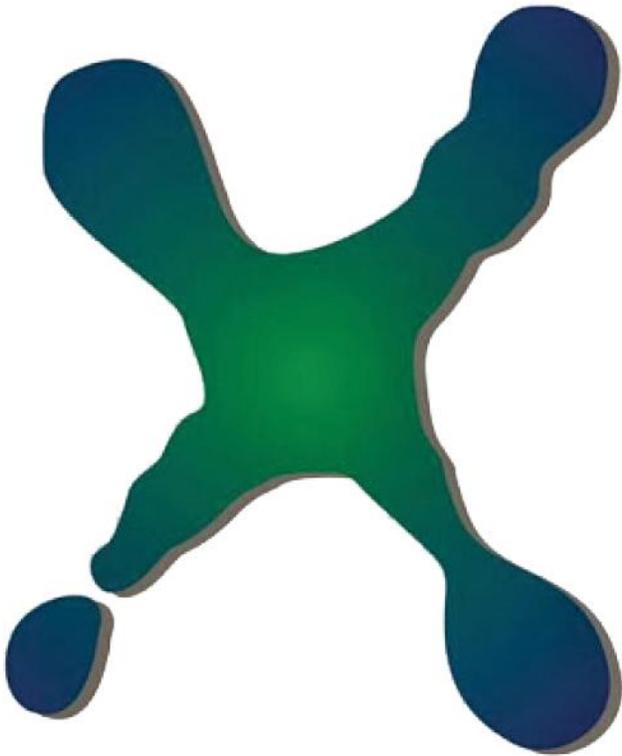


SWEATFREE TRIBE
INTERVIEW SERIES
PRESENTS



AN INTERVIEW WITH
Ian Robinson

www.ethixventures.com

We know that SPC is currently in fundraising mode. What can our readers do to help?

Yes! In fact, I just sent out a letter to movement activists and university colleagues asking them if they'd be willing to donate something to support the cause. I've already heard back from quite a few of them, which really feels good! Here is an abbreviated version of what I said to them in that letter:

The SPC builds on the insight that “collective” consumers – in this case, public entities -- have much more power to shape international commodity chain dynamics than individual consumers. Our membership currently encompasses three states and 13 cities including PA, NY, ME and Los Angeles San Francisco and Portland. Each of these (as well as many others not yet part of the SPC) has committed to purchasing public uniforms from sweat-free sources.

The SPC's members have gone beyond the other public entities with sweat-free ordinances by banding together to create a common model of purchasing standards; a common database of vendors, and a dense network of information exchange.

This year the SPC built on this foundation by collaborating with one of our members -- the City of Madison, Wisconsin -- to craft a Cooperative Contract RFP for uniforms and public entity apparel purchase that pioneers labor standards – and a process for both independent assessment and for vendor improvement. One of the beauties of the cooperative contract is that any public entity can “piggyback” and make purchases under its terms, whether or not they are ready to join the SPC.

The formation of the SPC owes a great deal to the activists of Sweatfree Communities and in particular its creative and committed founder Bjorn Claeson. In the long run, our goal is to fully finance the Consortium's work with dues from its members and fees for the information and ordering services it provides to non-members. For example, it will earn fees in relation to the Cooperative Contract. But cities and states are under extreme budget pressure. We are now having a difficult conversation about raising dues. As the Board wrestles with these matters, it is essential that we support its minimal staffing requirements and attempts at expansion with the support of sympathetic allies. That is why the SPC needs external help now.

Please help! I know that each of you has many other commitments, but after the Rana Plaza disaster, we all know what is at stake in the battle against sweatshops. You can use this [webpage](#) or you can mail a check (made out to the Sweatfree Purchasing Consortium) to my home address (3435 Brentwood Court, Ann Arbor, MI 48108) which I will forward to the SPC. If you use the website, please let me know so I can thank you personally. It is a tax deductible contribution.

Thanks for giving me the space to share this request with your readers!

Can you tell us more about your experience in the sweatfree movement which led to your role as Secretary and Board Member of the [Sweatfree Purchasing Consortium \(SPC\)](#)?

I first became involved in the sweatfree movement because I was inspired by what the students on the University of Michigan campus were doing on the issue. This was in the late 90s, when USAS was new. U of M was an important campus, from the point of view of USAS's strategy, because sports apparel with the big M logo are such big sellers, and we had a very committed and effective branch here in Ann Arbor. Its acronym back then was SOLE (Students Organizing for Labor Equality).

