"Teaching about Sweatshops and Globalization"

By

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Abstract

This paper reports on my experience teaching "Sweatshops and the Global Economy." It describes exercises in the political economy for engaging students in the study of sweatshops. Also taken up are my efforts to involve students in the debate among economists about sweatshops and the antisweatshop movement, an analysis of the place of sweatshops in the process of globalization, and efforts to end sweatshop abuse.

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"Sweatshops and the Global Economy" is an economics course I teach at Wheaton College, a small New England liberal arts college. [1] Last semester the course enrolled sixteen students, a mix of student activists from a variety of social science majors and more traditional economics majors. My struggles to engage that mix of students in the study of sweatshops and globalization, my successes and failures, are much of what I report on in this paper.

Exercises in the Political Economy of Sweatshops

I developed or borrowed from others several exercises in political economy as tools for engaging students in the study of sweatshops. Let me tell you about two of them.

Exercise #1: Exploiting Commodity Fetishism

Believe it or not, the right place to start any sweatshop course is with Marx's concept of commodity fetishism. No, I don't mean with a long-winded exegesis of Marx's explanation of how commodities become the bearers of social relations in a capitalist economy.

But I do start with the assertion that purchasing commodities brings us in contact with the lives of the factory workers who manufacture them. Buying jeans, t-shirts, or sneakers made in Los Angeles, or Jakarta, or the export zones of southern China and Latin America connects students to the women and men who work long hours in unhealthy and dangerous conditions for little pay in the apparel and athletic footwear industries. Students in the anti-sweatshop movement, without having sloughed through Marx's Capital, understand that connection.

Sweatshop organizers know that commodities can reveal underlying social relations. For instance, the "Rethinking Schools" curriculum on sweatshops and The Smithsonian sweatshop exhibit, "Between A Rock and A Hard Place," recommend the following exercise to introduce students to sweatshops. Have students look at the tags of their t-shirts, identify the countries

where their clothes are made, and then find those countries on a map. The Smithsonian website also provides data on U.S. apparel imports from different countries and the prevailing average hourly wage in their apparel industries. That exercise got my course off to a good start.

Many of my assignments built on these initial connections. Workers' personal testimonies (e.g., Chan 2001) and other readings acquainted us with the lives of apparel and athletic footwear workers in China (Kernaghan, 2000), Indonesia, and Mexico (Fernandez-Kelly, 1997), as well as Los Angeles and New York City in the United States (Bonacich and Appelbaum, 2000; Louie, 2001). [2] Our study of working conditions in the turn-of-the –twentieth-century New York City garment industry, the Triangle Shirtwaist fire, and the reform movement that followed further deepened the connection of my students to the world of sweatshop workers (Lieurance, 2003). [3] Finally, a library assignment asked students to develop an annotated bibliography about one group of sweatshop workers and then present their findings to the class.

Two videos about sweatshops were especially helpful. “Global Village or Global Pillage.” engaged my students (Brecher et al, 2000). Its interviews with women across Asia and Latin America threw into sharp relief the global effects of what it calls the “the race to the bottom.” A recent episode of "Now with Bill Moyers" tells the story of young women who worked 70 hours a week in oppressive conditions in the Bed and Bath Prestige factory in Bangkok making clothing for Nike and Reebok, only to lose their jobs when this Taiwanese-owned factory suddenly closed its doors (Moyers, 2003). Moyers narrates the long struggle of these Thai women to win the severance pay owed them under Thai law.

Exercise #2: What is a sweatshop?

The answer to the question what is a sweatshop is less straight-forward than you might think. Most anti-sweatshop groups define sweatshop operators as employers who violate two or more labor laws, from the prohibition of child labor, to health, safety, fire and building codes, to forced-overtime and the minimum wage. Other sweatshop critics, such as labor economist Michael Piore, insist that the term sweatshop should be reserved for "a specific organization of work" in which fixed costs are held to a minimum by operating substandard, congested, unhealthy factories, typically overseen by a "sweater" or subcontractor (Piore, 1997: 136). Still others favor the broader, looser use of the term sweatshop as a vivid metaphor for a lousy job because a narrow definition of sweatshops lets off the hook too many low wage employers who might meet minimum wage and safety requirements, but seldom provide their employees with an adequate standard of living (Ross, 1997: 294).

