Where are the Workers in Consumer-Worker Alliances? Class Dynamics and the History of Consumer-Labor Campaigns

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This article surveys the history of labor- and middle-class-sponsored efforts to mobilize shopping on behalf of working people from the late nineteenth century through the present. It analyzes the class dynamics of these movements to, first, underscore workers' own ability to mount consumer campaigns and, second, critique middle-class campaigns in the present that can treat workers as unorganized, passive victims. It underscores the potential hierarchical dynamics inherent in consumer-labor campaigns, both between classes and within the labor movement, including dynamics of race, gender, and space.

Keywords: *labor; consumers; alliances; workers; unions*

Nike. Starbucks. Fair Trade Coffee. The Gap. During the late 1990s, all these took on new political meaning as a dynamic new wave of consumer organizing emerged in the United States in support of poor workers in Latin America and Asia. Campaigns for Fair Trade Coffee, on one hand, and against Nike and Walt Disney, on the other, galvanized young people who, in turn, with tremendous energy and effectiveness, drew consumers' attention to processes of globalization, the exploitative origins of U.S. consumer products, and the political possibilities of shopping on behalf of social justice abroad. These new consumer-worker

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alliances emerged as part of a resurgence of the U.S. labor movement after 1995. They were part and parcel of the larger antiglobalization movement worldwide, challenging new structures of production and developing transnational strategies for globally defined struggles against corporate capitalism.

Here, I offer a brief sketch of the history of previous consumer campaigns in the United States on behalf of working people, placing this wave of contemporary activism along a broad historical span. In part, I want simply to provide a sense of what has come before and place our efforts today in historical context—both to inspire us and provide a feeling of continuity. More directly, though, in presenting a range of historical campaigns, my goal is to highlight the character of contemporary activism and, in reflecting on current campaigns, open up possibilities for future activism. In particular, I underscore the history of class dynamics within labor-consumer alliances and suggest how that history offers insights into activism today—especially as it cautions middle-class activists and consumers to respect workers' own ability to organize themselves, both at the workplace and through consumer campaigns. Moreover, it warns us all against hierarchical dynamics often embedded in the very nature of consumer tactics, especially as they can shape relationships between leaders and rank-and-file workers.

Before jumping in, it's useful to distinguish a cast of characters in the history of consumer-worker alliances. On one side lies a long history of such activism on the part of workers themselves, beginning in the 1870s. These activists break down, in turn, into two categories: (1) working-class members of the labor movement (broadly defined to include many formations) and (2) working-class consumers, including members of the labor movement, but also other allies and supporters too, such as unorganized workers and, especially, female family members of organized workers—an extremely important group of people when it comes to consumer activism. On the other side lies a long history of middle-class movements, which in turn break down, similarly, into (1) activists and organizations and (2) consumers (obviously, as with workers, overlapping categories). From another angle, we can slice these four categories into two groups of consumers—working class and middle class—and two parallel groups of organizations/activists. In analyzing consumer-worker alliances and campaigns, we can think of all four categories of people and organizations in relation to each other.

From their very first deployment by workers in the late nineteenth century, consumer tactics have been deeply racialized, in ways cutting across these categories. In some instances, white workers and their allies have used politicized shopping as an overtly racist ploy against workers of color; in others, workers of color have taken up consumer campaigns to fight racism in alliance with middle-class members of their communities, unifying workers and small businesspeople along lines of race.

Dynamics of nation and space further complicate this matrix. Before the 1990s, consumer-worker relationships played themselves out in a national con-

text, within the borders of the United States. But today most consumer-worker alliances involve transnational relationships between consumers in the United States and workers outside it. This is of course a result of the vast restructuring process we call globalization. Beginning in the 1970s, much production for the U.S. market moved overseas; since then, the workers who sew shoe bindings or grow broccoli for U.S. consumers as often as not work overseas. Activists in worker-consumer movements have in fact deliberately chosen targets operating both within and outside the United States in order to underscore these relationships and thence illuminate corporate-driven globalization. At times these spatial dynamics, too, can be subtly racialized, as white activists in the North in some cases frame interactions with workers in the South in a paternalistic manner.

The class position and interests of activists in consumer campaigns shape, in turn, their long-term goals—which we might think are obvious but aren't. At their most basic, the common goal of all these campaigns has been to marshal consumer power within the United States of behalf of working people—to raise wages, living standards, and working conditions for those who produce goods or services for U.S. consumers. When we look at the deeper goals of recent campaigns, though, the answer becomes a bit trickier. Ideally, I would hope the goal of consumer-worker alliances would be to help working people empower themselves to achieve better working conditions and living standards and, more broadly, to bring about a just society based on equality and democracy. In other words, ideally, through these campaigns consumers would help working people achieve control of their own economic lives and communities, however they choose to define that. The ultimate goal, in other words, is not middle-class people obtaining justice "for" the working people at the other end but helping working people do so for themselves—in a long-term process of planned obsolescence.

