage and has sup-
ported adjuncts’ unionization drives (Flaherty 2013a, 2013b; Schmidt 2013; United Students Against Sweatshops n.d.[b]). All of these campaigns endeavor to raise labor standards within the contained environment of the college campus, not just for the sake of campus workers and adjunct faculty but also to raise standards nationally.

Another student activist attempt to use the contained social environment of college campuses to advance nationwide progressive goals is the effort to push administrators to declare their college campuses sanctuaries for undocumented immigrants. Creating a sanctuary campus involves putting in place policies to support undocumented students, ranging from offering financial assistance (since such students cannot receive federal financial aid) and providing legal counseling to barring Immigration and Customs Enforcement from entering campus without a warrant. Administrations at many schools have been responsive to activists’ demands, even as some have refused to use the term “sanctuary campus” to prevent false expectations about the extent to which they can protect undocumented students (Kelderman 2017; Najmabadi 2016a, 2016b; Redden 2016a, 2016b, 2018). Whatever the limits of such protection may actually be, this movement is leveraging the well-defined administrative boundaries of the college campus to create a social environment where undocumented students enjoy a greater degree of support and protection than they have off campus. This effort, in turn, counters the increasing normalization of xenophobia in the wider society.

Another campaign that uses the college campus as a cultural incubator for more progressive social mores is the push for affirmative consent—“yes means yes”—to become the new norm for sexual interactions on campus, with students expected to obtain clear verbal or physical consent before engaging in sexual acts. These activists view the existing “no means no” standard as placing the burden on the victim of sexual assault to speak out at a time when fear or shock may hinder this response (New 2014; Wilson 2016). Despite some inconsistency in the way students, especially male students, interpret which signals mean “yes” (Flaherty 2017), this standard has become increasingly normalized at many colleges. The ground this standard has gained on college campuses and the rise of the national #MeToo movement against sexual harassment and assault have led legislatures in many states to consider making affirmative consent the legal standard for all adults (Beitsch 2018). This is another example of how changing norms on college campuses can serve as a beachhead for changing norms in the wider society.

Other examples of student activism more closely parallel the campaigns that are the focus of this book, the efforts by USAS to use colleges’
institutional ties with apparel companies to force them to respect workers’ rights. Student activists championing a variety of causes have sought to pressure administrators to use investment funds as a point of economic leverage—just as they used their licensing agreements with apparel companies—by divesting from industries and businesses that contribute to social ills, such as the private prison and gun industries (S. Brown 2015). One of the most prominent examples is environmental activists’ push to have colleges and universities (along with churches, city governments, foundations, and other organizations) divest from fossil fuel companies as part of a wider strategy in their fight against climate change. Even if such divestment has only a modest financial impact on fossil fuel companies, it helps to highlight expanding fossil fuel extraction and stigmatize fossil fuel companies (Gitlin 2016; Marklein 2015). Another example is the campaign to push colleges to divest from companies that are complicit in Israel’s occupation of the Palestinian territories, such as Caterpillar, which sells equipment to the Israeli military that it uses to destroy Palestinian civilians’ homes (Horowitz and Weiss 2010; Kurwa 2015).

College campuses may be relatively self-contained social environments that facilitate student activism, but they are not socially isolated. Student activists can use colleges’ cultural and organizational connections to the wider society to push for broader social change, with the campus as a launching point for expanded social leverage. While student activism alone will not end the dominance of right-wing populism in U.S. politics, college campuses provide important sites for activist battles that can help expand the progressive movement in the United States. Labor rights groups such as USAS can play an important role in rebuilding the U.S. labor movement and U.S. labor unions. To challenge the appeal of right-wing populism, progressive labor unions must challenge the power of an increasingly reactionary capitalist class and its hold over the nation’s political leadership in both major parties. They must tap into people’s discontent by presenting a progressive populist message and mobilize people against the increasing economic and social inequalities. To do so, they must build alliances with a broad range of groups through social movement unionism. USAS and other groups provide a vehicle for college students to take part in this coalition-building process. This study examines some of the major mechanisms these students employ to organize and strategize in coordination with other progressive groups.
The Creation of the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC)

