

Fairtrade fortnight special: Shopping For a Better World Part 3

Thus illustrating in a modest way that there is a feasible alternative to the controlling and surplus - extracting relationships orchestrated by the main brands.

Small companies like Cafe Direct and the Day Chocolate Company combine three essential elements which offer significant potential: They have production processes which embody complex social, human and environmental purposes, including financial return. Their company structures foster co-operative relationships, not just of ownership, but the connectedness and management of common interest of otherwise unequal parties. Their promotional activities eschew use of culture and information solely to create 'needs' for goods or fashionable uniformity but stress tolerance, diversity and the political relevance of knowing the issues and lifestyle choices. These elements make sense to people. The intent and purpose of these alternative multinationals resonate with all who feel doubtful about the benefits that the market will bring. It is hard to trust the fidelity of the altruistic companies to their claimed social purpose. The genuinely alternative companies engage people's conscience, rely on the interplay between themselves and campaigns and relish education and action. They depend on and celebrate the empowerment of individuals and organised groups. They also deliver goods and services which people want and need, effectively excluding TNCs from their own marketplace.

These alternatives and consumer-based campaigns, hopefully linking up with workplace-based campaigns that connect the needs of producers and consumers, illustrate that there is more than one kind of market place. But the goals of those who are most clearly working for a fair market are up against the most powerful economic interests in the world. Their success depends on relationships with other bargaining groups engaged with the market. The emergence of new fairer economic relationships depends on: how much governments agree to increase their political credibility by raising standards through public regulation how much corporations continue to hold many governments to ransom for support, sweeteners, deregulation or lowering of labour and other ethical standards whether the best companies gain customers and endorsers, thus ensuring their commercial survival against the competitors who resist the new normative frameworks but offer cheaper goods and services how much civil action goads the voluntary initiatives of all companies how much trade unions, NGOs and other community-based organisations who 'opt in' to bargaining with TNCs become divided from those that do not the way in which civil society and communities of producers and consumers can retain their independence and their values-based thinking, activities and language. The advantages of democratic, consumer-oriented campaigns are their responsiveness, natural intelligence, empathy and internationalism, the ad hoc nature of their birth and death, their simplicity of purpose, audacity and vision. On the other hand they lack strategic sense or a notion of destination.

So, closer co-operation between the labour movement and the consumer-based campaigns now taking on multinational capital would be of great mutual value and a step forward in reshaping the forces at play. The capacity for strategic debate and sense of vision to be found in labour movement traditions could help to overcome a weakness of the fair trade and NGO movement. On the other hand the focus of this consumer movement on the content of market relations is vital to rethinking socialism in an age of multinational domination where common ownership does not provide the most feasible immediate solution to economic injustice

In the long term, consumer, trade union and government efforts to socialise the market will lead to new forms of companies, with forms of ownership which equalise relations between producers and consumers. But action can be taken directly, collectively and immediately in the market before changes in ownership become a remote possibility.

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Davinos Greeno works for the [organic food](#) and [ethical clothes](#) directory that lists 100s of Organic and Ethical Companies and we also have [Health Articles](#) for you to read or publish.