After discussing the different definitions of sweatshops, I asked students to read several newspaper and magazine articles that use the term sweatshop, and to decide if the article used the term appropriately. The goal of the exercise was to sharpen their analytical sense of what constitutes a sweatshop, a term mainstream economists complain is a vague and ill-defined pejorative. We read "Sweatshops of the Streets" about bicycle messengers (Lipsyte, 1995), "Egg Empire is Under Fire" about agricultural sweatshops (Rimer, 1996), about workers on cruise ships – "sweatshops at sea" (Reynolds and Weikel, 2000), and even why "adjunct profs at our colleges might as well be sweatshop workers." (Scarff, 2000)

To my surprise students found this exercise to be something other than the instructive lark I had thought it would be. The exercise actively engaged them, but applying a consistent standard to defining a sweatshop proved to be a difficult assignment. Beyond that, the responses of some students were defensive. It was one thing to label export factories in the third world or even immigrant populated factories in the U.S. apparel industry sweatshops. But to suggest that

a broad swath of U.S. workers labored under sweatshop-like conditions was quite another. Some students instructed bicycle messengers to go back to school, disputed that cruise ship conditions were as bad as reported, suggested that farm work has always been hard, and advised downtrodden teachers of first year writing to lessen their workload by assigning fewer papers. Other students took the exercise as intended and tried to parse each example with a consistent definition of a sweatshop and learned a great deal from the exercise.

Confronting the Critics of the Anti-Sweatshop Movement

Most economists are convinced that low-wage world-export factory jobs, the very kind we usually call sweatshops, better the lives of workers and their families. That was surely the position of The Academic Consortium on International Trade (ACIT), a group of advocates of globalization and free-trade made up mostly of economists. In a letter to university and college presidents, the ACIT warned presidents that anti-sweatshop protesters on college campuses were often ill-informed, and that adopting codes of conduct requiring multinational corporations to pay higher wages recommended by the protestors may cost workers in poor countries their jobs.

My course devoted considerable time to understanding exactly what economists have to say in defense of sweatshops and taking on those arguments. In one class we developed a list of their arguments that I typed up. I then asked students to respond to those arguments point by point using the statement of the Scholars Against Sweatshop Labor (SASL), "my article "Why Economists Are Wrong About Sweatshops and the Antisweatshop Movement," (Miller, 2003), and sections of Contours of Dissent, by Robert Pollin, the lead author of the SASL statement (Pollin, 2003: 156-163). I then typed up and distributed our responses as an “indictment of sweatshops.”

Dissecting the mainstream economists' defense of sweatshops proved to be worthwhile experiment. Articulating these arguments in the seminar gave progressive students an opportunity to

practice responding to arguments they would surely confront outside of the seminar. At the same time, the exercise provided an opportunity to speak directly to the positions my more conservative students held, even if they could not articulate them. The result was some of our most spirited discussions. Also, I was quite pleased with my students' performance when I asked them on their midterm exam to read and analyze The New York Times Magazine article, "Two Cheers for Sweatshops," by Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, who won a Pulitzer prize for their coverage of China. Most students were able to identify the arguments Kristof and WuDunn relied on to defend sweatshops and to fashion a capable response to them.

The students seemed to enjoy the chance to be part of an on-going debate. Also taking on the defense of sweatshops by mainstream economists provides several important lessons for economics students:

1. Everyone is for some labor standards.
2. Enforcing local labor is a helpful but inadequate response to the problem of sweatshop labor.
3. Market-led economic development alone, independent of labor and social movements and government regulation, does not put an end to sweatshop conditions.
4. Demands for better working conditions and higher wages in the world export factories are not necessarily jobs-killers.

Nonetheless, the defense of sweatshops offered up by mainstream economists is a formidable one and remarkably resilient. Buttressed by tremendous ideological support, their arguments, even those effectively countered, like Hydra reappeared during the semester allowing my most conservative students to inoculate themselves against indictments of sweatshops.

Sweatshops and Globalization

I do attempt to locate my discussion of sweatshops in a broader analysis of globalization. But the tension of needing to divide class time among studying sweatshop abuse, confronting economic arguments about sweatshops, and developing the analytics of globalization limited that part of my course to no more than a couple of weeks. With that constraint, I found myself unable to move my most political students beyond condemning financial-market-directed globalization toward articulating alternative progressive polices for a developing economy to engage the world economy. To accomplish that, I concluded, would require devoting more time to studying trade and financial liberalization than was available in a course on sweatshops.