Innovation in Action: Crafting the WRC

Having analyzed why exactly the U.S. anti-sweatshop movement found the Fair Labor Association so problematic, we can now look into how the movement responded to its formation, our first major cycle of innovation. This process produced the Worker Rights Consortium, a genuinely independent monitoring organization whose creation added a significant new layer to the strategy of the corporate campaign (discussed in Chapter 4) on which anti-sweatshop activists had been relying to pressure apparel firms. According to Eric Brakken (interview), USAS’s first staff person, the WRC was originally simply a paper proposal, meant as a conceptual alternative to the FLA, but it took on a life of its own as it became the focal point of the movement’s response to the apparel industry.

As with many strategic innovations by social movements, the development of the WRC was spurred by the obstacles the movement encountered. The USAS member Jess Champagne (interview) spoke about the student group’s main motivation for creating the WRC:

We felt that it was important to have something clear to offer to universities that would counter-balance [the FLA]. [. . .] The universities were telling us that they were going to join the FLA. We thought that the more universities joined, the more effective it would be in covering up what was actually happening on the ground. So we decided that we needed to make a clear alternative
that would bring universities together, that would have an impact on sweatshops.

The student activists saw the FLA as a barrier to the effective use of the corporate campaign strategy. An important part of corporate campaigns is delegitimizing the target, especially in the case of companies such as Nike and Adidas, for which their brand image is their primary asset—and thus one of their most vulnerable points of attack. As discussed in the previous chapter, the FLA, with its façade of social responsibility and involvement of multiple stakeholders, did much to enhance the legitimacy of the member corporations. USAS believed that by designing an alternative to the FLA that was truly an independent monitoring organization, it could undermine the FLA’s legitimacy. Such an alternative would also strengthen the position of the anti-sweatshop movement, both in the framing contest that was ongoing in the national media and in bargaining with college administrators. If it did not want colleges to join the FLA, USAS had to be able to present journalists and school officials with another option.

It is likely, however, that, even without the formation of the FLA the student anti-sweatshop movement eventually would have been pushed to create something like the WRC. The USAS member Thomas Wheatley (interview) recalls, “At the beginning we were really focused on disclosure. [We thought] we just needed to have the names of the factor[ies]; that if we had the names of those factories, people all over the world would bring up the list, look up those factories,” and undertake the monitoring and investigations themselves. Local labor rights groups, however, were not likely to get easy access to the places they wanted to inspect simply because the factory was on a list that said it was producing for certain colleges that had codes of conduct. Factory owners would have little incentive to admit such groups to their facilities, particularly if they did have something to hide. USAS’s various organizational mentors saw the problems with leaving monitoring to local groups before the students did. Wheatley (interview) said:

The more we dug into it, the more we understood. The more students went to visit [and] did research, the more information we got from our allies in the movement. Nikki [Bas of Sweatshop Watch], Medea [Benjamin of Global Exchange], Charlie [Kernaghan of the NLC], and other folks [said], “This is great, but what are you going to do next? How are you going to do this? We need to talk about how we enforce these codes. This is really fabulous. Congratulations, kids! Now comes the hard part.”
The WRC thus represented an alternative not only to the FLA but also to monitoring by individual schools, none of which—including the wealthiest universities—had the resources or expertise to properly monitor the implementation of their codes of conduct. By pooling the resources of member schools, the consortium would have the ability to monitor the implementation of its codes in a way no school could have managed on its own, no matter how serious it was about doing so.

