

May 16, 2015

Blase forwarded me your email, I was in SOLE at Michigan the same time he was and I was the undergraduate student on the labor standards and human rights committee which I believe he mentioned. I'm going to answer the questions you sent Blase, if you want to know anything specific, feel free to ask. I also have a fair amount of old documents etc. in my SOLE folder if you want scans of anything. One of them is the signed copy of the official sit-in list of demands. I also have our full sit-in to-do list, the flyers we handed out on the day of to get people to call in to Coleman's office, talking points for the DSP, classroom teach-in syllabus, etc. I'm sure you already know this, but there is a TON of media from the sit-in and Russel thing including a NYTimes article. There is also a case study someone at the business school did which I know is taught in at least one MBA program. Boston University's MBA sustainability class teaches the Russel case. There is also an article in the American Economics Review (the top economics journal) entitled "Multinationals and Anti-Sweatshop Activism" by Ann Harrison and Jaspom Scorse who estimate the impact of anti sweatshop campaigns on actual worker wage growth in Indonesia and find that there are large increases in real wages for targeted enterprises. It's serious empirical evidence that these movements can work.

When were you at Michigan?

I was at Michigan Fall 2005 - Spring 2009 when I graduated. I was involved with SOLE from 2006-2009

How did you know you wanted to become involved in campus activism? How did you become aware of the sweatshop issue specifically?

I've been involved in social justice and activism work for most of my life. I volunteered for the Gore and Kerry campaigns back in the day and I got involved in the anti-war movement in high school during the lead up to the Iraq invasion. My interest in anti-sweatshop activism came from a larger interest in labor justice and working with Latin American Immigrants. My degree is Economics and Latin American Studies so I also have a research interest in low wage labor and labor standards.

Where did SOLE get its information on sweatshop violations? Did SOLE have any direct connections to factories, workers, or labor organizations?

Yes, a lot of the direct contact with workers was through USAS. We brought in workers a few times while I was there to give talks which were always well attended. The reports on those should be in back issues of the daily, 2006 or 2007 is the one I remember the best. We also had independent relationships with unions most notably LEO and GEO. We worked with the UAW, Unite HERE, AFSCME, and the other unions on campus on a small level.

We did do some of our own research on sweatshops and labor standards, and worked on other, related, projects such as the SOAwatch movement, the coke campaign, fair trade advocacy, etc.

How did SOLE interact with the national USAS organization? Anti-sweatshop activists at other universities?

We worked pretty heavily with USAS although we pre-dated the national organization so our relationship was a little different than that of other universities. We went to conferences with USAS and USFT (united students for fair trade) mostly the midwest regional conferences but a few people went to the national ones. We also had a person on the weekly coordinating committee conference call for USAS. I did that for about a year, it was extremely helpful especially when it came to advice on events, organizing the sit in, planning mass call ins and email bombs, etc. We were also very close with the USAS chapters at Michigan State and Purdue. The Purdue kids faced even more resistance and animosity from their administration.

We also worked directly with the workers' rights consortium who designed the DSP and do a lot of the actual investigation of sweatshops. They came out to meet with us a few times during the heavy organizing around the DSP and Russell.

Did SOLE have a relationship with the President's Committee on Labor Standards and Human Rights or other administration figures? Did SOLE view them as allies or opponents?

Yes. Traditionally the undergraduate position on the committee is held by a SOLE member. I held that position for school year 2008/2009 and then I worked for the committee as a research assistant the next summer putting together a guide to the social justice oriented classes on campus.

We mostly saw the committee as an obstruction. Not really an ally or opponent but more of a time sink of endless bureaucracy and waiting. I served on the committee the first year that Sioban Harlow came back as chair and replaced...I don't actually remember his name, and the committee started to move a bit faster. One thing I will say about the committee, is that when I was on it my opinion was always taken seriously and I did not feel that my voice was discounted because I was the undergrad. I also had two pretty awesome allies on the committee that year which helped. One was a law student and the other had been a non-voting record keeper in the past but became a full member. I can tell you more about how the committee functioned if you want.

