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## How College Students Created Opportunities for Sweatshop Workers: The Anti-Sweatshop Movement and an Interactive Approach to Political Opportunity Structure

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How Students on College Campuses Created Opportunities for Workers in Sweatshops:  
A Multi-Institutional, Interlocking Approach to Political Opportunity Structure

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## **Abstract**

Political opportunity structure (POS) refers to how the larger social context, such as repression, shapes a social movement's chances of success. Most work on POS looks at how movements deal with the political opportunities enabling and/or constraining them. This article looks at how one group of social movement actors operating in a more open POS alters the POS for a different group of actors in a more repressive environment through a *chain of indirect leverage*—how United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) uses the more open POS on college campuses to create new opportunities for workers in sweatshop factories. USAS exerts direct leverage over college administrators through protests, pushing them to exert leverage over major apparel companies through the licensing agreements schools have with these companies.

**Key words:** anti-sweatshop movement, campus activism, labor rights activism, political opportunity structure, student activism, transnational social movements, United Students Against Sweatshops

Activists in the anti-sweatshop movement have faced a challenge, in that the sweatshops workers who face the most desperate working conditions often have the least leverage to pressure factory owners to improve working conditions. Dissident factory workers can easily be fired and blacklisted in most countries in the Global South—and in all too many countries, assassins and death squads are still used to repress labor activism. It is activists in the Global North who most often have the leverage to change things. In this article, I will focus in particular on the ways student activists on college campuses associated with United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) have used their greater freedom of action and greater leverage over apparel companies to help sweatshop workers unionize and fight for improved working conditions. We look in some degree of depth at a case where USAS members helped workers at the Kukdong factory in Atlixco, Puebla, Mexico unionize, and more briefly at two other cases—the BJ&B factory in Villa Altagracia, the Dominican Republic and the New Era Cap factory in Derby, New York in the United States. There are multiple social processes that allowed USAS to support workers at these factories unionizing. Many of them are well documented in the existing literature—movement-building at the local level, the formation of transnational coalitions, and using both disruptive protest and changing public discourse as sources of leverage.

While all of these factored into this case, I will highlight one process not previously well studied, the ways in which multiple institutions—in this case colleges, the transnational apparel firms with whom they have licensing deals, and the factories to which these lead firms outsource—are interlocked with each other, creating a system where USAS can support factory workers through a system of indirect leverage. Drawing on thirty in-depth interviews and a variety of documentary evidence, I will show how USAS mobilizes their members to directly pressure college and university administrations, demanding that they in turn put pressure on their

licensing partners, demanding that these big apparel firms in turn put pressure on the factories they outsource to, to recognize workers' unions (See Figure 1). This might sound like an unlikely chain of influence, given the geographical and social distance between students on college campuses in the US and workers in sweatshop factories in the Global South, but in a number of campaigns, it has been strikingly effective. The key here is that many US colleges and universities have licensing deals with apparel companies, including some of the major players such as Nike and Reebok, giving those companies the right to produce clothing with the school's name and logo on it. The big apparel firms value these licensing deals for their marketing potential. This has allowed USAS to use these licensing deals as a source of leverage over these firms, by successfully campaigning to get their schools' administrations to put in place pro-labor rights codes of conduct as part of the licensing deals. Then, if the licensees violate the codes by using sweatshop labor, USAS can push to have the license suspended until such time as the firm properly addresses the problem. And, while the basic model of activism was developed in transnational campaigns, it has also been applied within the US, in particular a 2001 campaign where USAS supported workers at the New Era Cap factory in Derby, New York.

[Figure 1 here. Caption: Figure 1: The Chain of Indirect Leverage]

This brings us to one of the central concepts in the study of social movements, political opportunity structure (POS). This idea attempts to describe the ways in which the larger social and political context, such as levels of repression, shapes a social movement's chances of success or failure (Alimi 2007; McAdam 1999; McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996; Tarrow 1998; Williams 2020). Most work on POS has looked at how one group of social movement actors deals with the political opportunities enabling and/or constraining them. In this article, I want to look at how one group of social movement actors operating in a relatively open environment has

sought to alter the POS for a *different* group of social actors in a more repressive environment. Specifically, I will analyze how the members of USAS have used the more open POS in which they operate on college campuses to create new opportunities for sweatshop workers in their factories, opportunities that allowed these workers to struggle for improved working conditions and unionize. They do so through a chain on *indirect leverage*—using protests like sit-ins and hunger strikes to directly exercise leverage over college administrations, pushing them to in turn do things that exercise leverage over the major apparel firms, who can easily exercise leverage over the contractors they outsource to.

