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Fair Trade vs. Free Trade

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As the holiday shopping season descends upon us like a turkey vulture on road-kill, the folks who operate the Chico Peace and Justice Center are asking consumers to put a little thought behind their purchasing decisions this year.

The CPJC has embarked on a project to explain and encourage the concept of buying "fair trade" products—those whose producers have been certified by meeting certain standards of wages as well as work and environmental conditions.

Not to be confused with the term free trade, which is the unhindered flow of goods and services between countries effectively boosting the bottom line for corporations at the expense of Third World nations and their workers, fair trade is a growing grass roots attempt to help those marginalized by trade agreements like NAFTA, compete with the mega corporations like Nike and The Gap.

Fair Trade, whose roots can be traced to post-WW II Europe, has continued to expand across the globe. Last year consumers spent \$2.21 billion on Fair Trade Certified products, according to Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International (FLO).

That figure marks a whopping 41 percent increase over the previous year, benefiting as many as 1.4 million producers and workers. For the most part, the products are agricultural and include cocoa, coffee, tea and bananas.

Sue Hilderbrand, CPJC director, says the Fair Trade labeling process is stringent and not open to abuse like the use of the word "organic" has become in America.

"The Fair Trade certification is really very protected," she said. "It is not given to just anybody. It is part of the value of buying that product."

Right now the CPJC storefront on Broadway between Fifth and Sixth streets offers mostly ornaments and knick-knacks from Third World countries. They hope to offer clothing and more necessity-type merchandise next year. The idea is to go up against those companies that run sweatshops and rely on child labor.

"We had a conversation last night with our board to say let's go through our inventory and talk about what are the products we are selling," she said. "A lot of them are disposable income

products—that is what a lot of Christmas gifts are."

The center hopes to compete with the behemoth Wal-Mart by next year—a daunting task to say the least. Hildebrand, with her counter-culture aura, is diminutive but intense and serious when she says this.

"What we are hoping to do within the next year is to bring in products that can replace Wal-Mart products," she said. "Things you will actually need. We are thinking of bringing clothes into the Peace Center. Don't go to Wal-Mart to buy your T-shirts, come to the peace center or anywhere that has fair trade certified clothing."

As the saying goes, it's the thought that counts.

"I think that as people become aware of where their products come from and how they are produced, and you give them an alternative, generally I think people will choose the alternative," Hildebrand said.

The center's educational outreach is built upon the stories the mainstream media have begun to publish on the use of forced child labor in India and China. The so-called alternative media have long reported such atrocities, but mainstream media's reporting on such matters grabs Middle America's attention.

"We are sort of taking advantage of this recognition by the media and our being able to say, 'Yeah isn't that awful? Here is an alternative to that kind of labor being used.' "

On Friday, Nov. 23 the center will hold a sidewalk sale at its 526 Broadway storefront from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

"The day after Thanksgiving is Buy Nothing Day," she said. "What we're saying is if you have to buy something, buy fair trade. The idea is if you have to participate in all of this consumption, you might as well buy products that actually take into consideration who produces them.

"I think most people, when they realize the things they are buying are produced by people who are terribly underpaid and exploited, will consider their actions if they have an alternative."

The North American Free Trade Act, which promotes free trade among nations, has damaged the economies of other countries while helping large multi-national corporations. In the United States, the government subsidizes farmers. Mexico does not subsidize its farmers, meaning the farmers south of the border cannot compete with their American counterparts.

"Many of those farmers were forced off their land and with their families were forced to move to the cities and compete for wage labor," Hildebrand said. "The cities aren't prepared to absorb all those migrants—the infrastructure and jobs aren't there. As a result, you have illegal immigrants crossing our borders."

"So you can't think free trade doesn't impact our economy. Of course it does. Why do people feel the need to leave their countries, their villages, and cross the borders risking their lives? It's because they are forced to. It's because of the economic imbalances."

Jim Henson is the CPJC's "Fair Trade Guy" and he noted the items, trinkets, he called them, that sit on the center's merchandise shelves, arriving from countries like Thailand, Colombia, Kenya, Cameroon and even the city of New Orleans.

Most of the stock on the shelves comes from a company called Ten Thousand Villages, which buys directly from the producer.

"A lot of this stuff is not much more than that which you buy in other places," Henson said. "And with items like jewelry, it is often much cheaper because you cut out the middle man."

Ten Thousand Villages, he said, is a Mennonite organization formed after World War II as a result of the massive devastation left by years of warfare.

"They went into these countries and they realized there were crafts these people could make," Henson said. "And they started these fair-trade programs, which raised self-esteem and brought the countries back up to a manufacturing level. They thought if we can do this in developed countries we can do it everywhere."

Hilderbrand is confident Fair Trade will catch on, and help alleviate the grinding poverty that exists in so many Third World nations.

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"We talk about how corporations are out of control and this is so grass roots, so counter cultural—bypassing the corporations and saying profit is not the most important thing. The mandate of any corporation is you have to make so much of a profit to satisfy the shareholders. We work beyond that; we're not going to make as much money as the market will bear. We are going to make as much money as it costs to get it here, keep our lights on and pay the producers a living wage.

"It is outside the mainstream, but it is seeping through, people are discouraged and walking around saying, 'What can I do?' It's not huge. If it were we'd be doing the same thing the corporations are doing. So by nature we have to keep it small."

Henson, too, is encouraged.

"In this country the larger corporations are climbing on board. Macy's is putting in a small display [of Fair Trade products] in their store. Starbucks sells Fair Trade coffee. Even Sam's Club is buying organic cotton products."

But doesn't this make it little more than a passing sales gimmick?

Hilderbrand said that's OK by her.

"That is the thing," she said. "We see this 'green washing' but who cares? If you sell fair trade and it's fair trade certified, I don't care. If you make a gob of money, but you produce organic products we all benefit from, I don't care. Right now [corporations and merchandisers] are making gobs of money and selling garbage.

"Hey, it's a great gimmick: 'We care about people and we are not going to suck anyone dry.' Great gimmick."

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