I had already been working on NAFTA and how neoliberal trade agreements like NAFTA promote race to the bottom dynamics in wages, working conditions, worker rights and democracy. So the USAS critique of the dynamics in the apparel sector's global supply chain made total sense to me. It was a pleasure to be able to support and work with idealistic young people who had a good analysis of what was wrong, and a strategy for using our local collective power to do something about it.

Because the SOLE students got me thinking more about the apparel piece of the global system, I was open to the idea, proposed by another UM Sociology Dept colleague that we do an experimental research project to see if consumers were willing to pay more for sweat-free products. That research project, and a couple of follow-ups we did thereafter, brought me this strand of my research into alignment with a key question that the anti-sweatshop movement needed to be able to address when seeking to get skeptics and critics to take their proposals seriously.

The research work that started in this way, then led me to [Bama Athreya](#). Bama and I put together a conference at UM in 2005 called Creating Markets for Conscientious Consumers. The idea was that conventional for-profit apparel brands and retailers were not responding to the consumer demand for sweat-free clothing that our research showed was out there. There was a serious market failure in this sense. So it was necessary to construct this market; it would not come into being just sitting around waiting for for-profit entities like The Gap or Wal-Mart to respond to it. We thought maybe we could learn from the way ethical consumers had constructed the fair trade coffee market, which was rapidly expanding by that time (as it still is). So we brought together people from the fair trade coffee world with people from the apparel sector. I met a lot of leading people in the anti-sweatshop movement -- including [Kevin O'Brien](#) -- at that conference for the first time, and have been networked with them ever since.

It was connections to Bama, [Bob Ross](#), and through them- [Bjorn Claeson](#), that eventually got me invited onto the Board of the Sweatfree Purchasing Consortium (SPC). The SPC is comprised of two kinds of members: the government entities (city, county and state governments that purchase clothing for their employees, and seek to do that in accordance with sweat-free principles) and labor experts who do research and/or otherwise gain expertise on how the global supply chain works in the apparel sector.

I was asked by Bjorn Claeson, the SPC's Executive Director, if I'd be open to serving as one of those experts, and I jumped at the chance. This was about a year after the SPC was created. My own research and writing has been mainly about what individual consumers will do, if presented with real world opportunities to buy sweatfree apparel. But I've always recognized that our best chance of shifting some factories and ultimately brands and retailers onto the "high road," in the first stage of the process, is through the purchasing power exercised by large collectives like major public universities and governments.

If we succeed in getting some factories, brands and retailers in making this shift, then individual ethical consumers will have the options they want, and their weight in the market -- potentially enormous, given their huge numbers -- will be a massive reinforcer of what the collective purchasers got started. So it's really a two-step process as I see it. Working with the SPC seemed like a natural supplement to working with USAS on universities in order to overcome the first

hurdle. If -- or, I should say, when -- we get to the second stage, I'm confident that individual consumers will prove our research findings correct.

We see and hear references to your research projects, often in the sweatfree merch marketplace. Your work with Bama Athreya on "Constructing Markets for Conscientious Apparel Consumers" helped us wrap our heads around the key marketplace issues. Do you have any plans for further research?

Along with two of the colleagues I've been working with since our first "sock experiment" on ethical consumption, I just published the results of our latest research, which used American Apparel customers in Ann Arbor to explore the significance of the fact that most Americans really do care about whether their clothing is made in sweatshops, but they don't care as much about that as they do about whether the clothes fit well, look good, are well made and affordable. The question, of course, is: if all of these other concerns have higher priority than sweatfree concerns, do those sweatfree concerns really matter?

We were able to show, based on our interviews and our analysis of the purchasing behavior of these consumers, that sweatfree preferences can be decisive in cases where vendors offer sweatfree products that also satisfy the higher ranked preferences. And that is not actually very hard to do. Many of the customers we interviewed as they exited the American Apparel store believed that those products satisfied their price, quality, style and fit concerns, and they shopped at American Apparel rather than somewhere else with clothing that would have met those other criteria because they believed that it's clothing was produced sweat-free. Of course, those of us who have followed American Apparel over the years, and have a fairly rigorous definition of "sweatfree" might well disagree -- after all, the company's founder and (until recently) CEO had a history of sexual harassment cases and he also violated worker rights when they tried to form a union back in the early days. But the important point for purposes of our analysis is not what we think, but whether the customers believed that American Apparel operated sweat-free, and over 90% of them did believe that claim.