Without this pooling of resources, it would have been considerably harder for USAS to use the leverage it had over the schools to exercise leverage, in turn, over the lead apparel firms. It was one thing for students to pressure their schools’ administrations into adopting codes of conduct. It was another for that to translate into pressure on the schools’ business partners to change their actual conduct. For this to work, a critical mass of schools needed to put pressure on the lead apparel firms to mend their ways. As discussed below, when the campaign for the WRC first began, Nike responded by canceling its contracts with a number of schools that had joined the consortium. But later, when a sufficient number of schools had joined the WRC, Nike found itself compelled to respond to students’ demands that it put pressure on its contractors to allow workers to unionize in cases such as the Kukdong factory in Mexico in 2001 (see Chapter 11). College students were too important to Nike’s marketing strategy to just cut out that major section of the market because of monitoring programs that the company believed impinged on its ability to operate freely. Instead, Nike at times had to concede to pressure from students via their schools. The WRC itself, it should be noted, did not engage in protest actions, but their shared membership in the consortium facilitated collective action by member schools to pressure their licensees, even if many schools did so only under pressure from their students.

The existence of the WRC not only facilitated USAS’s ability to apply leverage to apparel firms. It also was crucial in conflicts over the legitimacy of the movement versus the industry. By refraining from engaging in protest, engaging only in monitoring and remaining independent not only from corporations but also from labor unions, the WRC avoided any appearance of a conflict of interest. The WRC’s factory inspections were thorough compared with the FLA’s, taking place over several weeks or even months and using local and international experts. This gave its reports a great deal of legitimacy, which meant they could potentially damage a company’s brand image a good deal. USAS could then draw on this legitimacy, using the WRC’s reports to justify its protests and giving the group more power to pressure school administrations and apparel companies.
The process of designing the WRC involved consultations among a wide range of groups in the anti-sweatshop movement, working more or less through consensus. Brakken (interview) noted, “By this time, the students [. . .] were the group that all the other anti-sweatshop groups were paying attention to. We were the grassroots energy happening around the country.” Thus, USAS had many allies who wanted to work closely with it to design the response to the FLA. This pattern of a wide range of groups working together to coordinate campaigns and develop new strategic innovations is seen repeatedly in the history of the movement. As discussed in Chapter 1, having such a wide range of groups involved—and thus, people with a wide range of knowledge and experience—strengthened the movement’s ability to innovate creatively (Ganz 2000, 2009; McCammon 2003, 2012) as it designed the consortium.

The people involved in crafting the WRC—both students and veteran anti-sweatshop activists—held a series of conference calls, paid for by UNITE, and met face-to-face immediately before USAS’s official founding conference in July 1999 (Brakken and Wheatley interviews). The relationship between the student wing of the movement and the veteran activists was a complex one. As USAS member Nick Reville (interview) recalled, the more experienced activists were trying to take sort of a backseat role because they didn’t want to be seen as dominating student movements; they wanted the students to have autonomy. But in a lot of cases, they were the people that we were getting our information from. How do we even know what’s happening in these countries? We know through other organizations. [. . .] We needed those groups. We needed their professional expertise [and] their understanding of what we are trying to do.

One thing worth noting is that the groups involved at this stage were all based in the United States. The workers with whom USAS sought to act in solidarity were not directly involved in designing the WRC. All of the more established groups, however, had extensive contacts with labor unions and labor rights organizations in the Global South; drawing on these ties, they were able to relay the concerns and priorities of Third World activists to the USAS members involved in designing the WRC. The USAS member Laura McSpedon (interview) told me, “I just remember feeling that the NGO partners—like Global Exchange, the National Labor Committee and Sweatshop Watch—they were the people with the relationships on the ground in other countries, and that was the key to making this happen.” At the same
time, some individual USAS members did have their own ties to groups representing sweatshop workers. The USAS member Alyssa Caine (interview) said:

There are some people in USAS that had their own relationships. Marion Traub-Werner took [two years] off and worked for STITCH [a group building bridges among female workers in Central America and the United States], so she had contacts. […] Miriam [Joffe-Block] really helped forge a lot of the relationships in Thailand as a USAS activist who got a Fulbright and spent time there. Agatha [Schmaedick] spoke Bahasa Indonesian and decided to go to Indonesia and had some relationships there.

