

# Connecting People, Connecting Struggles

*Voices from Clean Clothes and Fair Food --  
A Conference to Promote Justice in Factories and Fields*

## Introduction

"Clean Clothes and Fair Food, A Conference to Promote Justice in Factories and Fields" was a co-production of SweatFree Communities and the Alliance for Fair Food, held at Columbia Law School in New York City, April 27-29, 2007. About 135 people from a variety of organizations concerned with worker exploitation in a variety of industries participated in workshops, presentations, impromptu discussions, actions and performances. The conference would not have been possible if not for the countless volunteer hours of members of SweatFree Communities, the Alliance for Fair Food, Fair Food New York City, Campaign for Labor Rights, Labor-Religion Coalition of New York State, and the generous support of conference sponsors.



Rev. Noelle Damico speaks during the Reverend Billy and Church of Stop Shopping performance. Photo: Jeff Crespi.

Clean Clothes and Fair Food was SweatFree Communities' fourth annual conference, but the first one organized with an organization whose primary interest is worker rights abuses in the food industry.

Why did we come together for this conference?

On a global level we belong to a family of social movements comprising hundreds of thousands of organizations responding to growing ecological and social threats to our very existence. Zooming in on a small part of this global movement, we find organizations like SweatFree Communities and the Alliance for Fair Food organizing consumers in solidarity with workers at the bottom of supply chains, and demanding that the big purchasers at the top of these supply chains take responsibility for the welfare of workers in the most vulnerable positions. These organizations propose and create solutions that in the short term address specific injustices in certain industries – garments, food, and electronics among others – but also can help change the rules of a global economy based on exploitation if widely replicated across different industries. This broad convergence of goals, strategy, and analysis seems to us more significant than the dissimilarities between our organizations: fields vs. factories, fast food vs. (fast) clothes. Working in similar ways in different industries yields experiences that are fruitful for the advancement of one another's efforts.

### **Sweat Free Communities**

coordinates a national network of grassroots campaigns that promote humane working conditions in apparel and other labor-intensive global industries by convincing both public and religious institutions to adopt sweatshop-free purchasing policies. Using institutional purchasing as a lever for worker justice, the sweatfree movement empowers ordinary people to create a just global economy through local action.

[www.sweatfree.org](http://www.sweatfree.org)

**The Alliance for Fair Food** is a network of human rights, religious, student, labor, and grassroots organizations who work in partnership with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW). We promote principles and practices of socially responsible purchasing in the corporate food industry that advance and ensure the human rights of farm workers at the bottom of corporate supply chains.

[www.allianceforfairfood.org](http://www.allianceforfairfood.org)

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## The workers and the issues

The people who work in the fields in Florida and elsewhere and the people who labor in garment sweatshops the world over can be the same people in different phases of their lives or people from the same communities of subsistence farmers who have taken different routes as economic refugees from corporate globalization.

They face the same issues, the same oppression. The human rights crisis in Florida's fields is the same as the crisis in garment sweatshops worldwide: grueling, dangerous work with no right to overtime pay, no health insurance, no sick leave, no paid vacation or pension, and no right to organize in order to improve these conditions. Racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression are building blocks of an economic system that rewards sweatshop exploitation in both factories and fields.

The workers in factories are usually young women, uprooted from the countryside, and, often, the sole breadwinners for their children. Mothers sometimes work night shifts in order to be home to cook, clean, and take care of the children during the day, living a life of exhaustion and poverty. In the United States, a majority of garments workers also work in sweatshop conditions. Everywhere, even where the conditions are somewhat less oppressive, a constant shadow of insecurity keeps workers precariously balanced on the edge of an abyss of destitution, vulnerable to the slightest push in the wrong direction. Workers who speak openly about oppression and stand up for their rights need great courage.

The sweatshop workers in Florida fields are now mostly young men. Twenty-five years ago more women also worked in the fields, but because wages have been stagnant since then a worker now needs to pick almost twice as many tomatoes to earn the same amount. The fastest pickers are young men because of their upper body strength. Most tomato pickers are between the ages of 15-30 and have come north in the hope of supporting their families back home. They are from Mexico, Guatemala and Haiti - countries where small farmers have been driven into bankruptcy because of free trade agreements and where whole communities have faced severe political oppression. While farm workers in the United States are denied rights accorded workers in other industries and immigrant workers are even more vulnerable, the men and women of Immokalee, Florida, are bringing organizing models from their home communities' experiences of resisting oppression into their new US context. Determination, democracy and human dignity are the hallmarks of their efforts to end slavery and exploitation in the fields.

