In August, 1995, the Los Angeles Times *reported on 63 Thai immigrant women, found locked in a complex surrounded by barbed wire, working 84 hours a week. This slave labour didn't occur in China, Indonesia, or Honduras, where we've sadly come to expect such working conditions; it took place in El Monte, California, USA.*

At the same time, other stories of horrific abuse and exploitation were emerging from factories producing clothes for the global market. In what became known as the 'race to the bottom', multinational corporations could move to where the labour force was the cheapest and the labour laws the weakest. From Manhattan to Tangier, workers were beginning to reveal the oppressive, dangerous, and often illegal conditions under which they were working to produce the clothes bearing popular labels like Nike, Levi's, and the Gap. Thus the word sweatshop – which dates back to the nineteenth century – was reintroduced into popular use.

Although university apparel makes up only two per cent of the US garment market, students have been at the forefront of anti-sweatshop organizing. Early on, students around the US realized that their universities were directly profiting from the exploitation of women who make the clothes bearing the university logo. A campaign for a 'Sweat-Free Campus' was launched in the summer of 1997, and the idea spread like wildfire. Demanding that universities hold clothing producers accountable, students expressed their outrage that their fashion was dependent on exploitation and violence. For many students, it was their first – and perhaps their only – political action, but for others, it was their entrance into the movement, their introduction to the (il)logic of economic globalization. They learned that women make up 90 per cent of the sweatshop work force, and work gruelling hours, unprotected by wage or safety laws, subjected to mandatory pregnancy testing (sometimes even injection with contraceptives without consent). Armed with this information, students began connecting the stories of these women's lives with the broader economic system which thrives on such exploitation.

The Sweatshop and the Ivory Tower

by Kristian Williams

The first thing we did was set up a prayer meeting. An odd start, it's true, but Georgetown was an unusual setting for an anti-sweatshop campaign. It's a conservative university catering to the upper-upper-middle class, jealous of the Ivy League, a Catholic school where both a gay rights organization and a pro-choice group had been suppressed by the administration, and a financial leviathan with ties to Nike and Disney. Georgetown was not where one would go in search of anarchists and revolutionaries.

Still, the school's financial dealings did draw the attention of the Georgetown Solidarity Committee (the GSC) – a student group formed a few years earlier to support a union drive among the cafeteria workers. When that campaign failed, the group languished briefly, then found new direction with the help of the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE) – the garment workers' union. UNITE brought some much-needed scrutiny to the conditions under which apparel featuring Georgetown's name and logo was being produced. These sweatshirts and ballcaps sold widely and provided a key source of income for the school's sports program; they were also made in sweatshops in Central America. So, armed with facts about the wages of the workers and the profits of the college, the GSC set out to expose – and eliminate – the

Georgetown sweatshop connection.

Our plan was to get the university to adopt a code of conduct governing the licensing of its name and logo, with independent monitoring and enforcement through the Workers' Rights Consortium (WRC). Student groups around the country were pursuing similar strategies at their own schools; the sweatshop profiteers countered by forming the Fair Labor Association (FLA), with an intentionally meaningless code of conduct of their own. The trick, then, was to get the university to go with the WRC and not with the FLA.

I must confess I was skeptical about the prayer meeting. I did not expect God to put things right, and felt very strongly that the only way to persuade the administration was to apply pressure of a sort they could not ignore. In the end, that pressure came to bear: on Friday, 5 February 1999, 27 students took over the University President's office and refused to move until the school committed to the WRC code of conduct.

This move led to a decisive (if modest) victory at Georgetown, as the same tactic had a few days earlier at Duke University, and as it did later at a number of other schools. Though the school did not wholly accept the WRC position, they did accept key points of it. Companies producing Georgetown apparel would be required to publicly disclose the locations of their factories, opening the possibility of third-party monitoring by human rights and labor organizations. Any company which failed to comply with this requirement would have its contract cancelled.

The sit-in itself lasted 85 hours and was extremely well organized. Press releases were issued twice daily, support rallies were held, fliers printed and placed under every door in every dormitory and office building, and the school's stately stone walls were covered with posters and chalk-scrawled graffiti. I had a hand in all that, but that's not what I want to talk about here.