Middle-class people, of course, have powers people at the bottom generally do not have. The question, in consumer-worker alliances, is how to use those powers in a manner that serves the long-term goal of working people's empowerment; how to contribute to long-term structural change so class differences are not present in the first place.

LABOR'S CONSUMER CAMPAIGNS

Ever since the late nineteenth century, working people in the United States have a long history of themselves politicizing consumption through the labor movement. This history is unique to the United States—comparable labor movements in advanced industrial societies haven't by and large taken up the union label, boycott, and other consumer tactics. (The one huge exception, in Europe, is the cooperative movement.) The reasons lie outside the scope of this article, but the broad patterns suggest that the relative weakness of labor's political parties and clout in the United States led U.S. workers to turn to consumer campaigns out of a lack of power in other strategic spheres.[1]

In any case, beginning in the 1870s and especially in the 1880s through 1910s, the U.S. labor movement took up consumer tactics with great enthusiasm. The Knights of Labor, which peaked at around 800,000 members in 1887, produced vast boycott lists for both national and local use. Their national journal, *The Journal of United Labor*, was full of boycott pronouncements both precise and blanket. During the same period, emerging craft unions in the American Federation of Labor (AFL), in addition to promoting their own boycotts, invented the union label to mark a commodity as the product of a unionized shop. The label's origin was overtly racist: in the 1870s, San Francisco cigar makers put a white union label on their cigars to signal to buyers that only white, and not Chinese, workers had rolled the cigar. The idea of a union label—without such overt racial demarcation—quickly spread to sixty-eight different national unions by 1908. For their part, retail clerks, barbers, butchers, and restaurant workers all put union "shop cards" in the front window of their establishments to signal unionization inside; teamsters, musicians, carpenters, and other workers who traveled to multiple job sites marked themselves with a union button. Union members constructed a vast web of politicized shopping opportunities that they publicized in the labor press. The whole swelled greater than the sum of its parts as union members who produced consumer goods and services promoted their own labels, shop cards, or union buttons while seeking out those of their unionized brothers and sisters.[2]

Note that the shoppers here were members of the working class. The workers producing the goods and services, on one hand, and the consumers, on the other, were the same group, albeit with gender emphases, since the union members were more likely to be men, the consumers female. But not always: the most successful label was always the union cigar, bought by working-class men in front of their male comrades. Middle-class people were, by and large, absent from this loop, with the exception of small business allies such as owners of bars and shoe stores, often themselves recently risen from the working-class ranks and conscious of working-class patronage.[3]

The concrete effectiveness of any given campaign in pressuring any given employer in this era remains unknown. Marketing surveys or consumer data we might have access to today simply did not exist, and to assess effectiveness we are left largely with the competing claims of those promoting the campaigns and those targeted by them, or evidence of changes in employers' behavior. Independent of the impact on targets, however, labor's consumer campaigns in the late nineteenth century without question contributed to a grassroots class consciousness, as working people, both male and female, brought labor politics and solidarity to the most minute transactions of daily life.

We do know that, overall, labor's consumer campaigns were formidable enough to prompt enormous legal challenges on behalf of employers. In two landmark Supreme Court cases, *Loewe v. Lawler* and *Buck's Stove and Range*, the Supreme Court ruled that labor boycotts and the AFL's national "We Don't

Patronize" list involved illegal restraint of trade. Many unions backed off from national-level boycotts in response, while turning to other tactics for independent reasons.[4]

At the local level, though, organized labor's use of consumer campaigns nonetheless continued to flourish into the 1920s. In Seattle, for example, AFL unions built a thriving world of politicized consumption in the 1910s and 1920s. By 1920, unions and their allies owned twenty-three consumer and producer cooperatives, their own laundry, a movie theater, and a daily newspaper with a circulation of 120,000. They deployed boycotts regularly and often with great effect, most notably one against the Bon Marche department store in 1920, which they targeted for its owners' support for an open shop drive in the aftermath of the 1919 Seattle General Strike. In the mid- and late 1920s, local-market unions in the service sector were especially committed to the union label, which white workers continued to use to exclude Asian workers from the labor market.[5]

In this case, we have a bit more evidence as to the campaigns' ability to mobilize shoppers. In the case of the Bon Marche boycott, the city's employers' association admitted in its internal documents that "there is little question but that it is being injured" and spoke of firms' "vulnerability" to boycotts. Yet documents from the labor movement also indicate that unionized men constantly complained that their womenfolk were not observing boycotts or looking for the union label. Male union members were quick to demand unionized shopping from wives who they kept out of the movement but whose workload would be increased by seeking out union products and services—prompting them to shop elsewhere. The AFL's continued racism would obviously have limited the appeal of unionized shopping among working-class Asians, moreover.[6]

