

# **Boot the Bell Campaign**

## **University of Chicago Case Study**

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### **Background**

The Anti-Sweatshop Coalition (ASC) (USAS affiliate) at the University of Chicago had existed for about 3 years when we began the Boot the Bell campaign. The U of C is a traditionally conservative or apathetic campus that is the home of a legendary neo-classical economics department. We are not a member of the Workers Rights Consortium. We have faced considerable road blocks to progressive organizing in the past. ASC had a few small victories (like getting the medical school to cut a contract with a striking laundry), but for the most part we were focussing on building the group, on growing membership and doing education. We were a young group. Most of our members and leaders were first or second years. We had about 15 core people and a mailing list of 200 or so.

### **The Beginning**

We kicked off the campaign on the Student Labor Day of Action which is April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2002. We had brought Romeo from the CIW and Brian Payne to campus a few months before. On April 4th 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. was killed in Memphis, Tennessee organizing sanitation workers. King was in Memphis building for what he called the Poor People's Campaign which was aimed at connecting civil rights to economic justice. Students across the country celebrate King's legacy by standing in solidarity with workers. We tabled all day long in front of the Taco Bell and did street theatre in the dining area where people usually ate their food from Taco Bell. We also hand delivered tomatoes with notes attached to them to all of our administrators. The notes talked about how it was the anniversary of Martin Luther King's death and to honor him, we should pay attention to the conditions farmworkers in Florida were facing picking our tomatoes today. The notes also asked for a meeting with members of the Anti-Sweatshop Coalition and the administrators responsible for the contract with Taco Bell. Administrators responded to our notes very quickly and set up a meeting almost immediately.

### **Meeting with Administrators**

It's relatively easy to get meetings with administrators on our campus. We have relationships with some of the deans. We began meeting with administrators almost immediately in our campaign. In general, administrators at the UofC don't mind meeting with students. I think they like the students to think that they are getting close to winning. It's easy to get meetings, but it's hard to force administrators to act. The administrators we were meeting with were the Dean of students in the college and the Dean of Housing and the administrator of the Reynold's Club which is the student center that Taco Bell was in. We devoted the first meetings to getting answers from the administrators about what they wanted to see us do to kick Taco Bell off campus.

In retrospect, we should have documented what they were telling us. The hardest aspect of our campaign was getting the administrators to hold true to their promises. We should

have figured out a way to document these meetings...whether it was via tape recorder or having a campus reporter present at every meeting. At a public symposium this year, the administrators admitted that they made mistakes during the campaign (read lied to students). Even without documenting it, it was useful for us to get a list of things from the administration that we needed to do to get Taco Bell off of campus. Here are some of the things they told us to do:

1. Get an endorsing resolution from the Inter House Council (represents students in dorms that have meal plans that can be used at Taco Bell) (we did this)
2. Editorials in campus newspapers (we did this too!)
3. An open-community forum where folks can voice support or opposition (also this)
4. Have the Taco Bell Boycott become a part of campus dialogue. (and this)
5. Get endorsements from large student organizations. (and most importantly, this.)

They told us that affecting the sales of the Taco Bell would be useless. They also told us that the Calvin Report did not apply (the Calvin Report is a University of Chicago document that states that the University will not take political stances in business negotiations). The Calvin Report was written to justify not taking a stance during the Vietnam War and has been used to justify not divesting from South Africa during Apartheid and not joining the Worker's Rights Consortium. In general, it has been used as a way to block the campaigns of student activists and not as a model or code of conduct.

### **Center of National Campaign**

At a Taco Bell Boycott meeting in Washington DC during the April 20<sup>th</sup> 2002 mobilization, we, CIW representatives and student and community activists decided to make the University of Chicago the center of the national student campaign, "Boot the Bell." I think that we have to acknowledge that our victory came so quickly because of the work that Maribel and Sebastian from the Mexico Solidarity Network and Brian and Julia from the Student Farmworker Alliance did to support our campaign. Many thanks.