This is what I want to say: I was right about the need to pressure the administration; but I was wrong about that prayer meeting. And that's not the only thing I was wrong about. During the months between the September prayer meeting and the February sit-in the GSC engaged in tame tactics that the university could (and usually, did) ignore. We had rallies, vigils, petitions, leaflets, and a public forum. I expected

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building, a carnivalesque march of 5,000 people declare their opposition to IMF policies. Press conferences and banquets are further disrupted by infiltrating activists. The 50 Years Is Enough network is founded at a counter-conference. Simultaneous protests take place in several countries.

>> October 6 >> One thousand French workers invade the Paris stock exchange, halting the billion-dollar trade in financial futures and options for the entire day, in protest against the partial sale of car maker Renault, and all privatizations in France. One huge poster reading "Sacrifices, Unemployment, Privatizations" obscures the computer screens which normally provide prices for stock options. "If we called the police there would be a complete riot," one security guard complains.

>> October 9 >> Over 100,000 people march in London, UK, against the Criminal Justice Bill, which criminalizes direct action, rave music, and squatting, as well as terminating the right to remain silent under interrogation. A diverse group takes to the streets opposing the law – festival and party goers, squatters, travelers, hunt saboteurs, anti-road protesters, and gay rights groups. The day ends with rioting in Hyde Park.

>> October 26 >> All schools in Sierra Leone are shut

nothing to come from these, but I was in for a surprise.

It was at the public forum that I was first impressed by the course of the campaign. We supplied three speakers – GSC's vice president and two sympathetic professors. The administration sent a representative from the sports program and Dean of Students (with whom we would later negotiate). Following the speakers was a time for public comment, creating the sort of 'open discussion' so often called for in universities. We had, of course, planted half a dozen reliable people in the audience, scattered throughout the auditorium to make sure the conversation went the way it ought.

None of our people spoke. None of them needed to. The students who did speak – most of whom I had never seen in either a meeting or at a rally – spoke eloquently and with passion. They shamed the administration. They called the Dean a hypocrite and a liar. One woman broke into tears as she quoted scripture: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these…" Another, a member of the rowing crew, explained in no uncertain terms that her recreation was not worth the exploitation of teenaged girls half a world away. No student spoke in favour of the FLA or defended the administration. As I left that night it occurred to me – I think, for the first time – that the students might actually be on our side.

It should be understood that the students at Georgetown are, as a group, notoriously conservative. They are – almost uniformly – rich, young, white, and Catholic. Privileged and ambitious, they represented to my mind about the least likely source of sympathy to the plight of the toiling masses.

"In 1996 a Nike advertising man said innocently: 'Why write this kind of copy if not to incite people to riot?' – thinking that he was boosting the rebellious image of the brand, rather than predicting the Nike brand backlash." – *Stay Free* magazine

But during the sit-in, support came from some unexpected places: business students, a College Republican (a pro-lifer who literally winced at the word 'leftist'), a military cadet, and the Skull-and-Bones-type secret fraternity devoted to upholding Georgetown's Catholic traditions. The student government half-willingly donated their office for the GSC to manage its support operations. (We jokingly called this "the other occupation"). The security guards joked that they'd call us when their contracts expired (and I believe they might); they did nothing to interfere with the sit-in, or to discourage donations from coming into the office. Professors forgave students their late papers. And a Jesuit priest performed a mass in the occupied President's office.

The truth is that I never expected to win, in large part because I never expected such support. In retrospect, it seems that I must not have understood what we were doing when we held those rallies, printed leaflets, issued statements to the school paper. I was thinking tactically, you

see, focusing on what we could do to force concessions from the administration. And so I overlooked the strategy that was being employed right in front of my face.

If I had been in charge – also, I suspect, if the GSC had been comprised of more radical types – things would have gone a great deal differently. We would not have bothered with leaflets at the basketball games. We would not have sung the fight song at our rallies, or put Jack the Georgetown Bulldog on our posters and picket signs. We would not have organized prayer meetings. And we would not have won.

The GSC tailored its campaign to the conservative culture of the school. This was not the type of organizing I was used to, and it often made me uncomfortable. My mistake – a terrible mistake for a radical – was in thinking too small. I was focused on discrediting the administration in the eyes of the GSC members, while they were busy discrediting the administration in the eyes of the entire school.