Both boycotts and labels could encourage other unsalutory dynamics within labor organizations—and here we get a hint of the divides that consumer campaigns can at times encourage or plummet into. Labor-based consumer campaigns depend on a relationship between union leaders, employers, and consumers. The power comes from consumers, who, in theory, through their shopping habits pressure employers to recognize workers' concerns. Too often, however, labels or boycotts tended to disempower rank-and-file union members in the process. In contrast to a strike or an organizing campaign, ordinary workers have little role. In worst-case scenarios—which played out all too often in Seattle and elsewhere throughout this period—union officials reached deals with employers to sign union contracts without any input or agreement on the part on the workers involved whatsoever. In many cases, this was a gendered dynamic: nationally, male leaders in the shoe workers' union, for example, struck deals with employers and left female workers out of the loop. Often, these were workers who worked in labor-intensive industries like apparel.[7]

Two last notes on labor-sponsored consumer campaigns: first, it is important to remember that they only emerged in sectors of the economy that produced for a

consumer market. Unions could not boycott machine tools or put a union label on warships, for example. Second, they were always employed as part of a larger package of tactics, including political action, strikes, demonstrations, and other approaches. Workers tended, overall, to turn to consumer campaigns when they were stymied in their advancement on other fronts.

Finally, not all worker-run consumer campaigns emerged in trade unions or in the "labor movement" as traditionally understood. For example, in 1917 thousands of middle-aged Jewish women in New York organized an extremely effective boycott of chickens, fish, and onions in protest against the rising cost of living. Throughout greater New York, they overturned pushcarts, threatened butchers with their own cleavers, and joined in demonstrations of tens of thousands. Similar food protests emerged in Philadelphia, Boston, and in earlier years in New York, through which housewives protested against the exacerbation of their own labors by exorbitant prices. They succeeded in shutting down sales of boycotted goods for several days; whether they affected long-time pricing is not clear.[8]

MIDDLE-CLASS CONSUMER CAMPAIGNS

As all this working-class activism was growing, middle-class people began to organize their own consumer campaigns on behalf of working people as well, beginning in the 1890s. Two prominent examples of these were the National Consumers' League in the early twentieth century and the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" movement in the 1930s.

In 1899, a group of upper-middle-class white women in the Northeast founded the National Consumers' League. They were social reformers, involved in a wide variety of other projects, and concerned about labor standards and the situation, in particular, of women workers in sweatshops. They did not just fight on the consumer front; during the next four decades they were instrumental in achieving the minimum wage for women, abolishing child labor, and, eventually, passing the federal minimum wage in the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act.[9]

The league's consumer campaigns, to which its members were especially committed in the first two decades of the century, were pitched to middle-class, not working-class, consumers. As Eileen Boris shows, the women explicitly distinguished between "women who work" and "women who spend." These ladies were concerned that germs would enter their own houses on the threads of garments sewn by impoverished workers with tuberculosis and other diseases. Gradually, though, league members came to organize on behalf of women factory workers. Through their campaigns they developed their own Consumers' League "white label" for garments, which approved manufacturers could have their workers sew in and which would signal to middle- and upper-class shoppers that the labeled goods were safe.[10]

The Consumers' League developed its label independently of the labor movement. Not surprisingly, its members' relationship with organized labor could get

dicey at times. The Massachusetts branch of the league at one point even explicitly rejected the AFL's garment label. During the large apparel strikes of the 1910s, employers were swift to wave the National Consumers' League label in front of the public in order to legitimate themselves and confuse the public. But after those strikes swelled the ranks of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, and those unions' own label rose to prominence, the Consumers' League dropped its label.[11]

The Consumers' League story raises questions relevant to consumer-worker alliances today: What should the relationship be between middle-class organizations and workers' own groups? What powers did these elite white women have that the unions did not? How did employers manipulate the distinction between middle-class and workers' own endorsements—and how can allies avoid that trap? We can also note a reluctance on the part of middle-class activists to work within the structures of workers' own organizations.