I do want to talk about the Russel decision though. I'm not going to go through the whole fight but one of the things that the committee did really well was take the WRC reports seriously and then contacted the company to talk seriously about what appeared to be violations of their license. The reps who spoke to us basically nailed their own coffin. They were dismissive, non-committal, one of them completely dodged a question that I asked and didn't really make an attempt to do so until one of the other committee members (older and male and sounded older and male) pointed out that he hadn't answered it. After that call things moved pretty quickly. It also helped that it wasn't a huge contract and that it was enforcing our existing licencing agreement rather than completely changing university policy.

Were you involved in the sit-in that took place in President Mary Sue Coleman's office in 2007? What was the atmosphere like for students?

I was the outside organizer for the sit-in. Basically I ran the logistics meetings leading up to the sit-in, created information flyers, made sure that everyone knew what they were supposed to be doing when, talked to police outside, visited classrooms, held bail money (although they were released without bail), etc. etc. The atmosphere was a combination of hectic and festive. We had put a lot into it and were really pleased with the media attention that we got and the general support of the campus community.

I will say that we had 2 counter protesters show up. They were freshman or sophomores from west quad and had really hastily drawn signs that said "hippies take a shower" and "learn economics" We were expecting some of this reaction so we were prepared. First, we made a point of having everyone wear suits and look professional so people couldn't lean on that tired hippie nonsense. Second, one of the reasons I was involved in SOLE and on the LSHR committee is because I was an econ major (and now econ PhD candidate) so I could answer a lot of the "free market" nonsense arguments. To paraphrase fellow SOLE member Jason Bates, is there an equilibrium level of forced labor? what is the utility maximizing amount of wage theft or blocked fire exits? Basically the "counter-protest" ended when I asked them if they personally thought I needed a shower, answered the argument that started with "well, if you had taken an intro econ course..." statement with "Oh yeah, I remember that class, did you miss the part on market failure?" and they got embarrassed about being addressed directly and having it be clear that no one was on their side.

I didn't get a lot of sleep in the lead-up to the sit-in so some of it is a bit blurry. By some miracle I managed to not tank my GPA and managed to get all my forms and planning for study abroad done (I spent the 2006/2007 school year in Santiago, Chile) I did completely forget to turn in a term paper but the professor was shockingly understanding and gave me a no-penalty week extension.

What are some of your favorite memories from your time with SOLE?

The best part of SOLE was the people. My fellow Solistas (that is the correct term for a sole member) and our supporters from other groups are some of the most dedicated, insightful, courageous people I have ever met and it was amazing to work with them. Most of us also transformed our college activism into careers. Blase is a public defender, Susie Reed works for the UAW, Aria went to work for an ethical merchandise company and then went to work on a bio-diesel project in Kenya, Ryan Bates worked for the democrats, Adam Lax is studying something with education policy now but held other labor justice oriented jobs, Art Reyes has worked for a number of progressive politicians and advocacy groups, Jason Bates spent time working for unions, and I'm finishing my PhD in economics with a focus on labor and education. My first published paper was actually about documenting labor standards violations in Chile which called back to my time in SOLE.

My most salient memories are not of the events themselves that we held but their planning. The hours of painting banners and talking about politics and ideas up on the fourth floor of the union, skill shares, that 5 hour meeting where we made the final decision to stage the sit-in, and, of course, hand screen-printing t-shirts that said "fuck sweatshops" because we couldn't find a shop that would print them for us. I still have and wear mine.

I do want to tell the story about how I joined SOLE because it still stands out in my mind. I didn't join a lot of clubs my freshman year because I thought college was going to be a lot harder than it actually was (I know that sounds arrogant, but it's true). I came back for sophomore year and seriously thought about what I wanted to get involved with and I went to a bunch of meetings for various social justice groups and SOLE just really stood out. All the students were so excited and interested in what they were doing and would slip into acronyms and have to backtrack over and over because they were clearly really well versed in the dynamics of university licensing, social theory, etc. The meeting ran way way over and people gradually left as they had plans or got bored and I stayed and talked to Blase and Aria afterward and I distinctly remember someone saying, it was probably Aria, that if I had made it this far into my first SOLE meeting, I clearly belonged there which really struck me at the time. I'm glad she said it because she was right, I did belong there