We did, however, look closely at Direct Foreign Investment (FDI) and its effects on sweatshop conditions. Most of my students were surprised to learn that in the developing world FDI is highly concentrated in a few economies, not confined to labor intensive manufacturing, and that the evidence about the effects of FDI on economic development was quite mixed (Zarksy and Gallagher, 2003: 3-6).

Our study of the return of sweatshops to the U.S. apparel industry gave my students another view of globalization. In Behind the Label, an engaging and careful study of the return of sweatshops to the Los Angeles apparel industry, sociologists Bonacich and Appelbaum (2000) documents who stays in L.A. and who moves offshore. They also supply direct evidence of the chilling effect that the threat of apparel producers moving offshore has on the enforcement of labor law and organizing efforts.

Devoting attention to globalization makes an important political point for the antisweatshop movement. For instance, students need to recognize that other workers in the developing world, especially in the informal sector and rural agriculture, are often worse off than sweatshop workers. This does not mean that the concerns of the antisweatshop movements should be dismissed, as is often suggested by its mainstream critics. Rather it makes clear that

the plight of sweatshop workers needs to be addressed as part of a movement that would demand more for working people across the multiple dimensions of the world economy.

Making A Difference

My syllabus promised to pay special attention to what we should and can do about sweatshop labor. Early on in the semester we had outlined what we thought should be done about sweatshops and developed labor standards to be implemented internationally. When we returned to the topic of what is to be done about sweatshops in the last weeks of class, most students embraced the list of reforms they had identified earlier.

But my students were more divided about how to push for those reforms. The more conservative students shared mainstream economist Theodore Moran's objections to mandatory labor standards (Moran, 2002). Like Moran, these students would improve working conditions of corporate subcontractors through voluntary corporate codes pushed on image-conscious corporations by sweatshop activists and concerned consumers, although they worried about the reliability of the monitoring of corporate codes. Also like mainstream economists they placed much emphasis on the need to enforce local labor laws, yet they did advocate going further. They favored adding joint liability laws that would make corporations responsible for the working conditions of their subcontractors to U.S. labor law. To combat sweatshop abuse in the developing world, some of these more conservative students would ban subcontracting altogether.

The more political students embraced an interventionist agenda to fight sweatshops that treated labor standards and corporate codes as matters of public policy. They accepted the notion that antisweatshop activists are the intermediaries who make the market for labor standards (Elliot and Freeman, 2003). These students, however, argued that effective corporate codes required public monitoring in which corporations disclosed the locations of their

subcontractors and workers played an active role in the monitoring process as stipulated by the Workers Rights Consortium (WRC). They also insisted that corporations pay a living wage and respect workers' rights to form independent unions. Finally, like their more conservative classmates, these students also recognized the importance of enforcing existing labor law and improving labor law. They were especially offended by the fact that labor law in "the People's Republic of China" regularly goes unenforced and this "socialist state" had turned its back on its factory workforce in a rush to industrialization

These more political students spoke of forming a chapter of United Students Against Sweatshops at Wheaton. They told me that next semester they will launch a campaign to push Wheaton, a member of the Fair Labor Association, to join the WRC. I was immensely gratified that they regarded labor rights as human rights and were willing to act on that belief. Still I worried that more of their organizing efforts might have happened during the semester if we had devoted more time to talking about what to do about sweatshops.

End Notes

1. My earlier article "Teaching about Sweatshops and The Global Economy" reports on my experience teaching a first year seminar on sweatshops (Miller, 2001). The syllabus for my upper division course is posted at http://www2.wheatonma.edu/Academic/AcademicDept/Economics/Syllabi/Syllabi.html

2. China's Workers Under Assault by Anita Chan and Made in China, the National Labor Committee (NLC) pamphlet, were especially effective (Kernaghan, 2000; Chan, 2001). Chan's book consists of 23 case studies drawn from the Chinese media that cover forced labor, corporal punishment and physical assaults, occupational safety and health, right to work, and right to organize. The NLC pamphlet is filled with short summaries and pictures describing the horrifying conditions in Chinese factories producing goods for U.S. corporations, including Wal-Mart and Nike.

3. A video interview with Rose Freeman, who at the time was the last survivor of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire (Freedman, 2000), and a video of Robert Pinsky, the former poet laureate, reading his poem, "Shirt," brought to life the tragedy of the Triangle Factory (Pinsky, 1998).

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