

Minutes from the Worker Rights Consortium Founding Conference

Friday, April 7, 2000, 11:00 a.m.—3:00 p.m. *Eastern Daylight Savings Time*
Judson Memorial Church 55 Washington Sq. South. New York, NY

- 10:00 a.m. **Registration** and refreshments
- 11:00 a.m. **Welcome and Introductory Comments**
 Moderator: **Rev. Peter Laarman**, *Judson Memorial Church*
 Maria Roeper, *WRC Coordinator*
- 11:15 a.m. **Keynote Speech—U.S. Congressman George Miller (D-California)**
- 11:30 a.m. **Alice Ming-wai Kwan—Working Conditions in China Hong Kong**
 Christian Industrial Committee / Labor Rights in China
- 11:45 a.m. **Panel Discussion and Q & A on The Worker Rights Consortium Model**
 1. **Carrie Brunk**, *Student, Transylvania University*—University Role in the Effort to End Sweatshops and the Development of the WRC
 2. **David Schilling**, *Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility*—The Apparel Industry and the WRC Model
 3. **Nikki Fortunato Bas**, *Sweatshop Watch*—Components of the WRC
 4. **Kate Pfordresher**, *People of Faith Network*—WRC Governance
 5. **Jill Esbenshade**, *UC-Berkeley*—Where Do We Start?
 And joining for the Q&A:
 1. **Steve Weingarten**, *Director of Industry Development, UNITE!*
 2. **Edna Bonacich**, *University of California, Riverside*
- 1:15 p.m. **Lunch**—*will be provided*
- 1:45 p.m. **Plenary Session: Moving Ahead From This Conference**
1. **Further Discussion**
 1. **Formation of Working Groups: Disclosure, Resource Database, and WRC Staff Search Committee-**
- 2:45 p.m. **Closing**
- 3:00 p.m. **College and University Administrator Meet in Garden Room to Elect Governing Board Representatives**

These notes were taken by United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), and should not be taken to represent a definitive account of the dialogue at the WRC Founding

**Conference. Care has been taken to express all dialogue as accurately as possible.
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college or university has been substituted.**

Introduction: Peter Laarman from Judson Church begins with welcome. Says we aren't here as the embodiment of a movement, we're here as implementers of a new vehicle or instrument that will deliver something: brands with integrity. We will figure out how brand integrity can be kept, through talking with workers. We should expect to be united on the core principles of the WRC. Administrators, representatives of universities are welcome. Welcome to international folks Maritzah Paredes and Alice Kwan.

Maria Roeper: introduces Congressman George Miller.

Congressman George Miller:

Begins by saying it is great to meet face to face, away from virtual reality. He has been involved in this issue for a long time, and knows this is not an easy constituency to hold together. Has shared some experiences as student at UC-Davis, occupations, anti-war, etc. He would like to introduce his assistant David Madland, please use him as a resource.

Says building of enforcement of workers rights won't happen through Congress, it will happen through the country – i.e. “you”. He says it will be hard to teach ethics, human rights, etc., when these things disappear in the bookstore. This is about a values-based fight, and about human dignity. This is about social consciousness, and about caring about someone half-way across the world. He doesn't know anything else that should be taught in a university, but most universities have failed.

We don't know – and usually don't have the opportunity to see how these people labor. Shining light on sweatshops really is a great “disinfectant”. There are reasons why there are subcontractors and subcontractors and subcontractors. Because they can cut and run. Your pressure made them disclose. You are reshaping the debate and dialogue. This is about working together. This is about putting a spine into the “players” more than it is about eradicating sweatshops – it is about changing the way this country does business.

Alice Kwan:

Is here to share experience. She is from Hong Kong Christian Industrial Committee, a group very concerned with working conditions in China. China is a bit of a different situation. Folks are forced to work 13 hours a day, seven days a week, and overtime – no holidays. Forced to work in dangerous conditions, very old machinery. In most factories windows are barred. Many companies keep double set of books to cheat on wages, tell workers not to punch their time cards to deny overtime pay. HKCIC asked for disclosure for a long, long time. Talking about the factories that Nike disclosed – for the Nike case,

they disclosed only the model factories. The HKCIC made a comparison between disclosed and undisclosed factories – the one being disclosed are much cleaner than the others. (For the report, please see: http://www.cic.org.hk/ce_00feb.htm). Shall we be fooled?

Short Presentations (5 min.) by Panel:

Carrie Brunk (USAS): Great to be here, great victory. USAS picked the WRC Advisory Council to help the formation and initial stages of the WRC. The Advisory Council was chosen to represent the different constituencies of the anti-sweatshop movement.

David Schilling (Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility): Apparel industry very complicated. However, at this point it is controlled by retailers. This is a great experiment. Universities have the right to say, “This is our procurement policy.” You are a very critical part of the industry.

