



Tomato farmworkers in the field. Photo Credit: Scott Robertson

### Will the Supermarkets Step Up?

By pooling their massive purchasing power, supermarket chains are able to demand deep discounts from their suppliers.

Unfortunately for farmworkers, it is

precisely this type of high-volume, low-cost purchasing that has created strong downward pressure on wages and working conditions as suppliers look to cut costs in order to maintain profit margins. Supermarket chains may not

have created farmworker poverty, but they continue to play an active, and profitable, role in perpetuating it.

Since 2007, the CIW and its allies have called on supermarket chains to support the emerging solution to the human rights crisis in Florida's fields. This call is even more urgent given recent developments with the FTGE.

Yet with the exception of Whole Foods, supermarkets still refuse to join the Fair Food program. It is increasingly clear that the supermarket industry is attempting to shirk responsibility to pay into the system, short workers of its portion of the pay increase, and refuse to tie its purchases to the Fair Food principles.

Until this untenable position changes, supermarket chains can expect growing discontent from farmworkers and consumers alike. ■

## To Tell the Truth: Who Owns Fair Trade?

by Phyllis Robinson

When TransFair USA announced last fall that it was changing its name to Fair Trade USA, an immediate and ongoing tsunami of outrage and indignation burst through the Fair Trade community. Alternative Trade Organizations, 100% Fair Trade roasters, student, religious, and consumer activists, and non-profit organizations, all of whom have dedicated themselves to the difficult but critically important work of building market access for small farmers across the globe, were affronted. How could any single organization, a certifying agency no less, claim the name Fair Trade? Fair Trade is a concept, a way of doing business, a value system, an entire movement built through the convictions and hard work of hundreds of thousands of individuals across the globe. Can one organization simply appropriate all that "Fair Trade" signifies, and claim it for itself?

Reactions to the announcement have differed, but mainly span from disappointment to anger. Some are dismayed that TransFair would undertake such a divisive move, thereby attracting



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bad publicity and potentially hurting those for whom Fair Trade is most supposed to benefit. Others are more indignant, seeing this step as one more in a long line of "corporate-like attitudes and behaviors" that blatantly disregard

and steamroll over the legitimate concerns of others in the movement. Still others give TransFair credit for devising such a bold marketing move: just when your organization is encountering growing public relations challenges,

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rebrand yourselves so that the average consumer makes the assumption that your organization and Fair Trade are one and the same.

It is interesting that the move comes at a time when criticism of TransFair's approach and its actions has never been higher. In fact, the name change coincides with the recent decision this past year of many organizations, including Equal Exchange, to drop the use of the TransFair logo on fairly traded products, in favor of the IMO (Institute of Market Ecology) "Fair for Life" certification. Not only does the departure of many of the original "100% Fair Traders" signal growing discontent with TransFair, but since companies must pay each time they use the TransFair logo on a product, discontinuing use of their seal also carries financial impact. For the first time, companies finally have a choice between Fair Trade certifications. It is no wonder that TransFair took this moment to try and become Fair Trade USA.

But at the end of the day, why make such a fuss over a name change?

I mean honestly, does it really matter what Transfair calls itself? Should we really be getting worked up about the preferences of one certifying agency? Aren't there far more pressing issues going on in this country and in the world right now that deserve our attention?

Much of the anger and resentment surrounding TransFair's name change results from their long history of overlooking and undermining the interests, opinions and values of others in the movement. Coming as it has after a long line of far more serious and consequential actions over the past decade, this appropriation of the name Fair Trade, is considered by many to be the proverbial "last straw." The real disagreement, between TransFair and others in the movement, however is much more than symbolism. It is about divergent views of the mission, the underlying values of Fair Trade, and the strategies employed to fulfill that mission. At stake are the fundamental questions: who is Fair Trade meant to serve and how should it best do so?

The roots of Fair Trade began in Europe after World War II as a faith-based initiative to help provide livelihoods for eastern European war refugees. Non-profits, such as Oxfam, with an interest in alleviating global poverty, worked to create markets for the refugees' products. In these early days, "fair trade" followed a charity, or solidarity, model where the disadvantaged received market assistance.



Santiago Paz, CEPICAFE coffee co-operative, Fair Trade Futures Conference, Sept. 2011

Meanwhile, small farmers in the Global South, historically marginalized and without access to social services, infrastructure, credit, markets, or technical assistance, were organizing themselves into co-operatives as a means of survival. In response, by the mid-70s, a new wave of businesses in Europe, called Alternative Trade Organizations (ATOs), sprang up with the philosophy, "Trade Not Aid." They believed that market access was not something to be done out of charity, but rather, that Fair Trade was a right. The ATOs saw the farmer co-ops as equal partners; that work needed to be done in both the North and South in order to create a new system of trade that would benefit producers and consumers alike.

In the mid-1980s, Equal Exchange's founders created one of the first Fair Trade organizations in the United States to work with food products and small farmer co-operatives in the Global South. Like its allies in Europe, Equal Exchange's philosophy is deeply rooted in the conviction that the conventional trade system is unfair and that the mission of Fair Trade was to support small farmers, educate consumers, change business practices and ultimately create a new system of trade based on dignity, respect, and empowerment. This was not charity; it was structural change.