Stories from the conference reveal similar conditions of exploitation prevail in a variety of other industries where immigrant workers are particularly vulnerable. Sadly in the garment, agricultural, domestic, sex and service industries, a portion of workers labor in modern-day slavery, forced to work through violence or threat of violence and unable to leave their place of employment. The rise of 21<sup>st</sup> century slavery, which often includes human trafficking across borders, is a horrific consequence of a global economic system designed to produce goods at the lowest possible cost for corporate profit and consumer convenience.

### **Lucas Benitez, Coalition of Immokalee Workers, Florida**

*Many of us are caught when we cross the border and picked up by recruiters or coyotes who give us rides to find work. They tell you it will be \$500 to get to Florida, but you will have a good boss and be paid*



Lucas Benitez, CIW.  
Photo: Jeff Crespi.

well. The reality is different. One worker who was able to escape said that when he arrived in Florida, the crew leaders gave the trafficker \$800 for each of the men. They were treated like merchandise. He said he felt worse than an animal when this business transaction was going on. ... You arrive with a debt. After paying for rent, food, transportation, and tools your debt goes up and up. So you can't leave. ...

A grower once told me: "First we had black people who were slaves who worked for us. And then came the share croppers and poor whites. And now you Mexicans are working for us." And the question is who is coming after us.

## **Kalpona Akter, Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity, Bangladesh**

In many garment factories there are no bathrooms, narrow stairs, and no ventilation. ... There are some fancy well decorated buildings where they take the auditors. In 2005, a nine-story building burned and collapsed with hundreds of workers. The owner didn't have a building permit, but he got off scotch free because of his connections to government.

At the Triangle Shirtwaist factory site at least there is a board that says these many workers died in the fire. We can show our respect to them. But in Bangladesh, we still don't know the exact number of workers who died when the KTS textile factory burned. We don't know where the workers are. Parents still come and show us photographs, saying: "This is my daughter. This is my boy. Have you seen him?" Government doesn't care. Companies don't care.



Kalpona Akter with Joe Raico, a current garment worker from New York City, observing the memorial for Triangle Shirtwaist Factory workers in Manhattan's Lower East Side. Photo: Cassina Vinnograd.

## **Carla France, Domestic Workers United, New York City**

Domestic work is seen as menial, unskilled work and not important. Workers face disrespect and discrimination on our jobs, hardships on a daily basis, and long and hard hours with little compensation. Our pay is spent even before we receive it.

## **Gabriela Villareal, Safe Horizon, New York City**

14,000 – 17,000 people are trafficked into the U.S. every year. Yet, there is no firm methodology to the extent of human trafficking. The majority of these people are from East Asia. They are mostly women. Their top three destinations are New York, Florida, and California. In New York their average age is 15-20 years old. They become domestic workers, field workers, even nurses or teachers. They work in furniture manufacturing. They are forced into commercial sex acts.

## **Saru Jayaraman, Restaurant Opportunity Center, New York City**

In New York City restaurants, 70% of workers are immigrants; 40% are undocumented; and 80% are paid poverty wages. They face high risk health and safety violations. We find some of the greatest exploitation in the fanciest restaurants.

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## Root causes

The rules of the global economy guarantee that sweatshop exploitation is the main viable competitive strategy in labor-intensive global industries.

In the apparel industry, the rules allow the large brands and retailers to define the terms of the contract with supplier factories, including price, volume, and turn-around time. The ten largest retailers account for nearly two-thirds of all apparel sales in the United States. The combination of concentrated buying power in the retail/wholesale sector and excess production capacity in domestic and overseas garment factories allows the large buyers to lower the price they are paying for goods and dictate more stringent performance standards for vendors. Performance standards include faster deliveries and fines for violations of ticketing, packing, and shipping rules. The retailers can even demand a guaranteed profit margin and insist on cash rebates from manufacturers if the guarantee is not met. The terms dictated by the large retailers and brand-name companies in effect determine where and under what conditions apparel is produced.