For anyone who wants to read the whole analysis, it was published -- along with a bunch of other terrific essays on the potential for changing global apparel sector dynamics through ethical consumption -- here is the citation: Ian Robinson, Howard Kimeldorf and Rachel Meyer, "[The Strength of Weak Commitments: Market Contexts and Ethical Consumption](#)," in Jennifer Bair, Marsha Dickson and

Doug Miller, eds. *Workers' Rights and Labor Compliance in Global Supply Chains* (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 140-634.

I have a few research ideas beyond this piece. Most importantly, Bama Athreya and I have teamed up again, almost 20 years after our first collaboration, to explore to what degree vendors of ethically produced products focus on the ethical consumers as opposed to those who are either unaware of, or don't care about, how their products were made. To go back to the parallels with fair trade coffee, in countries like the UK, big chains like Sainsbury's now stock a lot of fair trade coffee. And because they have made the decision to do so, fair trade coffee sales have soared to about 20% of all coffee sales. But what share of those who buy the fair trade coffee from stores like that are doing so for ethical reasons? That isn't clear. Obviously it would be good to sell ethically produced goods to non-ethical consumers because that would greatly expand sales and with them, the share of all apparel producers who would be working in sweatfree production facilities. So the degree to which this is possible, and how to realize this possibility as fully as we can -- these are critical questions.

Unfortunately, both Bama and I have a lot of other responsibilities, and the work on this new project is going rather slowly. If anyone with a research interest and skills reading this would like to jump in and help us to move this ahead more quickly, I would love to hear from them! I can be reached at eian@umich.edu.

Congratulations on recently being elected President of the Huron Valley CLC. Considering that you're also an academic (teaching and research), and since academia seems so far removed from boots on the ground organizing, how do you marry the two?

Thanks! It's a terrific opportunity and a lot of fun to do this work. But it's also one of those "other responsibilities" that I was just mentioning. It's taking a lot of my spare time! It's true that people working in academic settings often end up devoting such a large share of their time to the academic world of departmental committees and professional associations that they have almost no serious time left over to apply what they know to work in the community. But this is really a personal choice. If we choose, we can do research that is highly relevant to real world struggles for workers' rights, or any number of other important causes. And, if we choose, we can get involved in our communities in ways that bring what we have learned to bear on the choices that NGOs and activists make about what goals to pursue and what strategies to employ in pursuing them.

It is true that the pace of things in the activist world is much faster pace than the academic world, and you have to be able to adapt to that. You have to learn how to make decisions quickly, without as much time for research and discussion as you would really like to have. And you have to develop new skills for working together with people who share your social justice / change goals that are not academics and come from very different backgrounds. A lot academics weren't born into the chattering classes. We came from working-class and modest middle class backgrounds ourselves. For academics like us, at least, these social challenges are really not that difficult to navigate, and the skills required to do this work effectively are no more difficult to acquire than many other skills we've acquired along the way.

The biggest hurdle to combining work in this way is probably that the academic system rewards people who devote their time, energy and intelligence to advancing their research and publications and teaching, but not so much to people who apply what they have learned from their academic work to advancing the public interest through working in and with the wider communities in which they live. To some extent, this may be inevitable -- every organization is parochial to some extent, and wants its employees to reserve their strongest loyalties and efforts for itself. But I do think this represents a failure of vision on the part of public universities which were, after all, created with tax payer money with the express purpose of advancing the public interest. This is something that we need to change, so that many more academics are incentivized to engage more often and more effectively with the community. In the meantime, you have to be willing to ignore the incentives that (if you pay attention to them) draw you away from the kind of work I'm doing. I don't find it difficult to ignore them, frankly. Compared with the satisfaction that I derive from working with the excellent people I work with, and from knowing that we are making history, not just recording or analyzing it, the incentives of more money or more status really aren't very compelling.

Bottom line: it's not very difficult to make the kinds of connections I've made between academic and public work, but because the system isn't set up to encourage that, you have to make your own road, rather than following the path of least resistance. And making your own road is the most interesting and fun way to live!

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