And so, the ATOs, Fair Trade coffee roasters, food co-operatives, social justice non-profits, interfaith organizations, students and other activists began the difficult work of growing a movement and opening markets for small farmer products. Alongside the traders' efforts to build supply chains and get small farmer products on the grocery store shelves, the activists worked tirelessly to build demand. They educated consumers about the importance of small farmers and the need to change the trade system which disproportionately favored large companies and plantations, marginalized small farmers and kept consumers ignorant about the source of their food and those who grow it.

An international body, the Fairtrade Labeling Organization (FLO), was created to certify small farmer co-operatives through a set of social and environmental criteria. In 1998, Equal Exchange, along with other organizations, supported the establishment of TransFair USA, a FLO-affiliate, to serve as an independent third party to ensure and verify that Fair Trade businesses in the U.S. were also meeting a set of Fair Trade guidelines. To participate in the system, and place the seal on a product, each industry pays a fee to TransFair.

Since that time, TransFair has grown to become a \$10 million organization. While it is technically a certifying agency, TransFair also began promoting Fair Trade and its licensees, organizing consumers, and marketing its seal as a brand. One of the

earliest criticisms leveled at TransFair was the fact that it simultaneously attempts to perform inherently contradictory functions: on the one hand certifying, regulating and receiving user fees from all companies, and on the other, spending this money to promote and heavily market a very limited number of specific companies. What should have been applauded as an effort to bring unprecedented visibility to the struggles of small farmers was undercut by the larger conflict of interest and the dumbing-down of the message; in short, neglecting consumer education in favor of the branding slogan, "Look for the seal."

It wasn't long before TransFair was courting large multi-national companies, such as Nestle, Chiquita, and Dole, lowering the bar to grow their brand. Providing certification to these companies, with their horrendous reputations, poor labor practices, and minimal commitments to the goals and mission of Fair Trade, has angered many who are striving to uphold Fair Trade to the highest level. Several years ago, TransFair received so much opposition to their attempt to bring Chiquita into the Fair Trade system, it eventually was forced to give up. However, last year TransFair did succeed in quietly getting a portion of Dole's bananas certified Fair Trade. The certification came at the same time that Dole (and Chiquita) was sued for its documented financial support of paramilitaries in Colombia, responsible for the murders of a number of labor unionists working on its plantations. Last year, both companies made it to the International Labor Rights Forum's list of 2010's five worst labor rights abusers.

Of all the controversial actions the certifier has taken, it has been TransFair's work in spearheading the entry of plantations into the Fair Trade system that has earned them the most ire, and probably done the most to weaken Fair Trade. In an effort to grow fast, Transfair and FLO have promoted a whole range of new products eligible for Fair Trade certification. Rather than do the necessary, and very difficult work to create and grow supply chains from small farmer organizations, the certifying bodies have taken the far

easier path and certified a whole host of plantation products. It is this "quantity" over "quality" approach which has small farmers, traders, and Fair Trade activists most upset.

At the Fair Trade Futures conference in Boston last September, Santiago Paz of the Peruvian small farmer coffee co-operative, CEPICAFE, summed it up best: "It's as if they're driving a car going 70 miles an hour and they have put their foot on the gas pedal. Now it's going 90, 100, 120-mph and suddenly the small farmer in the passenger seat is flying out the window. They are so concerned with growing the system, advancing at all costs, that they will only end with the extinction of small farmers."

Fair Trade is about transformation and this structural change only comes about by demanding and growing alternative models to the current system. It requires a commitment to small farmer organizations, to opening markets for small farmers, and to building a network of informed, educated and active consumers. Instead of supporting others in the movement to carry out this work, TransFair and its parent organization, FLO, have put their energy and resources into expanding the brand: not only do they certify multi-national companies whose overall practices do not show a commitment to these Fair Trade principles, but they have moved away from the idea of structural change.

In most products aside from coffee, chocolate, and a few others, large plantations can now be certified. In 2003, at the Specialty Coffee Association of America conference in Boston, the contingent of small farmer coffee co-operatives, and their industry allies, went wild when they learned that TransFair was trying to open up coffee and chocolate to plantations as well. TransFair used the argument that workers on plantations also need "assistance", but the fact remains that while every worker deserves dignity, respect, and labor rights, most plantations have not proven to be change agents. Small improvements, such as the installation of electricity and bathrooms,



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are services which should be provided by management anyway. Fair Trade is not about small improvements. Worse is that allowing plantations, with all the historical advantages they receive from governments, to compete with small farmer organizations in the same system, will in fact cause small farmers – with their limited resources – and access to technology, credit, infrastructure to fail.

And so, if anger over TransFair's name change has risen over the symbolic nature of the action, the deeper issues stem from its persistent and constant efforts to "corporatize" the Fair Trade movement. As Santiago Paz so emotionally and eloquently put it, what's at stake is nothing less than the future of Fair Trade; the future of small farmers.

Will the real owner of the Fair Trade movement please stand up? A ridiculous idea, of course. Fair Trade is a movement, not a brand. No one has the right to claim ownership over a movement. Just like in the 1970s popular game show, To Tell the Truth, when the panelists must guess which of the contestants can legitimately claim a specific identity, in this scenario, we are all the panelists. It is ultimately up to us to discern whether those claiming to "own" the movement are within their rights. ■

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To learn more, or to sign the petition demanding that TransFair cease using the name, Fair Trade USA, visit <http://www.organicconsumers.org/transfairusa/index.cfm>  
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