The "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" movement was quite different in many ways. It emerged in Chicago's African American neighborhoods in the late 1920s and flourished in African American communities throughout the Midwest and Northeast into the mid-1930s. While its main movers and shakers were middle class, they were far less elite than the Consumers' League—typically small business owners, professionals serving the black community, or, more often, the spouses of both.[12]

These activists were outraged that white retailers operating in black communities refused to hire African Americans. Beginning in Chicago in 1929, they began to picket recalcitrant white-owned stores and encourage consumers to eschew them. The idea spread like wildfire after the Depression hit. In Baltimore, New York, Washington, D.C., and many other cities, activists knocked on doors, circulated petitions, drove up and down neighborhoods with loudspeakers, paid visits to employers, and organized demonstrations. In many cases, these campaigns shaded over into "Buy Where You Can Work" or "Buy Black" exhortations in support of African American-owned small businesses. Through these campaigns, activists opened up thousands of jobs for African Americans in their communities, usually in small increments that added up over time. In Baltimore, for example, the A & P Supermarket hired thirty-eight new African American workers within a few months. Darlene Clark Hine has shown that in the movement, women did most of the hard, daily work of knocking on doors, dissuading shoppers, and making soup for picket lines through "Housewives' Leagues." By 1935, the Detroit Housewives' League counted 10,000 members.[13]

Here again, as with the Consumers' League, we have middle-class women supporting working-class employees through consumer activism. But in this case, the class lines are much less crisp. Given the tight restrictions around African American economic life in the 1920s and the less elite status in general of these activists, the distinction is only a partial one. Some of the jobs obtained would have been for

family members of the activists; middle-class African Americans, whatever their class, culture, educational, and professional identities, were constantly being forced into manual labor or service jobs because of racism. Moreover, those 10,000 members of the Detroit Housewives' League must have included many working-class women—the numbers of middle-class African American women in the city just were not large enough.

While in most cases "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaigns were nonetheless led by members of the black middle class, in Cleveland the movement played itself out differently. There, the "Don't Buy" campaign was from the beginning sustained from below by working-class activists, historian Kim Phillips demonstrates. In February 1935, inspired by the other cities' successes, John Holly, a shipping clerk and former coal miner, chauffeur, and auto worker, and other working people formed a new organization they called the Future Outlook League; they soon built one of the country's most powerful "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaigns. By 1936 several hundred people had joined, including radicals, southern migrants, and the unemployed.[14]

Gradually, the Future Outlook League started functioning as a proto-trade union. As the campaign to hire African American workers paid off, black Clevelanders began their new jobs at white-owned business only to experience horrific conditions and meager wages. The league began to take up the workplace concerns of these employees. In one case, when the owner of the Rainbow Cafe told its new black waitresses they would be working twelve hours a day, seven days a week for $5 a week, the waitresses quit work, the customers left their tables, and together they picketed the cafe. Within an hour the owner capitulated. Meanwhile, some middle-class African Americans in Cleveland were wary of the league's edge of class politics and afraid white philanthropists would be alienated.[15]

In the case of Cleveland, the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" movement thus circled round to the kind of worker-consumer alliance sponsored by the largely white AFL in earlier years, in which working-class consumers supported working-class concerns at the waged workplace. But here, both were united by racial solidarity, a circle that embraced middle-class black people as well.

LABOR-SPONSORED CAMPAIGNS PITCHED TO CROSS-CLASS CONSUMERS

In the 1960s and 1970s, two new campaigns emerged, both very powerful in the national political imagination, through which the labor movement sought to marshal consumer power at a broad, cross-class level. The first was the "Look for the Union Label" campaign launched by the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU).

In 1958, the ILGWU for the first time obtained a clause in all its contracts specifying that a little union label would be sewn into every garment produced in a unionized shop. During the 1960s, the union promoted its label steadily, largely

through fashion leaflets and films. Then, in 1972, the union jumped into label promotion full force. The ILGWU leadership was alarmed about the steady growth of imports into the U.S. apparel market and a simultaneous drop in union membership. That year, they launched a huge anti-import campaign to which promotion of the ILGWU union label was central. In their broader strategy, the ILGWU leaders wanted to use union label promotion to prompt consumers to both seek union-made, American-made goods and pressure their congressional members to pass trade restrictions on apparel imports.[16]

During the 1970s and 1980s, the ILGWU spent millions on union label promotion, most famously on its television advertisements, in which a glowing, multiracial chorus of actual ILGWU members sang "Look for the union label, when you are buying a coat, dress, or blouse." (The dignified ILGWU chorus with its catchy tune and impeccable appeal was so popular that it spawned parodies on television programs for years thereafter. Most delightful was a *Saturday Night Live* episode that began "Every time you buy pot from Mexico or Colombia, you're putting an American out of work." The "American Dope Growers" logo appeared onscreen, as the chorus swelled, "So look for the union label, when you are buying a joint, lid, or pound."[17])