Pitted against one another, contract apparel shops compete relentlessly for customers by cutting costs and pressuring workers to work harder for less, resulting in abusive and oppressive working conditions. Forced long overtime hours, below legal minimum and subsistence wages, denial of healthcare, limited and monitored bathroom visits, and suppression of labor rights becomes part of the violence of everyday life.

And it is the same for the farm workers.

The corporate food giants who are end-buyers of the tomatoes picked by the workers exert enormous downward pressure on the wages of workers. Companies like Burger King, Subway and Wal-Mart whose sheer economic muscle is unprecedented, have increasingly used their buying power to drive down their costs, squeezing their suppliers for the deepest possible discounts on produce. Nonetheless, growers seek contracts with these companies to guarantee sales and avoid commodity price fluctuations.

The growers who supply the retail food industry are a few, large, agricultural interests, not small family farmers. These growers own fields in Florida, up and down the east coast, the Pacific coast, and in Puerto Rico. In response to the downward pressure on sale price from retail food corporations, growers seek to maintain their margins by squeezing their suppliers, and in particular the one supplier with the least power to negotiate its price, labor. While growers cannot demand cheaper tractors from John Deere, cheaper chemicals from Monsanto, or a break on the interest rate from their bank, they can hold wages stagnant, or even cut the piece rate, and still obtain desperately poor workers to pick their crops. Squeezed by the buyers of their produce, growers pass on the costs and risks imposed on them to those on the lowest rung of the supply chain: the farm workers they employ.

This downward pressure on tomato prices also produces fertile ground for slavery. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) has investigated and exposed five cases of modern-day slavery in the fields, and freed more than 1,000 slaves. The CIW has also helped the U.S. Department of Justice prosecute the slavers who are now serving decades in federal prison, convicted under laws put on the books during reconstruction. Their work was critical in creating a new anti-trafficking law, which was established in 2000. But slavery and exploitation exist in the agricultural industry because there is a high demand for cheap labor and because workers lack basic rights that workers in other industries have – like the right to organize and bargain collectively.

## **Bjorn Claeson, SweatFree Communities**

*Buyers and brands demand compliance with strict codes of conduct, yet scour the globe for the lowest price they can pay. As a Chinese factory manager quoted in Business Week said, "The price Nike pays never increases a penny, but compliance with labor codes raises costs." So far the system has become more proficient at covering up abuses even as it appears more transparent. It appears to have developed a conscience, but it is really business-as-usual.*

## **Karla Molina, Centro de Estudios y Apoyo Laboral, El Salvador**

*Textile companies have become sophisticated in breaking unions. Previously they might have blatantly broken the law. Now they will break the union legally or so subtly illegally that you can't tell they are breaking the law. They change the name of ownership, move machinery, and reopen. Or they isolate a factory [committed to worker rights] – leaving it like fish without water – asphyxiating the workers so that they on their own decide to abandon the union. And the whole system is designed to keep workers repressed with low wages to provide low prices to the brands to be competitive.*

## **David Edeli, Public Citizen**

*Fast Track has hurt the economy. Fast Track and the trade agreements that it has enabled - NAFTA and the WTO - have been a major cause of the current economic mess now slamming millions of American families. U.S. wages have stagnated. Fast Tracked trade deals promote job off-shoring to low wage venues and a flood of return imports. This race-to-the-bottom competition means the average U.S. worker now makes only a nickel more per hour than in 1973 (before Fast Track), even as workers' productivity nearly doubled!*

### **Victory!**

On April 9, 2007, the CIW announced they had reached an agreement with McDonald's to dramatically improve farm workers' wages and working conditions. The agreement builds upon the 2005 agreement between CIW and Yum! brands, with the addition that aspects of how conditions will be monitored are scaleable industry-wide. The fair food movement has persuaded both McDonald's and Yum! Brands/Taco Bell to make their tomato purchases transparent. Yum! Brands meets regularly with CIW, opens their books to reveal their suppliers, the amounts purchased, and the prices paid for the tomatoes. CIW can also verify that Yum's penny-per-pound increase is actually paid to the farm workers harvesting for all Yum! Brands companies (Taco Bell, KFC, Pizza Hut, Long John Silver's and A&W Restaurants). Such guarantees of transparency and accountability are mirrored in the CIW's recent agreement with McDonald's. See: [www.ciw-online.org](http://www.ciw-online.org)