All this does not happen in isolation—it is interconnected with a number of other, better researched and theorized social processes. The chain of indirect leverage is successful in part because USAS has built ties with the sweatshop workers they seek to help in each campaign. For this to happen, first there must be movement-building at local level (McAdam 1999; McAdam et al. 1996; Morris 1984), both on US college campuses (Crossley 2008; Lewis, Marine, and Kenney 2018) and in the locales where sweatshop factories are located (Anner 2011; Armbruster-Sandoval 2005; Knight and Wells 2007; Pangsapa 2007; Ross 2006). Once the local movement-building has reached a critical mass, then it is possible to form empowering transnational coalition (Armbruster-Sandoval 2005; Friedman 2009; Steffek and Hahn 2010; Wood 2005) between groups such as USAS and labor unions representing sweatshop workers. The pressure that USAS directly exerts over college administrations—and that workers must also exert on sweatshop owners to be successful (Armbruster-Sandoval 2005; Knight and Wells 2007) (see also Marshall 2009; Waites 2019)—is done through a combination of tactics, involving disruptive protest (Flacks 1988; Gamson 1990; McAdam 1983; Piven and Cloward 1977), changing public discourse (Ferree et al. 2002; Jasper 1997; Ryan 1991; Snow and

Benford 1988; Snow et al. 1986), and negotiations with those in positions of authority (Andrews 2001).

Traditionally, the study of political opportunity structure has focused on movements' interactions with nation-states (McAdam 1999; McAdam et al. 1996; Tarrow 1998). Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Mary Bernstein (2008), however, have pointed out that movements come into conflict with many other social institutions besides states, something clear in the case of the anti-sweatshop movement's conflicts with not only business, but the colleges and universities where USAS operates; as a result, Armstrong and Bernstein have called for a more "multi-institutional" approach to the study of social movements. As scholars have focused more on movements' interactions with institutions other than states, they have begun to develop variants of the idea of "political opportunity structure," such as *discursive* or *cultural opportunity structure* for understanding the mass media (Ferree et al. 2002; Wahlström and Peterson 2006), *economic* or *industry opportunity structure* for understanding movements' conflicts with business (Luders 2006; Schurman 2004; Soule 2009; Wahlström and Peterson 2006), or *political-economic opportunity structure* for understanding movements' actions in the context of the intersection of state and business power (Císař and Navrátil 2017; Ergas and Clement 2016). Some of these scholars (Soule 2009; Wahlström and Peterson 2006) have noted that these different types of opportunity structure interact with each other, but the exact dynamics of these interactions remain under-theorized.

What I wish to examine in more depth here is precisely how these different political opportunity structures are interconnected—even those that are seemingly geographically and socially distant, like US college campuses vs. sweatshop factories in the Global South—and therefore how one set of social actors can take advantage of one set of political opportunities to

create new opportunities for another set of social actors elsewhere. We thereby deepen our understanding of the ways in which social movements can transform their socio-political environment. Using the connections created by transnational apparel production chains, student activists in the US can use their position as valued consumers to open up opportunities for sweatshop production workers in distant geographic and social locations.