The ILGWU's label campaign was enormously successful in drawing public attention to the situation of garment workers. It was less effective in changing actual shopping behavior or in producing trade legislation. Equally important, in terms of my analysis here, it fell into the same trap as earlier labor-sponsored consumer campaigns: other than the chorus, the campaign allowed for little initiative or active role on the part of rank-and-file union members. The power would come from consumers—of any class background. Throughout this period, the ILGWU was notorious for its lack of internal democracy, as a tiny group of Jewish and Italian men ruled over hundreds of thousands of female members, increasingly Latina and Asian immigrants.[18]

Perhaps even more famous during this period were the boycotts organized by the United Farm Workers (UFW). In 1966, the UFW first declared a boycott of Schenley wines as part of an organizing campaign in the California grape fields. In the late sixties and early seventies, the union extended boycotts to table grapes, Gallo wine, and lettuce. Free of the 1947 Taft-Hartley amendment's restrictions on secondary boycotts—because agricultural workers are not covered by the National Labor Relations Act (Wagner Act)—the UFW further applied its consumer pressure to Safeway stores, in an effort to force Safeway to carry only UFW-labeled grapes. The UFW boycott took an enormous amount of grassroots energy and captured the imagination of U.S. liberals brilliantly, as the black eagle on a red background became familiar to middle-class and working-class households alike. Students, volunteers, and white liberals fanned out to boycott Safeway and promote the label. Farm worker families moved to cities throughout the United States and Canada to support it.[19]

The boycott became the center of the UFW's strategic approach, and through it, in part, the union was able to gain and renew extensive contracts in the California grape fields. But as Frank Bardacke argues, the campaign subtly shifted the union's emphasis from organizing farm workers in the fields to obtaining power through middle-class consumers. In many ways this was the key to the union's success: the boycott campaigns—along with the UFW's earlier creativity at using the moral language of both the Civil Rights Movement and Mexican Catholicism—broke the isolation of farm workers from national political awareness. Again, though, the consumer approach provided little role for rank-and-file workers still laboring in the fields. In the long run, as middle-class white moods shifted to the center by the 1980s, and Republican governor George Deukmejian turned viciously on the UFW, the union was left a shadow of its former self. As I noted before, when unions take up consumer tactics, the strategic question is always the balance between appealing to consumers and sustaining other tactical approaches. Here, dependence on middle-class consumers proved a thin reed on which to hang workers' futures.[20]

CONSUMER-WORKER ALLIANCES TODAY

What, then, of our own times and the dynamics of consumer campaigns? The labor movement itself still promotes consumer tactics regularly on a modest scale, coordinated largely through the AFL-CIO's Union Label and Service Trades Department. The label department puts out a newsletter called *Labeletter* that lists strategic boycott campaigns; and it coordinates a Union Industries Trade Show that moves about the country each year.[21]

During the 1980s and early 1990s, many international unions—especially the autoworkers, steelworkers, and garment workers—along with the AFL-CIO focused their consumer organizing energy on "Buy American" promotion. "Buy American" campaigns were based on the idea that money spent by shoppers in the United States on the products of U.S.-based companies, would then be reinvested in good, union jobs for U.S. workers.[22]

"Buy American" campaigns are as old as the American Revolution, when "nonimportation" campaigns asked patriots to eschew British products—as in the Boston Tea Party. In the modern period, they began in the 1930s. In late 1932, right before Roosevelt's New Deal, newspaper mogul William Randolph Hearst independently launched a "Buy American" campaign through his 26 daily newspapers. Hearst's campaign was anything but grassroots; and it was infused with anti-Asian racism from its inception, as Hearst charged that "aliens," whether in Asia or working in the United States, were "sneakily" taking jobs away from Americans, who needed to circle the nationalist wagons and reject foreign goods.[23]

When the restructuring of the U.S. economy hit in the 1970s, U.S. unions revived the "Buy American" idea. Most famous were the autoworkers with their

parking lot signs banning imports and their Toyota bashings in which unionists and their friends took sledgehammers to Toyotas, symbolizing the workers' supposed enemy, Japanese imports. These campaigns, endorsed by the leadership and bubbling up from the rank-and-file, revealed their ugliest underside in 1982 when two unemployed white autoworkers in Detroit killed Vincent Chin, a Chinese American, after a bar fight, blaming him for their plight.[24]

By the mid-eighties and early nineties, the "Buy American" slogan was taken up by major corporate interests as well, most notably Crafted with Pride, which sponsored an expensive television campaign against imports. Crafted with Pride turns out to have been a creature of Roger Milliken, a notorious textile magnate from South Carolina with a long reputation as a union buster and part of Patrick Buchanan's inner circle. By the mid-eighties, Wal-Mart, too, exhorted shoppers to "Bring It Home to the U.S.A.," while New Balance positioned itself as the only running shoe produced in the U.S.A.[25]