### **Here are some highlights of our campaign:**

#### **Coalition Building**

We kicked off our Taco Bell Boycott Campaign at an important time in the history of University of Chicago activism. Progressive student groups were beginning meetings with cultural student groups and people of color organizations about building progressive student coalitions and solidarity. It was an exciting moment. We were all talking a lot. We were talking about taking over the student government, about challenging the Calvin Report. Progressive faculty were meeting to talk about challenging the Calvin Report (initially passed by the faculty senate so they thought they had some power there.) Rank and file worker movements in the hospital were gaining strength and a radical edge. It was exciting times. We ran a progressive student of color slate for student government and they won. They endorsed the Taco Bell campaign. We worked closely with the Organization of Black Students and MEChA on the campaign. We got endorsements from

most of the cultural student organizations (especially the big ones, the Organization of Black Students and the Organization of Latin American Students.) We got endorsements from all of the progressive student organizations, from academic organizations like the Debate Team. I think that we helped to begin to build solidarity and power in these organizations. The effects lasted. Traditionally white student organizations (like USAS) began talking about intentional anti-racism work. We had discussions about gender roles and homophobia. Important steps in sustainable organization building began to happen. We also worked with the organized labor on the campus. We got workers on campus and in the hospital to put up our fliers and to endorse our boycott.

### **High-Profile Events**

Methodman came to the University of Chicago in the middle of our campaign. We were able to use friends and allies we had within the Major Activities Planning Board to slip him a press packet about the Taco Bell Boycott. He talked about the boycott from stage and said that he supported it. We also used other high profile campus events to attract attention. We also have this weird UofC thing that happens every spring called the scavenger hunt. Students living in housing form teams that are given a weird and bizarre list of things they need to do or find. Again the Taco Bell Boycott infiltrates UofC institutions. Many of the items on the list were related to the boycott. One item, was to get the Taco Bell kicked off campus.

### **Community Forum**

We had the community forum. 250 students, professors and allies came to voice support. Representatives from endorsing organizations gave statements of solidarity. It was beautiful. To stand there and watch representative after representative, from cultural organizations, from academic organizations, Graduate student organizations, campus unions, environmental organizations, feminist organizations, religious organizations, all echoing support for the campaign. 250 people voiced support. One person came to speak out against the boycott.

### **Table Tents**

We used table tents in the dining area beside Taco Bell. These are so easy and simple, but I think they were really effective. Imagine eating your taco bell tomatoes while you read about slavery in the fields. Not so pleasant anymore.

### **Community Support**

We had a huge amount of support from the surrounding community. We had a long list of endorsing community organizations and they turned out to our events. They also helped us with press work and publicity. We specifically worked to get support from the neighborhood our university is in. The University of Chicago has a legacy for bad community relations. They are working really hard to turn that legacy around right now. They don't like to look bad to the community. They get really nervous about it. Though they kept telling us that this community support didn't make a difference, I know that it scared them.

There are many more ideas. We have a packet of information including material we wrote and used (much of the information is included in this Boot the Bell kit).

### **Set Back and Come Back**

At the end of the 2002 school year, administrators said that even though we had met their list of demands, they would not consider removing Taco Bell. Contrary to what they originally told us, they said that we needed to affect sales and that the Calvin Report applied. We were a little put back for a while, some of us had taken incompletes or dropped classes just to work on the campaign. We decided that we would just keep fighting and try to come back strong in the fall. We were confident that we would win eventually.

We began the school year in late September 2002. We planned a teach-in with a worker from Immokalee at the very beginning of the year. We needed to figure out a way to try to hold the administration accountable to the promises they had made and broken in the spring of 2002. We planned a spirited Halloween march across campus on Halloween (some people credit Nicole's tomato costume as the real source of our victory) and we hand delivered open letters to the administration. We were planning on publishing these letters in the campus newspapers and posting them all over campus if the administration did not address our concerns. We had a meeting the week after that. At that meeting the administration announced their plans to remove Taco Bell and to set up a student committee to choose a replacement vendor. The Anti-Sweatshop Coalition would have two seats on the committee, student government would have two, and two would be chosen from other student organizations.

### **Hunger Fast**

Though it was after our victory, we planned a 24 hour hunger fast in solidarity with the hunger strike. 35 students fasted for twenty four hours in front of the Taco Bell on campus while we tabled about the hunger strike that was happening on the steps of the Taco Bell Headquarters in Irvine.

### **Victory!**

We didn't expect to win so soon. We have never really had a student victory like this on our campus as far as I know. We expected to need to escalate. I remember, I couldn't go to the meeting with the administration where they told us we won, but Nicole called me right afterwards and left a message on my phone. She was so excited I couldn't even understand her. People didn't believe us when we tried to tell them.

In my three years at the UofC, I've seen the student body in the college become way more progressive and politically aware. I've seen progressive coalitions form with students of color. I've seen traditionally white groups stop and analyse their racism. It's exciting. I don't really know why, exactly, except that maybe this national student movement thing is taking off and maybe we should take this as a sign that we are winning. Keep up the fight!