Nikki Bas (Sweatshop Watch): Goals and components of WRC. First is to provide accurate information to colleges and universities, second is to give a voice to workers on their conditions.

1. Public disclosure – sorting information, distributing to public, etc.
2. Verify worker complaints – doesn’t certify factories. Workers are the best monitors – and must be free to speak up.
3. Spot investigations – independent verification of factory complaints.

**Termination of contracts always a last step.

Kate Pfordresher (People of Faith Network): has experience helping to develop New York Labor Committee Against Apartheid. She is talking about governance. A lot of work has gone into this meeting, but the WRC is not yet formed. We want to develop a true collaboration with universities from the very beginning. Currently, the WRC has a small financial account and *pro bono* legal counsel. *The Governing Board is the decision-making body of the WRC*: can hire and fire staff, etc. The Governing Board structure is currently six reps from the Advisory Council, three from USAS, and three from college and university administrations. We want this meeting today to choose administrative members of the Governing Board.

Jill Esbenshade (Graduate Student, UC-Berkeley): Where to go from here? Four working groups will be formed to make proposals to governing board. [NOTE: a fifth working group was later created to examine Governance and Bylaws, including the amount of university representation on the Governing Board.]

1. Staffing and Administration: responsible for drafting a staff search/hire process, funds, logistics, fiscal sponsorship
2. Data Collection: Proposal to gear WRC as an information hub. Will get more information, consolidate existing information.

3. Networking: will formalize existing NGO contacts, and explore contacts in areas where the WRC network is incomplete.
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There are challenges ahead, and universities need to collaborate. One year ago, no one imagined we would get disclosure, from an industry that has been entrenched in secrecy.

Question and Answer Period:

Lawrence R Mann, Associate Chancellor-- University of Illinois

Q: Administrators are planning on getting together again at lunch to caucus. It will take three days (approx.) to agree on process to elect governing board members.

Administrations have concerns about bylaws, process by which university members might participate. Other issues – which came to table this morning. Give consideration to how a productive manner do we engage industry into this conversation? How do we make industry partners?

A: Working group on disclosure will look into that issue – access to factories. There needs to be a healthy dialogue and formal dialogue with industry. Governing Board will decide on formal process.

Q: Number of university members on governing board. Administrators aren't interested in destroying the momentum of the WRC, but perhaps the composition of the board be given reconsideration. Does it represent interests of all members of the WRC?

A: Kate: Completely understand desire to discuss components of board. We can revise or propose changes to bylaws. Organization will be living organization – making adjustments will be protocol.

Middlebury College:

Issue of transparency. Difference between large and small schools as members. Very different issues with large schools and small liberal arts schools. At least one representative on governing board should be from small college.

Brown University:

A lot to be gained from a university project. Brown is a member of both WRC and FLA. Continued attacks on FLA will not be helpful. Want to reform FLA instead of kill it.

Smith College:

Q: Is a political economist. A couple comments on three page summary. The WRC is a brilliant strategy in response to localization of capital.

A: David Schilling: the WRC is not taking an anti-FLA position. WRC will be able to create better conditions on the ground, may have effect on other groups, WRAP, etc. We are not anti-anything. Positive, collaborative model.

A: Jill Esbenshade – we need to separate WRC and USAS. USAS will take their social movement where they want to. As George Miller said this morning, we have leverage over certain part of industry and we need to work where we have leverage.

**Part of the problem: excessive competition arises in this industry. In collegiate sector, raise standards – need hands on a powerful sector. Take the first step, and then we'll take on the world.

Q: How will existing structure maintain input from both over and under developed countries? With respect to North and South?

A: Need to ensure an organized way to give input. We have other international members of advisory council. Proposals for how we can build relationships will be done in networking working group.

Q: From St. Mary's. How will we continue communication beyond today?

A: Communication links are essential. We are setting up a listserv: to join, e-mail: wrc-everyone-subscribe@egroups.com

Q: University of Chicago (?) What is negotiable and what is not negotiable?

A: The core document of the WRC. The Code of Conduct will not be changed. However, everything is open to discussion.

Q: UNC. How are USAS folks selected to be governing board members? How was the advisory council selected? Do Universities have a say in this?

A: Carrie Brunk (USAS). Each constituency is responsible for choosing its own members.

Kate Pfordresher. Advisory Council grew out of USAS's work. AC will play role of incorporating allies from developing countries in organized way.

Q: UNC: Such a strong USAS presence, in advisory council, that they represent USAS's positions vis a vis the FLA.

A: Kate. Reiterate that there is not an official WRC position regarding the FLA and we are committed to that.

Q: University of Illinois – the dialogue this morning is intended to be constructive. In explicit fashion, please come back to the issues mentioned this morning. Address issues through dialogue.

