PHOTO: **"Coffee She Picked", withonef**

SO THERE I WAS, STANDING IN THE RAIN IN CHICAGO. THE YEAR WAS 1999, AND I WAS AT YET ANOTHER PROTEST. **THIS ONE WAS IN FRONT OF STARBUCKS.**

Yael Grauer

We were demanding that they start carrying Fair Trade coffee. Starbucks had hired some guy in a suit to deal with us. Suit immediately swooped in after our spokesperson was whisked away by television reporters.

Then Suit began to spin. He alleged that Starbucks coffee really was fair trade. No dice. I was well-versed on the issue, and could debate the difference between "fair trade" and "certified fair trade". I navigated through his inaccuracies point by factual point.

Suit was obviously annoyed. Indeed, he looked downright shocked when our relentless group refused to discuss this inside the store over a cup of coffee, and continued to stand in the rain with our signs and flyers, petitioning customers to demand that Starbucks carry certified Fair Trade coffee. He seemed to wonder why all these folks were making such a fuss about some beans.

IN STARK CONTRAST TO THE HORRORS OF THE MAQUILADORAS, THE COFFEE CO-OP OFFERED SOME OF THE MOST EXPLOITED EMPLOYEES **A SAFE AND FAIRLY PAID PLACE TO WORK.**

Starbucks eventually relented and started selling Fair Trade Certified coffee at all its stores beginning in October 2000. (Global Exchange, however, feels that Starbucks needs a lot more work to be truly fair to farmers and continues their campaign. See the latest details at http://www.globalexchange.org/campaigns/fairtrade/coffee/starbucks.html)

WHERE COFFEE (AND ITS DISCONTENT) BEGINS

Although many of the students present that day had never met each other, we were united as members of various campus environmental groups, including SARC (the Student Alliance to Reform Corporations) and SEAC (the Student Environmental Action Coalition). Starbucks, as the largest specialty coffee retailer, was an obvious target.

Although I attended college about an hour away, I felt very strongly about the issue. You see, I'd visited El Salvador over the summer of '98, right after graduating high school. I'd attended an educational vacation through the Center for Global Education, sponsored by the InterReligious Task Force on Central America.

As part of the trip, I toured a Fair Trade coffee co-operative that exports whole beans as Café Salvador. We spoke with the workers. The coffee co-op discussions were a stark contrast to the horror stories we'd heard from *maquiladora* (sweatshop) workers days prior, and we were never allowed inside the factories.

The factory workers had told us about their working conditions: dirty bathrooms, poor ventilation and maggot-infested drinking water. These women worked so hard and earned so little, about $5 a day. They had trouble maintaining their jobs after the age of 25 because of injuries caused by repetitive work and the heat of the machines. Many of these garment workers would develop upper respiratory diseases as well as throat problems from working with cotton. Although masks were available, the company refused to let the *maquila* workers use them. Workers were often fired for being too old or having children, and health insurance was grossly inadequate.

In contrast, the coffee co-op was impressive with its clean bathrooms and friendly people. There was a preschool and daycare attached to the co-op so that rural workers had a place to leave their children. 58 out of 268 member-workers were women. Women were particularly useful at helping sort and classify beans by size and

PHOTO: **"Coffee Beans", Angela Sevin**

It's hard enough for any organization to go from idea to implementation. It's even harder to go from ideals and ideology to implementation.

weight, as well as removing beans by hand. We were told that the men had tried but did not have the same dexterity in their hands and thus mostly women did this work.

Workers' basic monthly salary (not including profit sharing and health care benefits) was about $150 more per month than that of coffee workers outside of the co-op. Workers had job security, because labour was done year round. Outside the co-op, workers often had to look for seasonal work and didn't find it.

Close to a quarter of workers were female. Not only must women in El Salvador endure the often grinding poverty of their local economies, they are frequently paid less than their male counterparts. Yet as many researchers have observed, the majority of *maquiladora* and sweatshop workers worldwide are women. This co-operative thus offered some of the most exploited employees in the country of El Salvador a safe and fairly paid place to work.

In comparison, coffee production elsewhere in the country, and in impoverished regions worldwide, was characterized by low salaries, seasonal labour and a distinct lack of job security. In addition, large-scale farming methods are unsustainable and create environmental havoc with clearcutting trees, monocropping, and pesticides and chemical fertilizer.

EQUAL EXCHANGE

In the early 1980s, three men met while working as buyers for a distributor who served food co-operatives. They recognized that the conventional food system desperately needed reforms. United by a vision of fairness to farmers and a strong connection between these farmers and consumers, the three met once a week for three years to plan their organization and figure out how best to fulfill their vision.