As the "Buy American" swell of the eighties and nineties crested in 1991 and 1992, labor's "Buy American—Buy Union" plea was soon drowned out in nationalist alliances with ostensibly domestic capital, together rejecting "foreign products," implicitly or explicitly understood to be the product of evil Asians. Here, labor unions, rank-and-file consumers, and the upper reaches of corporate strategizing united, and nation trumped class—despite the fact that the corporate members of the team were themselves fleeing overseas as fast as they could.[26]

In this case, we have more evidence as to the campaigns' effectiveness. Marketing surveys and numerous other sources indicate that shoppers' desire to "Buy American" shot up by the early 1990s, just as their actual purchases of foreign goods were simultaneously rising—precisely because of the very globalization of production they wanted to combat. "Buy American" campaigns did not save jobs; they only diverted U.S. working people from understanding the transnational nature of corporate strategies and reinforced anti-"foreigner," anti-immigrant racism.[27]

In the current period, much more exciting are the campaigns organized by middle-class activists, largely white, against sweatshop labor and on behalf of small coffee producers overseas. In contrast to the late nineteenth century labor-sponsored campaigns with which I began, the producers and the consumers involved are different people; not only does class distinguish them, but nation as well, reflecting, in part, the new global structures of production and distribution. The transnational nature of these campaigns brings many strengths. The new campaigns have offered impressive opportunities for education about globalization. They open up new structures for solidarity: in contrast to "Buy American" campaigns, they do not ask U.S. workers to eschew the products of other working people simply because they are outside the U.S. border; instead, they extend the hand of comradeship across it. These campaigns build upon previous transnational consumer campaigns that were quite successful, such as the boycott of Nestle dur-

ing the 1970s and early 1980s in protest against its dangerous practices of promoting infant formula; and the cultural boycott of South Africa during the 1980s, in opposition to apartheid.

But the transnational nature of contemporary worker-consumer alliances does involve a deep divide between middle-class consumer campaigns on behalf of workers and the workers themselves. Not only are the activists, shoppers, and those they seek to benefit two very different groups of people, but, in the case of U.S. shoppers—if not activists—they will usually never even meet.

When we think about today's consumer-worker alliances, in contrast to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the workers involved are largely unorganized themselves. They do not have unions—that is why the wages and working conditions of, say, shoe workers in Vietnam are so vile. Much of the appeal to middle-class consumers can even lie in highlighting quite how weak and powerless these workers are.

On the consumer front, it has largely been middle-class consumers who have been attentive to the call to alter shopping behavior on overseas workers' behalf. This is in part because at a basic level, politicized shopping has almost always been more expensive—precisely because the pro-union commodity or service incorporates higher production costs. Historically, one problem in promoting the union label was that working-class shoppers could not afford to choose it. Middle-class shoppers, by contrast, have more discretionary income. If they choose, they are able to buy organic food at high-priced natural food stores, for example. They can select pricier Fair Trade Coffee. Working-class people, by contrast, are more likely to shop at Costco or Wal-Mart and buy their coffee in a name-brand can.

Middle-class activists calling out to their fellow middle-class shoppers have access to power and resources that labor activists often do not. They have college educations, literary skills, social networks through school and family, self-confidence about speaking in public. They have access to political power and funding agencies. All this means, as with middle-class consumers, that they have a lot of strengths to bring to oppressed workers trapped in exploitative jobs in whatever part of the world.

The potential weaknesses lie in how middle-class organizations dovetail with workers' own activities and goals. We need always to ask: Does this campaign empower people on the ground as workers? Does this activity help build workers' own worker-led and defined organizations? What power differentials are emerging within the movement?

The risk is a model in which a man on a white horse rides into the oppressed town, exposes exploitative conditions, points to helpless, passive workers, and then rides away. In this approach, strong, wise, U.S. middle-class people help a weak, ill-informed populace at the other end—which doesn't talk back or make demands on the nature of the solidarity relationship. At worst, this can lead to consumer activities that the workers themselves do not agree with or have power over.

In earlier stages of publicity about the maquiladoras in northern Mexico, for example, workers had to insist to U.S. supporters that they did not want people to boycott their products—otherwise they would lose their jobs. In milder form, it can mean middle-class activists prefer to work with unorganized, relatively powerless, atomized workers who do not talk back or make demands as effectively as organized workers.[28]

