

History 497: “Global Activism at UM: The Anti-War, Anti-Apartheid, and Anti-Sweatshop Movements”

Interview Questions

When were you at Michigan?

- I was at Michigan from 1993-2000 as a graduate student in the Biophysics Department, and I graduated with a Ph.D.

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

- I had always been politically active at some level since I was an undergrad at Cornell University. But my activism increased when I joined the Graduate Employees Organization (GEO) in 1995. GEO is the union of Graduate Student Instructors, and I was in the leadership from 1995-1999, including serving a term as President from 1998-1999 when we bargained our contract and went on strike for 2 days.
- I was also involved in a local Socialist group called Solidarity in the summer of 1997 and that Fall we were looking for some important issues to work on. I had been reading about problems with Nike sweatshops in Asia, and Michigan at that time had a large athletic uniform contract with Nike. I had met a few other folks around campus that were concerned about this issue and that Fall we formed the “Just Don’t Do It” campaign, which was a name that played with the Nike “Just Do It” slogan at the time. The goal was to get Michigan to demand that Nike make improvements in the factories or cancel their athletic contract.
- We were in email contact with other national groups such as the Campaign for Labor Rights, Global Exchange, and UNITE, the apparel and textile workers union, which I later went to work for. Through this network, we received sweatshop information and heard about the International Nike Day of Protest in October 1997 and other days of action, so we put together events on campus like rallies, sponsoring speakers, flyering at football games, and speaking at the Regents meetings.

Were you involved in the founding of SOLE? How and why was it founded?

- Yes and this was really amazing how it happened. In the Fall of 1998 I became the President of GEO when we were about to enter contract negotiations and this was going to take up all my free time, so I was planning on leaving the leadership of the Just Don’t Do It campaign. The problem was that other folks had graduated and there weren’t many people left to work on this, so I was worried that the campaign would end.
- As I remember it, around this time I got a phone call out of nowhere from Peter Romer-Friedman. He said he and a group of folks had just finished the AFL-CIO

Union Summer program and were looking for labor issues to work on. I'm not even sure how he got my number, maybe from the folks at UNITE. I couldn't believe the timing! We met and I explained the whole sweatshop issue, which led soon after to the formation of SOLE that Fall. SOLE took up the campaign to get Michigan to do something about Nike sweatshops, which evolved at some point toward adopting a vendor Code of Conduct and joining the Worker Rights Consortium.

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

- As mentioned earlier, we mostly got our information from other groups who were in direct contact with factory workers around the world. We were reading their reports and also news articles. In the pre-SOLE era, I don't remember that we had any direct contact with workers, but those contacts did develop over time, especially after the formation of the United Students Against Sweatshop (USAS), the national network, in 1998. It eventually became common practice to bring factory workers to campuses to speak to students and it's likely this happened at Michigan after I left.
- I remember specifically in 1997 being impressed with the UNITE report on the BJ&B hat factory in the Dominican Republic which discussed the working conditions, and the amount workers were getting paid compared to the prices for the hats. Michigan hats were produced there and it was a really great concrete example of the sweatshop problem.

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

- The whole year or so that I did anti-sweatshop work, before SOLE and as SOLE was started, was very fun and exciting and also exhausting and it provoked a lot of anxiety. It was really the first time I was one of the main leaders of a small activist group which places a lot of stress on you. Was anyone going to come to the rally? What's going to happen when we flyer at the football games with 100,000 people there? What will we say at the Board of Regents meeting and how will they respond? Are we going to win this campaign? Does anyone care about this issue?
- Several memories stand out, listed here in the order that they occurred:
 - When we flyer at the Michigan football game for the International Nike Day of Protest in October 1997, there was a team of young women dressed in identical Nike gear handing out pro-Nike information. I was actually really glad since that meant we had gotten the company's attention. I went over to chat with them and amazingly they asked who I was working for! As if nobody could do this activism work simply because they were motivated by social justice.
 - At some point a counter-student group formed called "Students for Free Trade" or something like that. We joked about it. They did one or two things and then we never heard from them again.

- At some point in the Spring or Summer of 1998 we got a meeting with Tom Goss, the Michigan Athletic Director at the time, to present our case. It went fine, he was very cordial, but I remember him complaining about how difficult Nike was to deal with, explaining how he and his folks had argued with the company for quite a while about the size and placement of the “swoosh” on the uniform.
- We had made a giant paper-mache sneaker and we would take it out to rallies on the Diag and ask folks to sign the shoe in solidarity with the factory workers.
- I think sometime in 1998, we were invited to do a panel interview on a local community access cable show. I really wish we had a copy of that interview.
- In the Spring of 1999 the SOLE group held their occupation of the President’s office. I was no longer really active with the group since I was doing GEO union work that year, but I was asked to come speak at the support rally outside. I was so proud of the group inside and really glad the campaign was able to continue and lead the way on this issue.

Info Sources:

- An article about the pre-SOLE Just Don’t Do It campaign is here: <http://oldnews.aadl.org/node/251536>.
- Amazingly some old material from the campaign is still online: <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~lormand/poli/nike/nike101-1.htm>.
- There is a record that the campaign presented comments several times at the Michigan Board of Regents meeting:
 - Feb 1998, page 268, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/u/umregproc/ACW7513.1997.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext>
 - Nov 1998, page 126: <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/u/umregproc/ACW7513.1998.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext>
 - Feb 1999, page 241: <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/u/umregproc/ACW7513.1998.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext>
 - March 1999, page 243, the U adopts an anti-sweatshop policy: <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/u/umregproc/ACW7513.1998.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext>
- An article I wrote about all this for the USAS 10th anniversary is here, page 3: <http://issuu.com/nellhernandez/docs/usasbook>