

What's Up With Fair Trade?

By Rodney North, Equal Exchange

Many of you may have noticed that the Fair Trade logos on your favorite products have changed. The one you've seen for years (top) seems to be fading away. And that's because it is. More precisely it's being retired. At the same time - and not coincidentally - four new logos are popping up (bottom four)

These visual changes are just the tip of the iceberg. Below the metaphorical waterline is big, thick debate - a fight really - over the future of Fair Trade. This short article is just a quick introduction to pieces of that drama, as well as an invitation for readers to dig deeper and get involved so that you can help shape the fate of Fair Trade.

At the center of the story is the fact that the Fair Trade movement is not a simple homogenous collection of like-minded organizations or individuals. Rather it is made of people from over 80 nations, rich and poor and in-between. You've got about a million farmers, hundreds of farmer co-operatives, thousands of artisans (with their own co-ops, too), hundreds of importers, food companies, mission-driven Fair Trade businesses, education and advocacy organizations, certifiers, student and faith-based groups, and thousands of retailers, like Buffalo Mountain, but also large chains like Whole Foods and Walmart. Not surprising there are some large differences of opinion amongst them all.

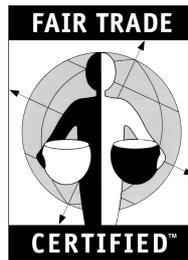
In the mid-80s the Fair Trade labeling concept was the product of the innovative and hard work of a Mexican coffee farmer co-op, UCIRI, and a Dutch Fair Trade organization, Solidaridad. Together they created the system whereby coffee bought from co-ops like UCIRI, on specific economic terms, could carry a label indicating that it was fairly traded, even if the coffee company was an otherwise conventional business. The idea quickly spread to other commodities, like cocoa and sugar, and to many other wealthy, northern countries, including the U.S.

There were many actors in this drama, and many arguments and plot twists along the way. For example, when Fair Trade was extended to tea one faction succeeded in stretching the rules so that large plantations would be eligible, too, something that others (like Equal Exchange) still think is anathema to the original vision of Fair Trade. But for many crops, including some of the most important ones like coffee, cocoa, and sugar, a line was drawn that reserved Fair Trade eligibility to democratically organized co-ops of small farmers. You could say that among the farmer groups who co-founded Fair Trade, and the pioneering brands, and the supporting civil society organizations there has been a consensus that Fair

Trade was (and should remain) a tool for uplifting the 99% (eg small farmers) and should not involve benefiting the 1% (plantation owners & large corporations). After all, one of the problems that Fair Trade was trying to redress was the long-entrenched economic and political inequality of the countryside where these exports crops have always been grown. Therefore supporting co-ops of small-farmers, not the already advantaged plantations, was an obvious pillar for the original Fair Traders like Equal Exchange. But during the years between the introduction of Fair Trade certification in the U.S., 1998, and today there has been steady, and continual, divergence between the vision of the dominant certifier, Fair Trade USA (formerly TransFair USA) and the movement pioneers. Actually Fair Trade USA's desired path has even alienated them from the global body of certifiers, Fair Trade International, of which they had always been a dues-paying member.

This difference in strategic perspective on Fair Trade's mission and purpose came to head in October 2011 when Fair Trade USA announced they were not only seceding from Fair Trade International but were also going to promulgate their own Fair Trade rules through which would realize their long-held wish of certifying plantations. They call their new approach "Fair Trade For All".

This immediately ignited a firestorm from most of the other key players in the movement, with the notable exceptions of Green Mountain Coffee and Whole Foods. Tellingly, most of the large corporations who sell some Fair Trade products, like Starbucks, Dole and Walmart have stayed mum on the issue. Conversely most of the hard-core Fair Trade businesses like Equal Exchange, Divine, and Cooperative Coffees, and civil society groups (United Students for Fair Trade, some faith-based groups)



and over 80 food co-ops (including Buffalo Mountain!) have all opposed Fair Trade USA's actions. For example, Fair World Project has initiated various petitions to push back. But most importantly, the small-farmer co-ops themselves, the heart of Fair Trade, including UCIRI, where it all began, have categorically rejected Fair Trade USA's actions.

This brings us to the present, to the fight over Fair Trade's future, and to what you can do. You can:

- Sign Equal Exchange's statement voicing your support for Authentic Fair Trade (over 8,000 people already have)
- Learn more about the issue at <http://www.equalexchange.coop/small-farmer-campaign>
- Sign the Fair World Project petitions
- look for the Fair Trade International blue-green-black seal, or brands like Equal Exchange, Divine, and Wholesome Sweeteners who have broken ties with Fair Trade USA.
- Ask your favorite brands to switch their Fair Trade certification away from Fair Trade USA.