In building models for consumer-worker alliances, I think it is essential to start from recognition of the power, real and potential, of workers' own organizations and consumer campaigns and the long history of workers' movements in the countries involved. It has become all too easy to imagine an unorganized "blank slate" at the other end, when, in fact, workers in places like Central America, Mexico, and Vietnam have far more successful histories of labor, anticapitalist, indeed revolutionary activity, than those in the United States. Often, the labor movement in other countries is much stronger than it is here—even in countries we think of as weak victims. Honduras, for example, has a higher union density rate than the United States (15% versus 13.5%). My favorite recent example is Nepal. In March 2000, two hundred thousand hotel workers went out on strike in Nepal. (To put those numbers in context, the U.S. Hotel and Restaurant Employees International Union has around 250,000 members in the United States and Canada.) Most of us do not even know how to imagine a Nepalese labor movement, let alone one that might be ahead of our own organizations or even helping us out.[29]

We also need to bear in mind that workers' movements in Asia and Latin America are quite rightly suspicious of U.S. beneficence and of the power dynamics potentially involved. Throughout the 1950s through the early 1990s, the AFL-CIO took State Department money and worked with the CIA to undermine Left-led unions overseas. Activists abroad know this history and do not want to engage in relationships of ostensible solidarity that replicate U.S. imperialism.

How, then, can middle-class consumer powers in the United States serve workers' interest? First, the goal needs always to be empowerment of workers' own self-defined organizations at the other end. Subcommandante Marcos and the Zapatistas have spoken of opening a "democratic space," in which the goal is not a specific social structure so much as the space in which to collectively and democratically define it. On the labor front, the most basic right for which all activists can fight is the right to organize in the first place—guaranteed in few nations, including the United States. In one recent campaign, an alliance of activists from the U.S. Labor Education in the Americas Project (U.S./LEAP), Maquila Solidarity Network, AFL-CIO, Campaign for Labor Rights, Korean House for International Solidarity, Students Against Sweatshops, and, in Mexico, the Workers' Support Center, successfully fought for the right of workers at the Kuk Dong factory in Puebla, Mexico, to organize a union and bargain with their Korean employer. U.S./LEAP also organizes solidarity on behalf of the Coalition of Latin American Banana Unions (COLSIBA), which represents more than 40,000

unionized banana workers in Central America, Colombia, and Ecuador. These banana workers have long-established militant unions and are anything but poor, passive, ill-informed victims; they have specific organizing goals and are following their own path of empowerment. And they welcome aid from the North, depending on the strings attached.[30]

Finally, we can look around in our own backyard. In building consumer-worker alliances, we can find hundreds of thousands of exploited workers all over the United States who labor in the restaurant kitchens, garment factories, and fields where our food and clothing come from. Mobilizing consumer power on behalf of domestic workers, though, brings to the fore the messy question of cooperation with the U.S. labor movement, with all its independent opinions, powers, and warts. Middle-class activists who want to labor on behalf of working people can fight for the right to organize right here at home. Building domestic consumer-labor alliances, though, forces middle-class activists to confront domestic class differences, both in organizing and in consumption patterns, which are more easily elided or romanticized in overseas relationships.

As I hope this brief survey has made clear, these issues are by no means new. The debate over how to use consumer power is more than 125 years old within the U.S. labor movement; middle-class activists have been experimenting with how to deploy it for over 100 years. Communities of color have repeatedly tried to figure out how best to use their shopping habits to advance their concerns. Like any political tactic, consumer campaigns need to be deployed in a careful strategic relationship to other tools, with careful attention to the internal balance of power within our organizations. There is a power in shoppers' hands; the question is how to use it to serve our longest and most inspiring of long-term goals of equality and social justice. In the interim, we can use it to open democratic space. Because in a truly democratic political process, nobody is going to agree to one's own oppression—or to unequal relationships of solidarity.

NOTES

1. On labor and the cooperative movement in Europe, see, for example, Ellen Furlough, *Consumer Cooperation in France: The Politics of Consumption, 1834-1930* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Ellen Furlough and Carl Strikwerda, eds., *Consumers Against Capitalism? Consumer Cooperation in Europe, North America, and Japan, 1840-1990* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littfield, 1999).

2. Ernest Spedden, *The Trade Union Label* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1910); Leo Wolman, *The Boycott in American Trade Unions* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1916); Harry Wellington Laidler, *Boycotts and the Labor Struggle* (New York: John Lane, 1914); Lawrence B. Glickman, *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Michael Gordon, "The Labor Boycott in New York City, 1880-1886," *Labor History* 16 (Spring 1975): 184-220; David Scobey, "Boycotting the Politics Factory: Labor Radicalism and the New York City Mayoral Election of 1884," *Radical History Review* Nos. 28-30 (September 1984): 280-325; and Gregory R. Zieren, "The Labor Boycott and

Class Consciousness in Toledo, Ohio," in Charles Stephenson and Robert Asher, eds., *Life and Labor: Dimensions of American Working-Class History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986): 131-46. On anti-Asian racism and white labor's consumer campaigns, see Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