## **José Schiffino, Labor Council for Latin American Advancement, New York City**

*The annual number of union workers and activists murdered in Colombia each year is larger than the combined total of unionists killed in the rest of the world combined annually. Just last year 72 trade unionists were murdered and since President Uribe first came to office in 2002 there have been over 400 killed. In that same period of time there have been only 10 convictions for these murders. The Colombia FTA could very well encourage more murders as Colombian agribusiness and other export interests would have expanded opportunities for their exports and with the weak labor standards in the agreement and other provisions, the U.S. would have little power to use trade policy to positively affect the situation.*

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## **Our demands**

To end these conditions, we must eliminate the market conditions that demand exploited and enslaved labor, and insist that large companies at the top of the supply chain take responsibility for ensuring human rights of workers in all links of the chain.

SweatFree Communities and the Alliance for Fair Food demand that:

- Large apparel brands and retailers and the fast food giants take responsibility for increasing the wages of workers at the bottom of supply chains. The contract terms between the large buyers and the factories and growers must allow for workers to receive a living wage without being forced to work long (overtime) hours in harsh conditions.
- Garment workers and farm workers participate as full partners in workplace and industry decisions that affect their lives.
- Codes of conduct to protect workers' rights be developed with the full participation of workers and be enforced in partnership with workers.

### **Carla France, Domestic Workers United, New York City**

*Domestic Workers United (DWU), an organization of nannies, housecleaners, and elderly care givers, is pushing a Domestic Worker Bill of Rights through the state legislature in Albany. If passed, it would be the first legislation of its kind, guaranteeing basic rights to domestic workers in New York State. Domestic workers have been excluded from most federal and state labor laws, including the National Labor Relations Act.*

*We demand:*

- *A living wage, phased in from \$12.00 to \$14.00 per hour by 2010.*
- *Employer choice to provide health care coverage or a wage supplement.*
- *Time-and-a-half at the regular rate for every hour over 40 hours per week.*
- *One day off per 7-day calendar week.*
- *Up to 12 weeks of family and medical leave.*
- *Paid time off for vacations and holidays.*
- *Paid sick days.*
- *Advance notice of termination.*
- *Severance pay in accordance with number of years worked.*

*We have a dream that one day all work will be valued equally, that workers will be paid a living wage, and that no human being will be considered "illegal."*

### **David Edeli, Public Citizen**

*If we work to replace Fast Track with an alternative piece of trade legislation, we can give Congress greater input and control over the process of writing and passing any future trade agreements. This alternative legislation could involve mandating policy goals for any future trade deals. Through such a mechanism, we could achieve many of the same goals that we might look to achieve through national anti-sweatshop legislation. For more reading on the idea of replacing Fast Track, read Public Citizen's memo on the issue here: [www.citizen.org/documents/ActivistTalkingPoints.pdf](http://www.citizen.org/documents/ActivistTalkingPoints.pdf)*

#### **A Government Consortium for Change**

Motivated by public sentiments to end taxpayer subsidies of sweatshops and level the playing field for ethical businesses, 181 states, cities, counties, and school districts in the United States have adopted "sweatfree" procurement policies, requiring vendors and supplier factories to abide by fair labor standards in return for public contracts to supply uniforms and other products. Yet, no single state or local government has the resources to monitor and verify working conditions or enforce sweatfree procurement requirements at supplier factories beyond their immediate jurisdiction. Currently in formation, a consortium of states, local governments, and school districts could mark a great advance in fulfilling citizens' commitment to end taxpayer support for sweatshops. By pooling resources, public institutions can ensure that citizens' aspirations have the best chance for success. For more information on the Consortium campaign, see: [www.sweatfree.org](http://www.sweatfree.org)

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## Taking action together

During the Clean Clothes and Fair Food Conference, participants departed from the halls of Columbia University to march on Burger King in Times Square, demanding human rights for farmworkers. Representatives from religious, human rights and worker communities presented the manager of the local Burger King with a letter that urged the company to work with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers to improve wages and working conditions in the fields of their Florida-based tomato suppliers, just as Yum! Brands and McDonald's have already done. The action, which was planned by Fair Food New York, was an opportunity to publicly demonstrate our commitment to human rights and corporate supply chain responsibility. The demonstration and the Carnival for Fair Food which followed, featuring locally grown, organic food prepared by a homeless food cooperative, were opportunities to build awareness and community around issues of justice within our food chain.