### **A History of the Anti-Sweatshop Movement**

The dramatic worldwide rise in sweatshop working conditions is broadly linked to the promotion of economic globalization by business and governments since the 1970s. More specifically, it is the result of a particular strategy by companies in many industries, that of overseas outsourcing. In outsourcing, major firms contract out important parts of production to other, smaller firms, many of which in turn operate globally; companies based in Taiwan, South Korea and Hong Kong may, for instance, have factories not only in Southeast Asia, but in Central America. These contractors are then pitted against each other in a bidding war. They each try to secure business from the major firms by offering to do the production for the lowest possible cost, while still maintaining a certain quality. The burden for this reduction in costs is almost inevitably shifted onto workers, producing sweatshops throughout the Global South. The industry that in many ways pioneered this outsourcing model was the apparel business, where it is now the norm to outsource most or all production, while the major firms focus on the more profitable activities of design and marketing. Since the apparel industry has been the pioneer in outsourcing and therefore in reintroducing sweatshops, it has been the main target of the anti-sweatshop movement (Anner 2011; Bonacich et al. 1994; Gereffi and Korzeniewicz 1994; Ross 2004). Understanding this relationship between the major apparel firms and the contractors they



outsource to is central to understanding the system of interlocking political opportunity structures and the chain of indirect leverage. In particular, the lead apparel firms are the ones with the power in this arrangement, with the ability to dictate not only prices, but other things—including working conditions—to their contractors.

Another central element of this chain of indirect leverage is the fact that many US colleges and universities have licensing agreements with such major apparel firms as Nike and Reebok. The license allows these companies to produce clothing with the school's name and logo on it. The school gets a cut of the profits and the apparel companies get access to the highly coveted student market, by means of which they hope to build up lifelong brand loyalty. Through extended campaigns culminating in actions such as sit-ins and hunger strikes, USAS has pressured college administrations around the US and Canada to implement pro-labor codes of conduct for their licensees and to join the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC), an independent organization that monitors companies' compliance with schools' codes of conduct. Licensees must, in turn, ensure their contractors are in compliance with the codes. When a company is found by the WRC to be violating these codes, USAS will mobilize to pressure school administrators to suspend the guilty company's license until such time as the violations have been resolved. With apparel companies seeking access to the student market and USAS chapters at colleges around the country, this strategy has been strikingly successful in a number of individual campaigns to help sweatshop workers in particular factories to unionize and secure other gains.

An example of this is the 2001 campaign to support workers at the South Korean-owned Kukdong plant in Atlixco, Puebla, Mexico, which was contracted to produce apparel for both Nike and Reebok for export to the US. Officially, the workers belonged to a union, but it was

what activists call a “yellow union”—one serving the interests of management, not the workers. Specifically, it was the Revolutionary Confederation of Workers and Peasants (Confederacion Revolucionario de Obreros y Campesinos or CROC), a union associated with the Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional or PRI), which ruled Mexico when it was a de facto single-party state from 1929 to 2000. Most workers were not even aware they belonged to the union and the leaders of the union simply lined their pockets with workers’ dues. When workers went on strike in January 2001 protesting against such things as the presence of maggots in their food and for the right to join an independent labor union, Kukdong’s management fired many of the workers, including the union’s leaders, and called in the police and CROC thugs to physically attack the workers. Many workers who had not been fired had to sign loyalty oaths to continue to work at Kukdong after the strike was repressed. However, the workers were already in touch with US activists affiliated with USAS and other groups such as the AFL-CIO Solidarity Center. In response to reports of the crackdown, USAS used their leverage on college campuses to compel college administrators to threaten Nike and Reebok with the suspension of their college licensing agreements unless they acted to improve conditions at Kukdong. They did so and in September 2001, Kukdong’s management began to engage in good faith collective bargaining with an independent union democratically representing Kukdong’s workers. Kukdong—now operating under the name Mexmode—agreed to raises for the workers, to policies preventing abusive treatment of workers by management, and to rehire workers laid off in the course of the labor struggle (Hermanson 2009; Knight and Wells 2007; Ross 2006; Worker Rights Consortium 2001b).