3 In addition to the previous citations, for the union label in individual trades, see Patricia A. Cooper, *Once a Cigar Maker: Men, Women, and Work Culture in American Cigar Factories, 1900-1919* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987): 104-07, 137-39; David Bensman, *The Practice of Solidarity: American Hat Finishers in the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 57, 152-65, 185-90, 199-201; Stuart B. Kaufman, *Challenge and Change: The History of the Tobacco Workers International Union* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986): 11-23, 26-35, 61; Stuart B. Kaufman, *A Vision of Unity: The History of the Bakery and Confectionery Workers International Union* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987): 49-50, 52, 55; Sally F. Zerker, *The Rise and Fall of the Toronto Typographical Union, 1832-1972: A Case Study of Foreign Domination* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982): 112, 116, 133-34, 137, 139-42, 154-56, 198-99, 242; Mary H. Blewett, *Men, Women, and Work: Class, Gender, and Protest in the New England Shoe Industry, 1780-1910* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988): 290-92, 299-301; George Barnett, *The Printers* (Cambridge, MA: American Economic Association, 1909): 273-78; Albert Helbing, *The Departments of the American Federation of Labor* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1931): 104-11; and Louis Lorwin: *The American Federation of Labor: History, Policies, Prospects* (New York: Brookings Institution, 1933): 368-69.

4. Daniel Ernst, *Lawyers Against Labor: From Individual Rights to Corporate Liberalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995); William E. Forbath, *Law and the Shaping of the American Labor Movement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

5. Dana Frank, *Purchasing Power; Consumer Organizing, Gender, and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919-1929* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

6. Frank, *Purchasing Power*, employer quotes, 133; on wives and consumer activities, see also Susan Levine, "Workers' Wives: Gender, Class, and Consumerism in the 1920s United States," *Gender and History* 3 (Spring 1991): 45-54.

7. Frank, *Purchasing Power*, chap. 9; Blewett, *Men, Women, and Work*, 267-317; see also studies of individual trades cited above.

8. William Freiburger, "War, Prosperity, and Hunger: The New York Food Riots of 1917," *Labor History* 25, no. 2 (Spring 1984): 217-39; Dana Frank, "Housewives, Socialists, and the Politics of Food: The 1917 New York Cost-of-Living Protests," *Feminist Studies*, 11, no. 2 (Summer 1985): 255-85; Paula E. Hyman, "Immigrant Women and Consumer Protest: The New York City Kosher Meat Boycott of 1902," *American Jewish History* 70 (1980): 91-105; and Monroe J. Friedman, "American Consumer Boycotts in Response to Rising Food Prices: Housewives' Protests at the Grassroots Level," *Journal of Consumer Policy* 18 (1995): 55-72.

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13. See, for example, Meier and Rudwick, "The Origins of Nonviolent Direct Action," 323; Greenberg, *Or Does It Explode?*, 188; on the Detroit Housewives' League, see Hine, "The Housewives' League of Detroit."

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16. Dana Frank, *Buy American: The Untold Story of Economic Nationalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), chap. 6; Gus Tyler, *Look for the Union Label: A History of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1995); and Pamela V. Ulrich, "'Look for the Label'—The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union Label Campaigns, 1959-1975," *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 13, no. 1 (1995): 49-56.

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21. American Federation of Labor and Industrial Organizations, *Labeletter.*

22. Frank, *Buy American.*

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid., On Vincent Chin, see special section in *Amerasia Journal* 28, no. 3 (2002): 1-65; and Christine Choy and Renee Tajima, *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* Film News Now Foundation and WVTVS, Detroit (Detroit: WTVS, 1988).

25. Frank, *Buy American*.

26. Ibid.

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28. The Nicaragua Network is currently developing an "International Labor Solidarity Code of Conduct" in response to the problems with this model.

29. For Honduras: FIDE Hondurasinfo, http://www.hondurasinfo.hn/eng/hsc/labor2.asp, 29 January 2003; for the United States, United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics News, http://www.bls.gov/news/news.release/union2.nrO.htm, 29 January 2003. For the Nepal hotel strike, "Nepal Hotels Workers Start Indefinite Strike," 15 March 2001, CNN.com World, http://www.cnn.com.2001/WO . . . siapcf/south/03/15/nepal.hotel.strikes.

30. For the EZLN's concept of "democratic space," see *Shadows of Tender Fury: The Letters and Communiques of Subcomandate Marcos and the Zapatista Army of National Liberation*, translated by Frank Bardacke, Leslie Lopez, and the Watsonville, California, Human Rights Committee (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1995); on the Kuk Dong struggle and COLSIBA, see the newsletter of the U.S./Labor Education in the Americas Project and their website, www.usleap.org; on Kuk Dong, see the Maquila Solidarity Network at www.maquilasolidarity.org.

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