Despite this, USAS had no institutional ties with groups in the Global South. As Chapters 11 and 12 show, this changed as the movement grew. USAS would develop close, consistent ties with groups abroad, and these groups would come to be more directly involved in planning by USAS and its allies.

As one might expect, given the circumstances, the discussion among anti-sweatshop activists as they designed the WRC was very much shaped by the FLA in the sense that the WRC emerged out of critiques of the FLA. The substance of these critiques, however, was shaped by the movement’s ideology. One area where this is clear is in the movement’s understanding of the main cause of sweatshops lying in the structure of the apparel industry and the need of companies—both lead firms and contractors—to maximize profits. The most obvious aspect of this was the strong belief of all of the groups involved that corporations should have no role in the governance or funding of the WRC. This reflected not simply a desire for the WRC to appear independent and thereby have more legitimacy. As discussed in the previous chapter, according to USAS’s analysis, it was sweatshops’ centrality to the apparel industry’s profit strategy that prevented the apparel companies from taking the steps needed to eliminate sweatshops. Including corporations in the WRC would have undermined activists’ ability to design the organization so that it emphasized enabling rights, such as freedom of association, alongside protective rights.

Activists’ understanding of the structural and therefore pervasive nature of sweatshops also shaped the strategy they designed for the WRC’s inspections—specifically, what they called the “fire alarm” model of monitoring (see Chapter 10). According to Brakken (interview):

One of the things the FLA wanted to do [was] put a tag on the clothing saying it was sweatshop-free or FLA-approved. […] The debate
within the anti-sweatshop movement around the FLA was whether a label would actually work. Could a product actually be certified sweatshop-free? [. . .] So I think part of the framework of the WRC came out of the [realization that] there’s thousands of factories around the world; we’re a limited organization; we’re never going to be able to have a permanent presence that would actually be able to certify these factories. [. . .] The WRC was [. . .] primarily set up to respond to workers’ complaints and to be reactive, instead of proactive. I think that was a result of those early debates.

The WRC has not historically certified factories as sweat-free or given them a seal of approval, although this began to change with the design of the Designated Suppliers Program. Activists feared that this would create the illusion that a monitoring program alone, rather than a restructuring of the apparel industry and the fostering of independent labor unions, could prevent sweatshops.

This interpretive-analytic process of evaluating the limitations of the FLA through the lens of the movement’s ideology of worker empowerment using a deliberative, participatory process resulted not only in a better design for the monitoring organization but also in the deepening of that ideology. Reflecting on the significance of this process for himself, and for many of the others involved, particularly students but also their NGO partners, Brakken (interview) said:

Going through some of those questions, it definitely changed my worldview around. I hadn’t really thought about the long-term vision of how people would be empowered. The question isn’t whether American consumers are going to be able to dictate the needs of the apparel workers in China or El Salvador. The questions are whether Salvadoran or Chinese workers have their own needs that need to be dealt with and need a good way to deal with that stuff. At that point at time, for some people, it was a little bit of a learning curve. [. . .] It definitely affected a lot of students’ worldviews.

What Brakken and the others involved in designing the WRC ultimately concluded was that the end goal was not simply to create a U.S.-based monitoring organization but to create an organization that could help foster “a permanent organization of workers who could monitor [the factory] themselves on a day-to-day basis. That’s called a union” (Brakken interview). In other words, guaranteeing enabling rights alongside protective rights became central to the WRC’s mission through this process of reflection. It
The Creation of the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC) was an issue that not only the students “had to grapple with; [. . .] the other organizations [. . .] had to do it, too” (Brakken interview).

Over the course of these discussions, the participants developed a “white paper” that outlined a case for why [the WRC] was necessary, a case for why this was possible, and some principles, like monitors ought to be independent, they ought to be within or connected to the local community, and workers ought to be interviewed off-site, and those kind of things. (Wheatley interview)

On October 19, 1999, USAS made its white paper and the WRC public, calling on all colleges and universities to withdraw from the FLA and join the consortium (Greenhouse 1999c). The WRC’s founding conference was planned for April 2000. In January 2000, the network of anti-sweatshop organizations hired Maria Roeper (interview) to bring the organization to life before the April conference.