The Kukdong case was not isolated. One can see similar patterns in other campaigns by USAS that, for reasons of space, I will discuss more briefly—to support the workers at the BJ&B

factory in Villa Altagracia, the Dominican Republic and the New Era Cap factory in Derby, New York, USA. The latter is worthy of note since, although USAS developed the basic model for their campaign relying on a chain of indirect leverage in the context of transnational campaigns, it was equally applicable to supporting workers at a factory in the US. The BJ&B campaign ran from 1997 (when USAS was just coming together as an organization) to 2003. Yupoong, the South Korean company that owned the factory, was resistant to making any meaningful changes, but eventually USAS, UNITE (the main US apparel union) and other anti-sweatshop groups brought enough pressure to bear on Nike that they pushed Yupoong negotiated a contract with the workers' union (Esbenshade 2004; Garwood 2011; Ross 2006). The New Era Cap campaign ran from 2001 to 2002; the factory produced baseball caps for both major league sports teams and many colleges and universities. Workers there had voted to affiliate with the Communication Workers of America in 1997. After years of union-busting tactics and disrespect from management, they voted to go on strike in 2001. After interviewing the workers at New Era Cap and hearing many stories of pervasive on the job injuries like carpal tunnel syndrome, as well as the general atmosphere of hostility towards the union, USAS members concluded New Era Cap was a sweatshop and, with other groups such as Jobs with Justice, brought their own pressure successfully to bear on the company (Carty 2006; Worker Rights Consortium 2001a, 2002) (Jane Howald, David Palmer; interviews by author, 2007).

### **Political Opportunity Structure**

Despite a few important dissenting scholars, most scholars studying social movements agree on the basic utility of the concept of political opportunity structure. Even Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper (Goodwin and Jasper 2004a, 2004b; Jasper 2012), the major dissidents, agree

that what the concept is meant to highlight—the ways in which larger social and political conditions shape movements’ chances for success—is important to study; they are simply skeptical that the concept of POS can be rescued from its many shortcomings. The most common criticism (shared by many proponents of the concept) is that, in practice, POS is vaguely defined and often becomes an all-encompassing ad hoc way of addressing all the social factors influencing a movement (Gamson and Meyer 1996; McAdam 1996; Meyer 2004).

Doug McAdam (1996) produced a synthesis of a wide variety of models of the POS, citing the following four factors as the crucial ones that repeatedly show up across multiple cases:

- “1. The relative openness or closure of the institutionalized political system
- “2. The stability or instability of that broad set of elite alignments that typically undergird a polity
- “3. The presence or absence of elite allies
- “4. The state’s capacity and propensity for repression” (p. 27).

Although other scholars have produced other syntheses (e.g. Gamson and Meyer 1996; Tarrow 1998), Goodwin and Jasper (2012) argue that McAdam’s synthesis is the classic one that has defined how most scholars think about political opportunity structure.

David Meyer (2004) proposes another useful way of bringing order to these many factors—to make a basic distinction between mobilizing opportunities and influence opportunities. Mobilizing opportunities refer to a movement’s ability to organize independently and expand their membership through recruitment—a basic precondition to a movement’s very existence. Influence opportunities refer to those social mechanisms that exist for movements to exert pressure on their targets, directly or indirectly, to alter their policies in order to accomplish

the movement's goals. One set of opportunities may exist without the other—for instance, movements may be relatively free to organize but have little way to pressure authorities to change their actions. Matthew S. Williams (2020) breaks influence opportunities down into two further elements, structural leverage and delegitimation. Structural leverage refers to the means activists can bring to bear to “undermine the structural sources of elites’ power” (p. 24). In a democratic institution, this may involve electoral politics, but more often it means disrupting business as usual through means such as boycotts or strikes in order to impose sanctions on those in power and coerce them into changing course. Delegitimation involves media campaigns and other such work to alter the public discourse, in such a way that the legitimacy and credibility of those in power are undermined.

Another major criticism of how the concept of POS has been used is that it has exclusively focused on movements’ interactions with nation-states, something that can be clearly seen in McAdam’s synthesis above. The implicit assumption in much of this work is that nation-states are the main opponents and targets of movements. Armstrong and Bernstein (2008), however, point to a growing body of literature that shows that movements have contentious interactions with many other social institutions. As an example, they point to the work of Mary Fainsod Katzenstein (1998), who documents that for many Roman Catholic feminists, their primary target has been the Church, which they seek to reform to be more gender-egalitarian. The anti-sweatshop’s activities analyzed in this paper provide another good example--the movement’s main conflicts have been with apparel corporations and college administrations, with the state remaining largely in the background. For these reasons, Armstrong and Bernstein call for the development of a multi-institutional theory of political opportunity structure, a task this paper seeks to contribute to.

