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Things and What They Hide

On April 1, 2008, as part of their ‘Earth Month’ marketing campaign, Walmart stores rolled out their very own Fair Trade Certified™ coffee. The press release, sub-titled ‘Retailer Answers Coffee Drinkers’ Demands for Guilt-Free Gourmet Taste,’ read: ‘Bolstering Walmart’s ongoing commitment to environmental issues, these first Sam’s Choice brand coffees…are part of an Earth Month expansion of eco-friendly products that help consumers live better without compromising budget.’ They further reported that the new coffees (including not just a fair trade option but also a brand certified by the Rainforest Alliance, and a United States Department of Agriculture [USDA]-certified organic blend) were all roasted by the world’s first CarbonNeutral® coffee roaster.

The doors of the biggest North American retailer had been breached. Commodities meant to carry a message about globally unequal exchange and the need for solidarity between peasant farmers and Northern shoppers were flowing into and out of the most mainstream of outlets. The company, which had long been an obvious target for those in the labor, environmental, and social justice movements, became one of the top three retailers of fair trade coffee in the United States. The top company on that list is Starbucks, a company not widely loved by those in the alternative globalization circles that have tended to support fair trade. In addition to the glowing publicity generated in the mainstream press, blogs focusing on sustainable food and global justice applauded Walmart’s decision. However, for many who had been active in the fair trade movement, the headlines announcing the Walmart launch must have been remarkably disconcerting. What kind of strange new age had dawned, when the Walmart corporation—infamous for its ruthless exploitation of workers and relentless drive for low prices at any cost—was clearing shelf space to make room for fair trade coffee? What

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meaning could possibly be taken from a packet of coffee proclaiming itself to be in the service of ‘fairness’ when the woman stocking it on the shelf can’t afford rent and an adequate diet in the same month?

Stock-taking by fair trade movement activists was clearly required. Was this a great victory for the movement? Were we witnessing the fruition of decades of activist sweat, spent to ‘make trade fair,’ as the Oxfam slogan encouraged the world to do? Was the market working to meet the emergent preferences of affluent consumers for justice, poverty alleviation, and environmental sustainability? Press coverage certainly suggested this was the case, as did the major US labeling initiative, then known as Transfair USA. Paul Rice, the CEO of Transfair USA, commented in the *New York Times* that by putting its Member’s Mark label on a fair trade coffee, Walmart was making a ‘statement of their commitment to fair trade’ (Downie 2007).

Spoiling the happy atmosphere that surrounded this win–win–win scenario for profit, consumer satisfaction, and the world’s poor farmers,1 an undertow of dissatisfaction could be detected in the activist ranks. At congresses, at meetings, and on online forums, long-serving fair trade workers lamented the wayward drift of a once-radical movement cozying up to the likes of McDonald’s, Starbucks, Dunkin Donuts, and now Walmart. How could activists who had labored together for years, with the common goal of dismantling structures of unequal exchange between the North and the South, have such opposing reactions to what augured yet another healthy spike in the sales of fair trade coffee?

The answer is that fair trade, like most (if not all) social movements, is far from monolithic. We will not be the first to point out that fair traders, including those at all levels of activism and participation in the movement, while sharing a ride, have a variety of destinations in mind (see, e.g., Fridell 2006; Raynolds and Murray 2007, 223–224). For many, Walmart, regardless of (or perhaps precisely because of) its potential to reach an enormous number of new potential fair trade consumers, was not on the itinerary.

What was for some time an undercurrent of tension within the movement, reflected in the varied responses to the Walmart announcement, has recently become a very visible split, as the US labeling initiative (now called Fair Trade USA (FTUSA)) broke off from the international umbrella organization Fair Trade Labeling International Organization (FLO) on January 1, 2012. While the split was over what seemed to be technicalities in standard-setting and governance, it reflected profound differences in visions for fair trade’s future. There were several