What the creation of the WRC did was add a new element to corporate campaigns, with its monitoring program working in a way that bolstered the legitimacy of the movement and undermined that of the industry. The movement had made limited use of independent monitors before, but such monitors were the outcome of a successful campaign, designed to keep an eye on one or a limited number of factories, when a deal was reached with a company to make sure it lived up to its commitments to activists (Armbruster-Sandoval 2005; Esbenshade 2004b), not a strategic element within a campaign. (Strikingly, none of my interviewees referred to these previous monitoring agreements when they discussed the creation of the WRC.) The WRC changed how independent monitors operated as an element of the anti-sweatshop movement. Although they did not engage in protest campaigns, the WRC’s staff’s independent monitoring and verification of workers’ complaints of abuse provided valuable legitimacy to the claims of those who were protesting, since they could point to the work of a relatively neutral third party to back up their claims. This is particularly important in getting school administrators to agree to sanction their licensees, since such officials are usually reluctant to damage their relationships with their business partners.

The Campaign for the WRC

Simply because the WRC was potentially a better monitoring organization than the FLA did not mean schools were going to sign on to it. As dis-
cussed in Chapter 3, most school administrators have close relations with major corporations through interlocking boards of directors. They also value their commercial contracts with corporations such as Nike and Reebok and were loath to offend them by taking action such as signing on to an organization designed by some of their most vocal critics. The USAS member Caroline Stoppard (interview) noted:

> It was something that was proposed by student activists, and universities were being asked to commit tens of thousands of dollars to an organization that was basically designed to go around and embarrass their business partners that had sweatshop conditions in their factories. But somehow we got them to do it.

Another obstacle, as we saw in the previous chapter, was that many school administrators seemed genuinely to believe that the major apparel firms were truly interested in ending the sweatshop exploitation of workers and that it was important to work cooperatively with them in doing so.

USAS therefore was going to have to pressure the school leaders to sign on to an alternative approach, using the same confrontational tactics as were necessary to get schools to adopt codes of conduct in the first place. At the same time, USAS would have to fight a framing battle with the major apparel firms, contesting the legitimacy of the FLA versus the WRC’s approach to monitoring factories for sweatshop conditions, each side claiming that its approach would be more effective. USAS was thus in the position of fighting simultaneously battles with their own schools’ administrations in the social arenas of college campuses across the country and with apparel corporations in the arena of the national mass media.

The 1999–2000 school year was marked by another wave of intensive student activism, again culminating in a wave of sit-ins in the spring semester, with the goal of compelling school officials to join the WRC prior to its official founding conference in April. According to Caine (interview):

> Students took that founding conference as an opportunity for their campaign. They built sit-ins and hunger strikes and all that stuff around the founding conference, saying, “We want our colleges and universities to join the Worker Rights Consortium before the founding conference.” It became a kind of deadline.

It was also intended as an incentive to the schools: if they took part in the conference, they could play some role in shaping the WRC (Caine interview).
In pressuring college administrations to join the WRC, USAS used the same range of tactics and the same strategy of escalation it had used in its campaigns for the codes of conduct over the previous two school years. It had the problem, however, of convincing administrators to join an organization that, unlike the FLA, did not actually exist and had no significant financial backing. This created a major legitimacy deficit. According to Reville (interview):

It was this bootstrapping thing—how do you go from nothing to something? We needed schools to sign on, but they wanted to sign on to something. So we were basically trying to convince them to sign on to this document that nobody had signed on to. It was like agreeing to join an organization that didn’t exist. It was kind of a funny situation, but we had to do that in order for [the WRC] to start existing.