Tamara Kay (2005) and Hein-Anton van der Heijden (2006) both argue that the emergence of global governance systems such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the United Nations, and the World Bank creates a distinct new type of POS, different from ones centered around national-states. While Kay and Heijden focus on formal, recognized global governance organizations and agreements, global production chains create informal governance structures, in which the largest, most profitable companies are able to exercise power over smaller businesses, particularly their contractors (Gereffi 2001; Gereffi, Humphrey, and Sturgeon 2005; Gereffi and Korzeniewicz 1994). Of particular relevance for this paper is the argument Catherine S. Dolan (2004) makes that the power structures of these global production chain play a major role in shaping the labor management strategies of the least powerful firms, pressuring them to keep costs as low as possible and thereby fostering abusive working conditions.

Even within a movement, different activists may have different opportunities. Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward (1977) emphasize that the social location of activists—such as sweatshop workers in the Global South vs. US college students—has a significant impact on the social context they operate in. Activists in different social locations therefore often have to deal with very different political opportunity structures, with differing points of opening and closure.

It's also important to recognize just how dynamic the POS can be, including in response to the actions of the movements interacting with those very political opportunity structures. Hans Pruijt and Conny Roggeband (2014), for instance, looks at how different movement organizations can create openings in the POS for each other. In their case, they are looking at how movements operating in the same national POS, but using different strategies—institutional versus autonomous ones—can create synergistic effects that create more opportunities for both

organizations. The case in this paper is a related but distinct phenomenon, of a movement organization—USAS—in one local POS strategically increasing the openings for other movement organizations—unions of sweatshop workers such as those at Kukdong, BJ&B and New Era Cap—in a different, geographically and socially distant POS.

Jack M. Bloom (2014) highlights another form of dynamism in the POS, pointing out that social movements are not the only social actors whose actions and strategies are constrained and/or enabled depending on the social structure and maneuvers by other social actors. He argues that successful movements create a more closed POS for the elites they are challenging, narrowing the options open to these elites so they face more pressure to give into movement demands. Strikingly, Bloom illustrates this with a case from a totalitarian polity—not a relatively open, democratic one—that of Solidarity in Poland in the 1980s under the Marxist-Leninist single party state system.

Frequently, as with sweatshop workers and college students, activists in the Global South may face a much more closed POS than those in the Global North. In such cases, activists may use their different social locations to take advantage of what Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink (1998) dubbed the boomerang effect. Instead of Southern activists directly pressuring their target in a closed POS, they more form an alliance with Northern activists who may have greater, if often indirect, leverage over the target—thus striking the target in an indirect, roundabout way, much as a boomerang (originally an Australian Aborigine hunting weapon) does (Armbruster-Sandoval 2005; Bassano 2014; Bob 2001; Dale 2008; Irvine 2013; Marshall 2009; Stewart 2004; Waites 2019). For instance, in the Kukdong campaign discussed above, the workers at Kukdong faced a closed opportunity structure—their efforts to organize an independent union met with swift repression and the mass firing of their leaders. USAS then

mobilized in support of the workers in their more open environment of the college campus—and were able to use this to pressure Nike and Reebok, who in turn pressured Kukdong’s management to sit down and engage in good faith collective bargaining with their workers.

Sikkink (2005) later expanded on this model, arguing that transnational activists were interacting with a multi-level POS, with the national and transnational levels interacting (see also Alimi 2009; van der Heijden 2006). She maps out four variations, depending on the mixture of openness and closure in the national and transnational POS, with the boomerang effect operating when the national level is closed to local actors but the transnational one is open.