I spent a year at Georgetown, and this is the biggest thing I learned: you win by organizing, and you organize by approaching people on terms they can accept. You do not win because of your radical rhetoric. You do not win by writing off potential allies, or insisting on ideological purity. You do not win by denigrating popular culture or ignoring the decent impulses of your peers. You do not win because you have the 'right line' or are able to quote Gramsci. You do not win through heroics or martyrdom. You win by organizing, and you organize by approaching people on terms they can accept.

It is often tempting to think that 'moral feeling' has no political worth. And indeed, a pious moralism is worse than useless unless it can be directed into meaningful collective action. But if it can be so directed, the results are sometimes astonishing. It was not Marx's critique of capitalism or any ideological rejection of authority which led those twenty-seven privileged college kids to risk arrest and expulsion on behalf of sweatshop workers thousands of miles away. Nor was it an urge toward internationalism or student-worker solidarity that moved scores of others to support this shocking act. These ideological developments came later. Instead, it was a sense of basic human decency, the idea that it is simply wrong to abuse workers in the global South so

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down as 35,000 teachers go on strike. Demanding prompt payments of salaries and allowances and a 30 per cent pay increase, teachers also demand of the military government that they repeal a decree banning the right to strike.

>> October 27 >> More than 15,000 workers in Siberia and the far east of Russia take to the streets in the first stage of a nationwide protest against falling living standards and huge salary arrears. Similar protests take place across the country, with the participation of well over two million people.

>> November 8 >> At least 40 people in masks ransack a McDonald's in Mexico City's fashionable Zona Rosa, protesting an anti-immigrant ballot initiative passed in California. Windows are broken, bins tipped over, cash registers hurled to the ground, and graffiti with messages of solidarity and anti-imperialism painted. The new law denies all social services to illegal immigrants in California, clearly showing that voters have by and large forgotten that California was stolen from Mexico (and from Native Americans before that) by force and that the definition of "illegal immigrant" is an insult to those originally inhabiting that land.

>> November 24 >> In Beirut, Lebanon, striking

that Georgetown can sell its hats and sweatshirts at a higher profit. These motivations may be reformist and bourgeois. They are certainly not as tough-sounding as 'class interest', for example. But I doubt if such distinctions matter very much to the 16-year-old girl, chained to her sewing machine, stitching hats for a few dollars a day.

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Resources:

» US-based information, including how to get involved: www.sweatshopwatch.org

» Detailed info on starting and maintaining a campaign: www.maquilasolidarity.org

» *Sweatshop Warriors*, by Miriam Ching Yoon Louie, South End Press, 2001

Traffic moves sluggishly *through the grey London haze. Suddenly people dart into the road with scaffolding poles. They quickly erect a tripod and someone climbs to the top, balancing gracefully 20 feet above the tarmac. The road is now blocked to traffic but open to pedestrians. Louis Armstrong's "What a Wonderful World" drifts from a sound system as thousands of people pour out of the nearby underground station and fill the street. People shinny up lampposts and hang huge banners, some supporting the striking public transport workers, others saying "Breathe", or "Street Now Open". A band plays from the roof of a bus stop, people dance, a choir sings, and a tonne of sand is dumped onto the tarmac, turning it into an instant beach for children. Welcome to a Reclaim the Streets party.*

Reclaim the Streets (RTS) emerged in London from the campaign against the construction of the M11 link road, the environmental direct action movements of the early 1990s, and the unusual network of ravers, travellers, and protesters brought together by the Criminal Justice Act of 1994. By using creative tactics which fused carnival and rebellion they reintroduced notions of pleasure and play into radical politics. RTS also merged social and ecological principles into a wider cultural critique; their agit-prop questioned: "Won't the streets be better without cars? Not if all that replaces them are aisles of pedestrianized consumption or shopping 'villages' safely protected from the elements.... The struggle for car-free space must not be separated from the struggle against global capitalism."

The creative audacity of RTS proved to be contagious and spread across the emerging activist networks. In the late 1990s, street parties began to pop up across the global North, and a new generation of activists was inspired to rethink political action. In July 1996, RTS ambitiously reclaimed a motorway, the M41. While 10,000 people partied, huge carnival figures were wheeled through the crowd. Hidden underneath and drowned out by the sound system, people were tearing into the tarmac with jack hammers and planting saplings. This story tells how RTS pulled it off …