In 1983, the men began an ongoing relationship with the co-operative I toured in El Salvador. Finally, in 1986, the three men – Michael Rozyne, Jonathan Rosenthal, and Rink Dickinson – founded Equal Exchange, a worker co-operative that led the charge to bring Fair Trade foods, starting with coffee, into US grocery stores.

Fair trade, as defined by Equal Exchange, is "a voluntary program practiced by some importers and food companies to create an alternative market for traditionally disadvantaged producers in developing countries, usually small-scale farmers. The components include, among other things, a promise to purchase directly from small farmers and their co-operatives, paying mutually agreed-upon prices providing for a dignified livelihood."

Rodney North, Equal Exchange's Information Man, explained in further detail what Equal Exchange actually does. Their operation now covers an elaborate network of small, mostly organic producers. They're active at nearly all points along the way from coffee bush to cup.

"We import Fair Trade coffee, tea, cocoa, sugar and bananas from over 40 co-operatives of small-scale farmers around the world," states North. "90% of these crops are also certified organic. We also source from three groups of US farmers for our almonds, pecans and cranberries. We operate one of the country's largest organic coffee roasting operations. In addition to selling through grocery stores and restaurants nationwide, we offer a popular fundraising program for hundreds of elementary and high schools nationwide. We run a unique interfaith program that distributes our organic, Fair Trade products to

PHOTO: **"Fair Trade", Jon Lewis**


PANAMA
FAIR TRADE


GAP

FAIR TRADE INCLUDES A PROMISE TO PURCHASE DIRECTLY FROM SMALL FARMERS AND THEIR CO-OPERATIVES, **PAYING MUTUALLY AGREED-UPON PRICES THAT OFFER A DIGNIFIED LIVELIHOOD.**

10,000-plus churches, synagogues, and mosques nationwide." Equal Exchange also operates two cafés in Seattle and Boston and has an online store.

It's hard enough for any organization to go from idea to implementation. It's even harder to go from ideals and ideology to implementation. According to North, Equal Exchange's biggest challenge has been raising enough capital to expand their business without selling out. After all, when money's involved, the business brew can turn muddy or bitter.

"Unlike most of our peers in the natural foods business we've managed to do this," North said, "and it's thanks to a unique form of stock we sell, and the 'Equal Exchange Certificate of Deposit' we offer through Wainwright Bank." These CDs allow socially responsible investors to make low cost loans available to Equal Exchange to fund their growth in Fair Trade.

HOW TO CONTRIBUTE WITH YOUR CUP

These victories are hard-won, farmer by farmer, café by café. Yet these victories are vital. As Equal Exchange's website points out, even with all of their successes, "most small-scale farmers around the world remain impoverished and at the mercy of volatile and complex commodity systems. Although Equal Exchange has effected change once thought impossible, there is still much more that needs to be done."

While we should all learn more about where our food – and favourite beverages – come from, you don't have to take a trip to El Salvador to make positive change. (However, as an educational experience, I do recommend it.) As consumers you can ask your favorite store or café to carry or serve Fair Trade coffee.

And not all "Fair Trade" is created... well, equal. Equal Exchange deals with small farmer co-ops, not large plantations. This is, indeed, an exchange between equals. A fair wage to a small farmer goes directly to support that farmer and his or her family. Conversely, trade with large plantations may mean that the plantations' owners or controlling corporations benefit, but the hands picking the beans may never tuck a larger wage into a pocket.

As Equal Exchange's website points out, "the growth of Fair Trade has not come without profound challenges. The acceptance of large plantations and corporations such as Nestle into the Fair Trade labeling system calls into question the very underpinnings of the certification system of which we are a part."

If you choose another kind of Fair Trade coffee, make sure that the brand you are buying was sourced from small-scale farmers. If you're buying Equal Exchange, look for their hard-to-miss rectangular red logo or the black-and-white Fair Trade seal. If you are a parent or teacher, you can suggest that your school switch to the Equal Exchange fundraiser program. If you belong to a faith community, you might consider Equal Exchange's Interfaith Fair Trade program.

And finally, consider subscribing to Equal Exchange's newsletter, What's Brewing, to stay up-to-date on the latest information. Occasionally Fair Trade farmers need your help in lobbying federal governments. Equal Exchange uses their newsletter to encourage readers to contact their elected representatives to affect critical legislation.

While in El Salvador, I was offered only weak coffee to drink. I learned that the second pressing (in other words, low-grade beans) was all that remained in the country, and that the first pressing was exported to mostly American grocery stores.

Make mine Café Salvador, as I reminisce about the farmers that I met that summer day in 1998.

Sources

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PHOTO: **"Sorting Coffee, Maraba Washing Station", Ry Tweedie-Cullen**