## **Methods and Data**

My analysis draws primarily on thirty in-depth interviews, conducted between June and October 2007, with activists in the US anti-sweatshop movement, part of a larger project on the strategic evolution of the anti-sweatshop movement. I used the interviews to create what Robert S. Weiss (1994) calls a panel of knowledgeable informants—people who have participated in the events the researcher is interested in and have otherwise difficult to obtain knowledge. In this case, that difficult to obtain knowledge was the details of how the movement made strategic decisions, including how they evaluated the larger social environment in which they operated. I would ask people who had participated in these events to walk me through the details of various campaigns and meetings, asking them how they had arrived at certain strategic decisions and how their strategies were meant to overcome the social obstacles they perceived. Since I interviewed multiple people involved in each major event I was interested in, I was able to triangulate between people’s memories to reconstruct a fuller picture of the process. Given that I wanted to be able to compare the dynamics of multiple, nationwide campaigns to support



sweatshop workers over a timespan of multiple years, in-depth interviews gave me better access to the data that I wanted than participant observation at one campus locale over one, limited time period would have. This was thus a historical study, attempting to reconstruct poorly documented or undocumented events such as activist meetings in detail, while also developing an understanding of why those involved took the actions they did.

I started with initial contacts in the leadership of the movement and from there engaged in snowball sampling, which ultimately gave me access to a wide range of activists who had played a leading role in the anti-sweatshop movement. I interviewed people who helped develop the overall strategy of the movement, who campaigned to get colleges to adopt USAS' program, and/or who were involved with campaigns to support workers at specific factories. My respondents included people both in such formal staff positions as USAS' National Organizer or the WRC's Executive Director and those who were involved in the national movement as volunteers based on college campuses. I interviewed fifteen people affiliated with USAS, six with the WRC, six with an organization called SweatFree Communities (which I do not cover here for reasons of space), and twelve with miscellaneous allied organizations such as the apparel union UNITE HERE and the US Labor in the Americas Project (USLEAP); this may appear to add up to well over thirty, but many of my respondents with were affiliated with multiple anti-sweatshop organizations during their activist careers (see Figure 2). For the most part, the interviewees allowed me to use their real names, as their activism is a matter of public knowledge. I did a systematic, detailed coding of all interviews with the computer program HyperResearch, using a number of themes related to strategy and political opportunity.

[Figure 2 here. Caption: Figure 2: Venn Diagram of Interviewee Organizational Affiliations and Numbers. Additional Note: Note that this does not fully capture all overlaps in membership since

three interviewees belonged to multiple miscellaneous organizations.]

For practical reasons of time, finances and linguistic ability, I confined this study to US-based organizations, not attempting to study the entire global network of the anti-sweatshop movement. It is worth noting, however, that two of my interviewees were involved in the local campaign by the CWA at the New Era Cap factory—specifically, they were Jane Howald, president of the local, and David Palmer, a professional CWA organizer.

A secondary source of data was historical research using newspaper articles, various groups' reports and websites, and other such material to help me reconstruct events in more detail. The newspapers included not only national ones available in LexisNexis, but the on-line archives of student newspapers (which, at the time of my research, were not available through LexisNexis), which were crucial in reconstructing USAS' history. These sources helped me fill in the gaps of the historical narratives that my interviewees shared and allowed me to further triangulate between different accounts of what happened.

### **A Multi-Institutional, Interlocking Model of Political Opportunity Structures**

In this paper, I seek to expand upon existing work on the concept of political opportunity structure—as well as some of the critiques of it—by developing a model of the POS that is both multi-institutional, interactive and dynamic. We have normally thought of such opportunities in a limited fashion, as they relate to one social group, usually in some defined geographical locale, whether that be a college campus, a sweatshop factory, or a nation-state. This is a necessary starting point for the analysis of the POS, but I want to add more complexity to this basic approach, looking at the way different political opportunity structures that are geographically and socially distant can—through the agency of social movement actors—interact with each other

and change over time as the result of strategic action by social movement organizations.