The first school to officially join the WRC was, in fact, Reville’s (interview): own school, Brown University. This struggle had actually begun in the spring of the previous school year, when students began pressing President E. Gordon Gee to withdraw from the FLA. Reville recounted:

We went to them and said, “OK, here’s the issues we have with the FLA—we want you to withdraw.” And then we said, “Okay, how about if they don’t make improvements on these issues in the next six months, then we’ll withdraw.” And I think we said that because we felt like we did not have an alternative to offer, so just saying, “Let’s pull out,” was not as credible as that might be. So they agreed to [the six-month test period].

Of course, after six months the FLA had not improved at all, but Reville and the other USAS members at Brown now had the proposal for the WRC to present as an alternative. The Brown students used Gee’s promise to withdraw from the FLA and the threat of a sit-in as leverage to force him to come to an agreement. They settled on a compromise, in which Brown would remain in the FLA but also join the WRC (Reville interview). Gee made this public on October 19, 1999, the same day the anti-sweatshop network officially released the WRC white paper, inviting schools to join (Marklein 1999).

Within USAS, the compromise the Brown students struck with Gee was controversial. Reville said:
I think there were a lot of people at other schools that thought that was a bad idea and felt that it furthermore set a bad precedent. [. . .] To me it seemed like it was much more important to get schools into the WRC rather than getting them out of the FLA. Even if you got all the schools that had USAS chapters out of the FLA, you still would have had a bunch of random schools in it—and it would still have that legitimacy of having schools in it. [. . .] I think getting that first school on was crucially important. It’s not clear what would have happened if we hadn’t gotten on there, because I know that a lot of [USAS chapters] used us as an example and relied on us in order to get their school to sign on. I think especially being able to take advantage of this Ivy League cachet, that was always something that helped other schools.

The first few colleges and universities to join the WRC after Brown were also small Ivy League schools. By mid-February 2000, with the WRC’s founding conference less than two months away, only Bard College, Loyola University in New Orleans, and Haverford College had also signed on (O’Neill 2000). While their Ivy League status lent the WRC legitimacy, these schools gave the students little leverage over the major apparel firms, because their licensing programs were either small or nonexistent (with only procurement programs instead). What the movement needed as a next step was for some of the major sports schools to sign on, which would put far more pressure on the big apparel companies. On February 15, 2000, USAS chapters on many campuses began to systematically step up the pressure on their administrators. As a result, they netted their first three big sports schools: the University of Indiana, University of Michigan, and UW Madison. This did not happen without significant confrontation, It took sit-ins at Michigan and Wisconsin and the threat of one in Indiana (backed up by news reports of sit-ins elsewhere) to get the schools’ administrators to agree (Caine and Stoppard interviews). According to Caine (interview):

The administrators talked together, and they then affiliated with the WRC at the same time, all together. I think it was fear of going it alone and going up against Nike specifically and the fact those Big Ten schools were able to join together, I think, made it possible for them join. That was a big boost to the credibility of the [WRC].

According to Roeper (interview), the WRC “went from three to forty-four schools” between January and the April founding conference, with the
Neither the FLA nor the apparel industry reacted positively or passively to these developments. Their primary response was to try to frame the issue in a way that allowed them to maintain the moral high ground both in the arena of the national mass media and with college and university officials within the arenas of college campuses. While representing themselves as respectful of the students’ efforts, various groups affiliated with the FLA argued that the WRC would have neither the resources nor the reach to properly engage in monitoring. They argued that including the companies in the FLA gave it the necessary means to monitor effectively (Greenhouse 1999c). Roberta Karp of Liz Claiborne said, “You need buy-in from the people who have a stake in this. [. . .] Corporations have a stake in protecting their names and making sure the facilities they contract with are operated fairly, efficiently and effectively” (quoted in Snyder 2000, B1). Some companies, such as Liz Claiborne and Reebok, claimed to be well ahead of USAS in terms of fighting sweatshops, pointing to their own CSR programs as evidence (Krupa 1999; Snyder 2000).

