



Empowering Alternatives: United Students for Fair Trade's Two Year Growth Strategy

Executive Summary

In the last five years, students have been critical players in the success of the Fair Trade movement in the U.S., driving hundreds of campuses to implement conversions to Fair Trade coffee and other commodities. While universities are an important institutional foothold for the Fair Trade market, they represent more than just another feather in the Fair Trade cap. Students contribute an important grassroots character to the movement, delivering the Fair Trade message one person at a time to tens of thousands of young people each year. Indeed, they are more than consumer converts, they are the next generation of Fair Trade and global justice leadership, with the creativity to work on the cutting edge.

Born out of the collaborative work of organizations like Oxfam America, Global Exchange, TransfairUSA, Coop America, and Fair Trade Resource Network, United Students for Fair Trade (USFT) has been at the forefront of the student Fair Trade movement for the last two years, expanding and coordinating the movement on a shoestring budget. After an ambitious two-year strategy was put in place at a recent summit in Washington D.C. in October, 2004, it became clear that operational funding is essential to achieve student objectives.

The considerable student achievements thus far have come on the shoulders of committed leaders and late-night strands of caffeinated consciousness. While caffeine and personal sacrifice are certainly protocol for student organizing, they are not sufficient for generating and sustaining a nationally coordinated movement that is simultaneously active on over 100 campuses, that works to build the capacity of leaders at each of those campuses, and insures that practical, progressive information is available and accessible.

To effectively carry out these functions, USFT will require \$250,000 over two years to hire two full-time National Coordinators, provide stipends for students in ten part-time and regional organizing positions, and cover some operational expenses. USFT's two year strategy can be initiated as funding is made available. However, there is an immediate necessity for \$50,000 to fund one full-time national organizer who can set the stage following USFT's National Convergence this February, leading into the important spring student organizing season, and this summer's four international delegations.

Background: A Nation of Students Hungry for Alternatives

In recent decades, one of the most severe social impacts of global economic restructuring has been the abrupt displacement and lost livelihoods of millions of small-scale farmers around the world. Social movements have been pivotal players in spotlighting the injustices of this transition, and many campaigns—debt cancellation, trade justice, climate change, corporate accountability, international financial institution accountability, anti-privatization, human rights, to name just a few—have found common cause in the global justice movement (GJM), which has pushed with some success to turn the trajectory of global economic policy-making.

While the GJM has worked primarily to challenge these systems of trade and finance, it has also been able to replace them with functional alternatives. Over the last decade, the Fair Trade model has emerged as a cornerstone of the GJM. It represents a proactive response to the constant criticism of the GJM that says it cannot articulate viable alternatives. As such, Fair Trade is more than a niche market, it is a precedent that holds within it the promise of a global economy that works on a triple bottom line—social, environmental, and economic. As globalization tends to separate producer from consumer, and human values from economic efficiency, Fair Trade emphasizes a conscious relationship. At its heart, Fair Trade is the assertion that markets don't decide on markets, as the free trade credo would have it, but instead, that people decide on markets.

The combined student outreach efforts of organizations like Oxfam America, Global Exchange, TransfairUSA, Fair Trade Resource Network, and Coop America led to the founding in 2003 of United Students for Fair Trade, which works to coordinate and support over 100 active student organizations in the U.S. and abroad. As USFT enters its third year, it has already served to enrich and amplify the student movement, chalking up several significant campaign victories, hosting the largest annual Fair Trade conference in the country in February of 2004, organizing a

two-week leadership development summit in Nicaragua in August of 2004, creating several significant informational resources, and establishing itself as an essential and credible voice at the Fair Trade table.

The Student Movement in Motion: USFT's Two Year Plan

USFT blends the consciousness of social movements and the pragmatism of social entrepreneurship that, together, empower alternatives that are humanizing the global economy. The following are the core functions of USFT that feed this fusion: organizing, resourcing, and leadership development. USFT's two year growth strategy aligns with these three functions.

Organizing: Building a Bandwagon

Students have already begun to realize their ability to demand that administrations change their purchasing practices to reflect basic ethics of social justice. Campus campaigns have generated one of the few successful examples of institutional sectors supporting Fair Trade, and have directly contributed to increased demand for Fair Trade products. However, the impact that students have in building the Fair Trade bandwagon goes well-beyond the volume of coffee, tea, or chocolate that an administration chooses to serve in dining facilities. Because raising awareness is foundational for any campaign, students are constant educators, framing Fair Trade in creative and culturally relevant terms. Indeed, students provide an important grassroots component to the movement, bringing a transformative message to tens of thousands each year.

With paid national coordinators anchoring the organization, USFT will run the three following types of education-based campaigns:

- *System-wide campaigns*

With its national reach, USFT can push the student movement beyond the one-campus-at-a-time pace. USFT will coordinate concurrent initiatives and push for system-wide policy or resolutions that can usher in Fair Trade at a faster rate, and secure the longevity of change. Current research is being conducted on the University of California system, State Universities of New York (SUNY), and Jesuit school systems.