March on Burger King in Times Square.  
Photo: Jeff Crespi.

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## Strategies for change

The sweatfree movement and the fair food movement employ strategies for change based on the following principles:

- Consumer action in solidarity with workers who make the products or produce they buy.
- Focus on the big purchasers at the top of the supply chain who are responsible for worker rights violations further down the supply chain, including poverty wages and conditions ripe for slavery.
- Enforceable Codes of Conduct protecting the rights of workers, including worker-complaints-based enforcement of the code.

### **Noelle Damico, Alliance for Fair Food and Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)**

*We need more than legal strategies and more than public policy initiatives. Legal strategies and public policy deal with slavery and exploitation "after the fact." We need to look proactively about how to stop the forces that set the table for exploitation to occur. While it's important to punish individuals who engage in these shameful practices (and hopefully one day the institutions which also benefit from these practices), this happens only after people have been sorely abused and violated. It is not sufficient, nor is it a real deterrent in an industry that is hard to monitor.*

*The CIW's groundbreaking work on consumer-farm worker corporate campaigns against Yum! Brands and McDonald's urging them to take responsibility for the way their purchasing practices foster conditions of exploitation for farm workers in their supply chains, has issued in landmark agreements that are models for truly abolishing the incentives and rewards for using slave and exploited labor. We in the AFF hope that they will inspire new models in other industries plagued by the systemic lack of rights and the pervasiveness of slavery.*



Protesting Burger King's labor practices. Photo: Jeff Crespi.

During the Taco Bell boycott college students "booted the Bell" off their campuses and elementary school children forced their public schools to cease "Taco Bell Fridays." What other kinds of strategies could be used by students to make sure their schools buy food produced in decent conditions? Are there other public procurement markets that could be leveraged as well? As the fair food movement tries to transform the agricultural industry from its abysmal state, how might it be able to lay the foundation for a designated supplier program similar to the efforts pioneered by the Worker Rights Consortium in the sweatfree movement?

### **Lucas Benitez, Coalition of Immokalee Workers, Florida**

*We can't keep going case by case by case by case. We will continue that. But also need a solution to the problem at large. That's why we are in our campaign for fair food. Laws have been able to get some of the rotten apples out of system. But growers have not felt the consequences. Now we're making the big corporate buyers take responsibility. Taco Bell and McDonalds now immediately have to cut contracts with growers where there is slavery or human trafficking. They will have to meet higher standards for labor rights.*

### **Kalpona Akter, Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity**

*The Story of the Ringshine Textile Limited Workers' Struggle to Enforce the Law and Hold the Brands Accountable for Their Supplier Factories - Valuable Experiences and Lessons from the Struggle:*

- *Research is only one piece, but an important piece of a comprehensive campaign. It must be used.*
- *Workers' involvement improved the credibility and effectiveness of the campaign.*
- *Verifying the reliability of research and information gathered were essential to engage in the international campaign.*
- *Coordination of task delegation, information management, and internal and external communications was critical.*
- *Cooperation between three national labor centers led to a quicker solution because we had more human resources for the worker contact, information gathering, and other components of the campaign.*
- *Ability to translate documents quickly was key to keeping workers informed and in-charge of their campaign.*
- *Details and speed are important.*
- *We must be relentless and smart to win*
- *We must be humble in victory and we must re-engage with the management who wronged us in the past.*

### **Brendan Martin, The Working World**

*The heart of what we do is to finance the worker-owned cooperatives. We provide micro credit. Mixing micro-credit with worker-controlled business has much potential. Lo and behold workers get better job creating jobs for themselves. But micro credits on its own only credits 100 tiny capitalists, so you apply it to worker-owned factories on industrial scale and bring it to workers*

*whose only other option would be sweatshops. That's a possible anti-dote to corporate globalization. It's been very successful.*

## **Julia Quiñones, Dignidad y Justicia Maquiladora, Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s, Mexico**

*It's important for workers to take on the project. The process is sensitive because there is a culture of oppression. When workers who have worked in maquilas become the owners they reproduce the same practices they are used to; they put themselves in the role of the boss. We need awareness training to gain strength as a cooperative.*



Julia Quiñones and Susan Posey, translator. Photo: Jeff Crespi.