Representatives of the apparel industry also objected to the lack of corporate involvement in the WRC and its policy of unannounced inspections. Vada Manager of Nike said:

We object to the Workers [sic] Rights Consortium because it does not provide a seat on the table for companies. [. . .] Another issue is it has a “gotcha” monitoring system, which in our minds is not a serious way to achieve the common goal that we all want to achieve, which is to eradicate sweatshop conditions. (Quoted in Greenhouse 2000a, A16)

Here again, as in the previous chapter, we can see the lead apparel corporations using CSR programs as a means to avoid and obfuscate the real issue—the structure of the industry whose commanding heights they control—while presenting the appearance of caring about and trying to solve the problem of sweatshops. They tried to make the case not only that they were willing to be partners in the quest to end sweatshops but also that without their involvement—and on their own terms—the movement could not succeed.

Nike was not only particularly vocal in its criticisms of the WRC as it attempted to reframe the issue but also took countermeasures that went beyond those of other companies. In April 2000, the company began actively retaliating against schools that joined the WRC—specifically Brown
University, the University of Michigan, and the University of Oregon. Nike started by canceling its contracts with Brown and Michigan (Asher and Barr 2000; Greenhouse 2000b), the latter of which was a Big Ten sports school whose “contract extension would have been worth between $22 million and $26 million over six years. [. . .] That would have made it the most lucrative such deal in college sports history” (Asher and Barr 2000, A1). In the case of Oregon, the retaliation was of a more personal sort. Nike’s president Phil Knight was an alum of Oregon, and over the years he had donated $50 million to the school. In response to the university’s decision to join the WRC, Knight canceled the donation of an additional $30 million he had pledged (Asher and Barr 2000; Greenhouse 2000a, 2000b). Even as the students were exercising leverage over their administrations through sit-ins, Nike was trying to exercise its own leverage by pulling out of licensing agreements that school officials valued.

On one level, Nike’s retaliation seems to have been successful. The University of Oregon’s administration, which had never been very committed to the WRC, soon withdrew from the organization (Steffan interview). On another level, however, it backfired. According to Caine (interview):

> It brought more attention to the issue and gave the WRC a different legitimacy, too. [. . .] This is the Worker Rights Consortium. It’s just a small organization starting up. There was nothing to say that they were going to be able to do anything, but if Nike’s going to cancel a $30 million [donation] over it, then it makes it seem like they really could do something. So that was a bad campaign strategy for them to try to prevent the WRC from going forward. It made the WRC look more legitimate, not less.

Nor did Nike’s decision cause Michigan or Brown to withdraw from the WRC. Michigan, in fact, made a lucrative deal with Nike’s rival, Adidas (Steffan interview).

**The Foundation of the WRC**

Even as this campaign was unfolding, Roeper was doing the work needed to prepare for the organization’s founding conference, including setting up an office and finding a fiscal sponsor for the grant that had already been secured for the WRC. But her job involved more than just paperwork. She had to establish a distinctive identity for the WRC so that it was clear that it was autonomous not only from the apparel industry but also from USAS
and the labor movement, particularly UNITE. “I was supposed to be in the role of establishing an organization with the credibility of a research organization, not an activist one,” she said. This was necessary to create a group that colleges and universities would feel comfortable joining, one that they felt they had some ownership of and that was not simply the tool of the student activists who had been occupying their offices or a labor union such as UNITE, which many administrators saw as having dubious, protectionist motives (Rooper interview).

At the same time, the activists involved in creating the consortium wanted to ensure that it remained true to its original purpose. Thus, according to Wheatley (interview), the group drafting

the initial framework for the bylaws, which was probably all of three paragraphs, [. . .] wrote it intentionally to make sure that universities would never have a majority of their own; they would have to share power with external advocates, who were not the most radical of them. It wasn’t UNITE or Charlie Kernaghan [of the National Labor Committee] but Kate Pfordscher [of the People of Faith Network], David Schilling [of the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility], and folks like that.