*******Break for lunch*******

Question and Answer Session (continued):

Q: Indiana University—the WRC is a way for universities to truly act as citizens.

Q: University of Michigan: is the WRC code mandatory?

A: Jill Esbenshade: We encourage people to adapt the WRC Code, but a university may word it as they wish. However, the Code must include a living wage, full public disclosure, and certain health and safety language.

A: Steve Weingarten, UNITE! The WRC Code has two functions:

1. Ensure a living wage
2. Set health and safety standards for a school's apparel factories

A: Edna Bonacich: The Code will stop the “race to the bottom,” and will protect workers

A: Jill Esbenshade: Universities need to be members of the working groups and to form relationships within these groups.

A: David Schilling: We're building a large-scale monitoring effort through relationships with groups on the ground.

Q: Matt Turissini, Indiana University: Follow-up point from the UW-Madison Living Wage Symposium held this past November. Matt stated that people could approach him if interested in working on the follow-up conference.

Student from Macalester College: Administrators are reluctant actors here today, and may be here because of student pressure.

Peter Romer Friedman (U-Mich): Students and administrators have a equal voice on governing board, student and administrators need to work together

Q: Richard Baker, NYU: interested in how the working groups will operate working for the “magical June date”? Can panel members discuss the working groups?

A: Jill Esbenshade: The draft bylaws are open for discussion. The WRC model, however, is not open to modification of its principles. It would be great to get contact info from everyone here to facilitate the working groups.

Q: Rebecca, SF State University: In solidarity with USAS people, thinks back to her campus, and other campuses that are involved in actions. Some clarification as to what is open for changing in relation to the campus actions?

A: Steve Weingarten: Clarifies that the WRC is an independent monitoring organization, without corporate voice in the decision-making process. The WRC should give voice to workers and compile information on the working conditions in factories.

Q: U-Illinois: There will have to be tolerance with some of the ambiguities of the WRC in the beginning. Other issues that need to be addressed are as follows: the composition of the governing board (perceived need for more university representation on the board), resolution of draft bylaws, how will the dialogue with corporations proceed, how will everyone interact with the advisory board? How will the working groups address these issues?

A: Kate Pfordresher: Proposes a 5th and separate working group to address the three issues that the Illinois administrator brought up.

Carrie Brunk: Students have talked about the issues, and are open to another working group that addresses concerns over the Governing Board.

Q: Middlebury College: Stresses the need for there to be contact info available of everyone here today. What is the International Labor Organization's role within the WRC?

A: Kate Pfordresher: There has been no specific outreach to the ILO, but the WRC does reference the ILO as to some guidelines regarding child labor and health/safety standards.

Rev. Laarman: Is there a proposal to create another working group to address the issues that the Illinois administrator brought up?

David Schilling (Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility): If the question is in regards to the apparel industry relationship with the WRC, there is already a working group—the disclosure working group—that will address those issues.

Q: Kate (Macalester): is concerned about student voice on the governing board, and what will happen when the working groups tackle student voice—will it be lost?

A: Jill Esbenshade: The Advisory Council is open to changing the representation of the Governing Board.

Rev. Laarman: Mark the concern re: industry involvement.

Columbia University: Columbia has unique relationship with licensees, licensees need to be involved with the WRC.

University of Iowa professor warns against any portrayal of administrators as “evil,” also concerned with the work load of the working groups. Administrators worried that everyone else has had time to organize and administrators are here face to face for the first time today, they have not had time to organize.

Administrator wants to second that everyone understand that administrators have met for the first time today, so there is not unity among administrators. They need time to get together and network. Student seats on the WRC should not exclusively be USAS people.

Marikah Mancini (Purdue)-wants to qualify that companies’ role in the WRC should come out a working group and that companies should not have a voting seat on the governing board.

Q: Clark from U-Minnesota, student: What accountability do the different boards have?

A: Kate Pfordrehser: Talks about the accountability of full public disclosure. There is a working group to look over the draft bylaws. When there is consensus about the bylaws, the Governing Board will meet.

Rev. Laarman announces that email list can be accessed by wrc-everyone-subscribe@egroups.com

Sign-up sheets for working groups (open to all) available at the back of the room.

Jill Esbenshade re-iterates the 5 working groups (the Governance and Bylaws working group was added):

1. Staffing and Administration: responsible for drafting a staff search/hire process, funds, logistics, fiscal sponsorship
2. Governance and Bylaws: will examine draft bylaws and consider more university representation on the Governing Board.
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Rev. Laarman introduces **Maritzah Paredes** from the Collective of Honduran Women (CODEMUH) to close the conference:

She would like to thank the students and others who helped put this conference together. She is happy about the work going forward to remedy conditions throughout the world. WRC does work that needs to be done. Workers from the Global South will be important in the formation of the WRC.

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