- *Corporate campaigns*

Corporate campaigns will take three basic forms: First, there is urgent need to capitalize on USFT's past victories that have motivated roasters and Food Service Providers to offer a full line of Fair Trade coffee. USFT will conduct an outreach campaign that activates students on the hundreds of campuses where companies have agreed to offer a complete line of Fair Trade upon request. Second, USFT will coordinate nation-wide campaigns to push key food service provider companies to scale up their commitment to Fair Trade. Finally, USFT will encourage students to "move beyond the ivory tower" and into community coffee houses, putting strategic pressure on national chains while building partnerships with local Fair Trade businesses.

- *Molding New Alternatives*

Over the last year, USFT has formed several partnerships with a range of organizations working to implement Fair Trade principles beyond certified commodities. With staff in place, USFT will take a more proactive role in exploring a contributive student role and supporting current initiatives, such as: domestic Fair Trade standards for small-scale farmers and farm workers in the US, Community Supported Agriculture that incorporates social justice standards, Campesino Solidarity with innovative farmworker organizations such as the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, and Worker-Owned "Free Trade Zones" such as the Nueva Vida sewing cooperative in Nicaragua.

Resourcing: Making the Message

Students are a unique constituency within the Fair Trade movement that requires specific resources. In partnership with NGOs, USFT provides essential informational materials on the Fair Trade products and model that students can distribute which promote familiarity with certification labels. Beyond these staples, though, experience tells us that students do best when they *make Fair Trade hip*: Understanding popular culture and the need to make Fair Trade fun is a practical principle that animates many campaigns. There are certainly cookie-cutter, step-by-step campaign guides for students to use, but the visibility and energy of a campaign is greatly a function of creativity. With funding in place, USFT will: conduct the extensive research and outreach needed to generate and maintain a comprehensive website that houses a clearinghouse of innovative Fair Trade education, publicity, and campaign ideas from which students and others can draw when they're searching for some spunk. Additionally, USFT will be able to create its own repertoire of materials that will raise familiarity with USFT and help brand the organization.

Last, USFT will build in a much-needed measurability mechanism that will more scientifically gauge the progress of the student movement.

Leadership Development—Making the Messenger

USFT's most careful work is in developing the capacity of student organizers engaging in on-the-ground education and messaging behind Fair Trade. The point of departure is USFT's commitment to create a more proximate relationship with Fair Trade farmers and artisans. Instead of teaching students about 'bridging the disconnect between producer and consumer' through showing them PowerPoint's and filling them up on muffins in a lecture hall, student leaders are sent Southward to learn from the farmers and artisans themselves, to learn from the real-life benefits and challenges of Fair Trade. While these exchanges with Fair Trade in the Field are key to making the messenger, the more consistent spade work takes place in the trainings and teachings from regional conferences to annual National Convergence bringing together the full spectrum of the Fair Trade student movement. Through these *intercambios de saberes*, or exchanges of knowledge and experience, in cooperative communities from Nicaragua to Tanzania, and Fair Trade Hubs from Chicago to Santa Cruz, USFT cultivates a nuanced understanding of the Fair Trade model and movement.

Conclusion: What Will Progress Look Like?

Full funding for this project for two years promises to yield a robust, organized student movement that contributes substantially and uniquely to the greater Fair Trade movement. Indeed, the student movement is unique itself to the United States, and is an important factor in its continued growth. USFT represents an essential grassroots character to the Fair Trade movement that can simultaneously sit down at a negotiating table with corporate managers and drive home a pressure campaign. That combination of power and creativity is certain to expand the Fair Trade market, and the consciousness of the next generation of activists and consumers alike.

USFT has laid an infrastructure and made significant progress over the last two years without paid staff. As an organization, we have proven to the NGOs within the Fair Trade movement that we play an indispensable role. They recognize, as do we, the critical need for funds that will staff USFT and secure its careful growth over the next two years. Following are the core deliverables that will come through with two years of full funding as specified in the budget:

- ✓ Five hundred campaigns will be supported and initiated on campuses across the country.
- ✓ At least three coordinated campaigns that move institutions and companies at a national and regional level will be underway.
- ✓ Four USFT~*Encuentros* will journey to cooperative communities, strengthening the transnational character of USFT, developing deeper, long term relationships with cooperative partners, especially youth movements within cooperative communities.
- ✓ National and regional convergences will be more frequent and accessible. A national coordinator will enable regional coordinators to focus on regional organizing work, and not be draw away from their critical work on the ground.
- ✓ A re-designed comprehensive website that offers access to essential resources, both for activist and academic-centered projects will serve as an essential tool for student organizers bringing together the scattered resources and organizers from across the Fair Trade movement.

The availability of resources to accomplish the above tasks are well-deserved and vital to the movement as a whole. Ella Baker's mantra was 'Figure out where the work is already being done, and support it'. USFT has indeed been doing the work for two years, and is capable and ready to be supported as it looks to expand its contribution.

Under the fiscal sponsorship of The Fair Trade Resource Network, a 501(c)(3), USFT has managed several project budgets exceeding \$50,000, including our National Convergences and International Delegations. USFT and FTRN have developed solid accounting mechanisms for paid staff, and will continue to work in collaboration.