In doing so, I build on Armstrong and Bernstein's (2008) call for a multi-institutional approach to POS, not just by looking at opportunity structures on college campuses and in global production chains, but also in looking at how the POS in these two sets of institutions interact with each other, such that social actors on college campuses are able to alter the POS in global production chains. Sikkink's (2005) model of a multi-level POS, where the openness and closure of national vs. global structure shapes what actions movements take as they seek for and try to leverage openings, begins to get at some of these dynamics. But the boomerang effect can only take advantage of these different levels of the POS because the social institutions in question are already interlocked (Stewart 2004)—because college administrations have licensing agreements with major apparel corporations and because the students on college campuses are in some ways the end point of global production chains, consumers—consumers the lead apparel forms particularly value and want to market to. Therefore, in addition to speaking of a multiple levels, corresponding to differences in scale, from the local to the national to the global (Herod 2011), I find it fruitful to also speak of multiple, interlocking POSs.

These interlocks can allow one set of social actors to alter the opportunity structure of another geographically and socially distant social actor, as USAS has done for sweatshop workers. Normally, when we analyze how movement actors take advantage of what Meyer (2004) and Williams (2020) call influence opportunities, we look at how they are able to exert leverage on authorities within their own immediate POS. In looking at how POSs interlock, we still need to start here—but as a way of looking at how activists are able to engage in a chain of *indirect leverage*, successfully targeting geographically and socially distant authorities over whom they do not actually have direct leverage. The boomerang effect (Armbruster-Sandoval

2005; Bob 2001; Dale 2008; Irvine 2013; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Marshall 2009; Stewart 2004; Waites 2019) discussed above is a classic example of this. In the case of USAS, the chain of indirect leverage starts with them exercising direct leverage over college administrators through protests, sit-ins, hunger strikes, and other disruptive and delegitimizing protests. They are then able to push these administrators to use the licensing agreements with major apparel firms to exercise leverage over said firms, who in turn are pushed to exercise leverage over the contractors they outsource to deal fairly with workers' unions. To follow Bloom (2014), the actions of USAS increasingly close the opportunities for those in power they are challenging, ranging from the immediate targets of college administrators to the geographically and socially distant targets of sweatshop owners—which in turn opens up the POS for sweatshop workers, who face less threat of repression when they mobilize and are now dealing with owners and managers under considerable pressure to negotiate with them.

This also complexifies our understanding of the boomerang effect, by showing that it can pass through multiple mediating institutions to have its effect. Keck and Sikkink's (Keck and Sikkink 1998) classic model of the POS, and much of the work that builds on it, involves a two-step model. For instance, in one of the cases they examine, US human rights activists successfully applied pressure to the US government, which in turn put pressure on the Argentine military regime that ruled the country from 1976-1983 to reduce the human rights abuses they engaged in as part of their "dirty war" against human rights activists and other dissidents. However, as shown in Figure 1, here we are looking at a three-step process, with USAS putting pressure on college administrators, who in turn put pressure on the lead apparel firms, who in their turn on their contractors.

## **The Interactive Nature of Political Opportunity Structures**

As discussed above, Meyer (2004) breaks the political opportunity structure into two elements—mobilizing opportunities and influence opportunities. Williams (2020) in turn breaks down influence opportunities into those involving structural leverage and those involving delegitimation. Doing so helps us understand both why social movement actors need to take advantage of interlocking POSs and the precise ways in which different POSs interlock. Given the high levels of repression they face, the mobilizing opportunities for sweatshop workers are very limited. It is possible to organize unions of sweatshop workers, but it is very challenging and must often be done in secrecy, especially in early stages (Anner 2011; Armbruster-Sandoval 2005). For instance, at the Camisas Modernas factory in Guatemala, a previous organizing drive had failed because management had used intimidation tactics to deter workers from joining the union. So in 1996, union organizers laboriously gathered the home addresses of all workers, then visited them there in a three day blitz, signing up enough workers to require management to legally recognize them (Armbruster-Sandoval 2005). In many countries, labor organizers face very real threats to their lives. Liana Dalton (interview, 2007), a USAS member who, through USAS, had an internship with a labor union in the Philippines, told me that while she was there she was involved in investigating the coverup of the murder of one labor organizer, while accompanying another labor organizer who fully expected to be assassinated, documenting his actions and the threats against him, so there would be a record after the fact. More generally, she described herself as “sleeping on picket lines with people who were wanted by the military and who couldn’t go home.”