## **Janet Helene Martin**

*Living our mission in service we think differently—is that cup of coffee or tall cool glass of summer iced tea or the decadent chocolate bar or the lettuce in your salad or banana in your cake fairly traded, where the growers are paid a living wage so that they can be self-sufficient and improve their standard of living? Are your T-shirt and other clothing 'sweat-free' and produced under safe conditions and fair traded? Is that battery you are disposing going to end up being recycled by a child in India in unsafe working conditions? ... I do not bring these alternatives to you to make you feel guilty. My purpose is to help all of us think differently. To transform ourselves and be an example so we can have a transformational ministry.*

## **Post-conference working group of sweatfree entrepreneurs**

*Sweatfree entrepreneurs discuss how to make sweatfree business profitable... An untapped market exists of: 1) groups with a value-driven mission, but not fluent in social justice activism and terminology; 2) individuals who could be convinced to pay small premium on sweatfree clothes if the issue became "cool."*

*After the conference, this group started a Networking Site for Sweat Free Entrepreneurs: <http://sweatfreebusiness.wordpress.com/>*

## **Alan Flum, Fair Workplace Council**

*As consumer awareness increases, this drives companies to assure that more products are made under safe and fair conditions. This in turn drives greater consumer demand as there are more certified products to choose from.*

*When consumers purchase a product with the Fairworkplace.org certification label, they can be assured that the product was produced under safe and fair conditions. In order to obtain use of the label, manufacturers will have to agree to reveal their suppliers and their suppliers will in turn have to agree to a series of unannounced inspections, off-site anonymous worker interviews, and auditing of their wage records.*

*In addition, they must agree to the formation of on-site worker based monitoring. Fair Workplace Council will put the workers through a series of training course in occupational health and safety and worker rights.*

*If the factory where the product is made meets our standards, the company will be allowed to use the label on those specific products that have gone through the certification process. It is important to note that we certify products not entire brands.*

*In order to maximize the benefit to the workers and their families, the certification program is designed to empower workers directly. Factories and brands must agree to allow the formation of work place committees formed entirely of workers. As part of this process, workers go through a training program where they become aware of occupational health and safety hazards and their right to a living wage under this program. Workers become their own monitors and a mechanism is put in place where workers can report violations without fear of retribution.*

## **Gabriela Villareal, Safe Horizon, New York City**

*Finally, after years of investigations, human traffickers were brought to justice. In 2000, Clinton signed the Trafficking Victims Protection Act which defines what modern day trafficking and slavery is. It also defines preventive measures and allows for a set of protections. The law allows for a special visa for victims of human trafficking; stay in the U.S. for four years; bringing members of family to the U.S.; and social and legal services. The law provided funding for Safe Horizon.*

## **Saru Jayaraman, Restaurant Opportunity Center, New York City**

*Our strategy is to go after highest profile low-road actor and force them to do the right thing. Through litigation, organizing, and public pressure we force the powerful restaurants to come to table.*

*We also organize the restaurants that are doing the right thing into a "restaurant roundtable. We publish a manual on restaurants' legal obligations. Workers drafted the manual and the mayor's office distributes it. If restaurants signing our Code of Conduct they get a plaque saying, "I'm a high road restaurant."*

## **Conclusion**

Workers and consumers together can interrupt and reverse corporate economic systems that treat human beings as if we are expendable. To this end, worker leadership of our movements is important not only from a standpoint of human dignity, as workers are the most immediately affected by these abuses, but from a standpoint of efficacy. Workers are the only ones who truly have no stake in things continuing the way they are and they have the expertise required for changing these conditions. Consumer allies have a particular responsibility to develop their own leadership within their own sector constituencies, be they religious, human rights, student, business or grassroots, so that collectively we can bring the strongest and broadest demand for change. Together, we have begun to make history. Now, let's make the future.



Art projects during the Carnival for Justice. Photo: Jeff Crespi.