The founding conference took place on April 7, 2000. Attendees were organized into three caucuses—USAS members; an advisory board consisting of advocates and scholars who had long been involved in the anti-sweatshop movement, including representatives of groups from the Global South; and college and university administrators. Members of each caucus were to elect members to the WRC’s board of directors and four working groups that would finalize the bylaws and help define the details of the WRC’s policies. The conference itself consisted of a day-long meeting, featuring a panel of activists and scholars who had been instrumental in creating the WRC, taking questions from the audience about how, exactly, the consortium would work and what the working groups’ tasks would be (United Students Against Sweatshops 2000). The situation was an unusual one, because in this forum the anti-sweatshop activists were clearly in command of the situation. While USAS and its allies were well organized, the college and university administrators were meeting with one another for the first time; they had to request more time to organize themselves and decide how they would elect members from their caucus to the governing board and working groups (Featherstone 2002; United Students Against Sweatshops 2000).

School officials also had concerns about various aspects of the WRC,
raising a number of issues with the presiding panel. Some were basic ques-
tions about how the advisory board’s membership had been selected. Oth-
ers were about how much the proposed structure of the WRC was open to 
change. College and university administrators were particularly concerned 
that the consortium be open to engaging in dialogue with major apparel 
firms and that USAS’s firm anti-FLA position not be that of the WRC. 
Many schools also belonged to the FLA, with officials from those schools 
arguing that the goal should be to reform the association, not undermine 
it. The panel explained that many of the details of the WRC were open to 
negotiation and that the consortium was certainly open to dialogue with 
industry; certain core features, however, were not negotiable, such as the 
absence of industry representation on the WRC’s board to avoid compro-
mising its independence. The panelists also indicated that USAS’s anti-FLA 
position was its own and would not be the position of the consortium. At 
the request of one school official, the number of working groups was ex-
panded from four to five to address some of these concerns (United Stu-
dents Against Sweatshops 2000). As the chapters that follow show, the 
WRC did indeed maintain a cordial relationship with apparel companies 
and the FLA, engaging them in dialogue and working with them, as long as 
doing so did not compromise its principles.

Through the founding conference and the working groups, college ad-
ministrators were able to have some role in shaping the WRC—and thus 
to develop a stake in the organization—but in a way that the consortium 
remained true to the ends for which the anti-sweatshop movement had 
created it. The bylaws were finalized by late 2000, and the board hired 
Scott Nova as the WRC’s executive director.

The next chapter looks at the organization of the WRC and its fire 
alarm approach to monitoring sweatshops. Subsequent chapters look at 
the international work that the WRC, USAS, and other anti-sweatshop or-
ganizations have accomplished in collaboration with groups in the Global 
South. What we have seen unfolding in the past few chapters is a conflict 
between the anti-sweatshop movement, on one side, and the apparel in-
dustry and the FLA, on the other, made up of a series of strategic moves 
and countermoves by the social actors involved, each trying to exert lever-
age and legitimacy against other social actors, including not only one an-
other but also college officials.

In the crafting of the WRC as an innovative, strategic response to the 
FLA, we have also seen in this chapter the dialectic between ideology and 
experience that is at the heart of the development of strategy by social 
movements. The U.S. anti-sweatshop movement had been taking action 
based on its existing strategy of corporate campaigns and seeking new
points of leverage over the apparel industry—in particular, experimenting with codes of conduct for college licensees as a means to this end. As it did so, it ran up against obstacles: the realization of the impracticality of relying solely on local labor rights groups to carry out monitoring and the apparel industry’s formation of what USAS saw as a deeply problematic monitoring organization in response to the movement. The movement then took the time to analyze its experiences, reflecting on them in light of its ideology of worker empowerment. It did so collectively, drawing together activists from a range of groups, with different constituencies, experiences, and networks, thus greatly broadening the range of insight it could draw on, far beyond what any one individual or group would have brought to the table alone. In doing so, the anti-sweatshop movement generated a new strategic innovation—not simply the WRC as an organization, but a new model of monitoring that could complement the existing model of corporate campaigns. It also deepened its understanding of worker empowerment and its relevance to the anti-sweatshop struggle, coming to understand that monitoring would never be enough and that workers needed to be able to exercise voice and power through their own organizations.