Even once sweatshop workers have found ways to organize and mobilize, they also have very limited influence opportunities. Since the contractors doing the actual production are in a

bidding war with each other to keep prices as low as possible, they oppose improvements in working conditions, which typically make the costs of production go up—and thus make it likely that the lead apparel firms that hold the lion’s share of power in the global production chains will simply take their orders elsewhere. Thus the factory-owners are rarely in a situation to make concessions to organized workers, since doing so means they will likely lose business, quite possibly enough to put them out of business altogether. This was, for instance, one of the fears of the managers at both Kukdong and BJ&B.

USAS member Molly McGrath (interview, 2007) told me of the lead apparel firms (“the brands” as activists call them),

They've been able to just shut down a factory where a lot of people are organizing. Brands don't own the factories but brands have a tremendous influence over the factories that they can just take their orders out of them. There's nothing a factory really can do. A lot of times the business relationship is so important that a factory owner will just do whatever the brands tell them to do.

For workers to succeed, someone has to apply pressure to these lead apparel firms. And they are generally in no position to do so themselves—they have no influence opportunities over the big apparel companies. But US college students potentially do because of both the value the big apparel companies place on them as a marketing audience and the licensing agreements they have with colleges, which creates an interlock between the college as a POS and the corporation as a POS. As a result of pressure from college administrators, Nike and Reebok, in their turn, began applying such pressure to Kukdong’s management. More specifically, college administrators were warning the two companies that they might face suspension of their contracts if they did not see to it that the rights of workers at Kukdong were respected. A

minority of college administrators, having signed up to the WRC, now felt invested in actually seeing that their licensees followed through on their commitments. The remainder were responding directly to pressure from student activists (Molly McGrath, Scott Nova; interviews, 2007).

The workers at Kukdong recognized that they had limited mobilizing and influence opportunities on their own, but that outside pressure might expand their room to maneuver and exercise pressure on the factory managers. They had been growing increasingly frustrated with their treatment by Kukdong's management and the CROC for some time. Their mobilization and initial strike, however, happened shortly after they met with representatives from USAS who were visiting Mexico and who explained how they might use their position as college students to support the Kukdong workers. The Kukdong workers were also networked with other US groups, such as the AFL-CIO Solidarity Center, the union federation's program to support the efforts of workers outside the US to unionize. Throughout the lead-up to the strike, USAS remained in contact with the leaders of the Kukdong workers and, after the worker's struggle began in earnest, Evelyn Zepeda, a Salvadoran-American USAS member from Pitzer College traveled to Altixco and lived with Marcela Muñoz, one of the workers' leaders, for the duration of the campaign. Muñoz and other leaders of the Kukdong workers, Zepeda and other USAS members, the Solidarity Center, and other allies from both Mexico and the US conferred with each other in planning the workers' strategy (Hermanson 2009; Ross 2006).

Robert J.S. Ross (2006) argues

The student movement powerfully aided the working-class self-organization and gave the workers [at Kukdong] needed leverage by imposing codes of conduct over licensees who use university logos as a condition of their licenses. These

codes require, among other things, respect for associational rights. When the workers asked for help, the students pressured both the brands and their university administrators to influence the employers to make concessions to the unions (p. 72).

And this was not happenstance, but something that both the workers at Kukdong and the members of USAS strategically planned together. The members of USAS had some idea of the leverage they could potentially have—though the Kukdong campaign was when they really first put their strategy to the test—and approached the workers at Kukdong, hoping to support them and coordinate actions with them. USAS was quite conscious of the necessity of effective coalition-building and maintaining strong ties with the Kukdong workers in order to effectively coordinate this strategy, as can be seen in Zepeda’s decision to move to Atlixco for the duration of the campaign. The Kukdong workers also understood the importance of coalition-building and eagerly mobilized when they understood they had allies who could potentially bring significant outside leverage to bear on management.

The managers of Kukdong gave into pressure from Nike and Reebok in stages. Initially, in February 2001, they rehired many of the workers they had fired, including three of the five union leaders, as well as formally recognizing the workers’ independent union. They also agreed to allow the Worker Rights Consortium to perform inspections of the factory (Brigham 2003; Hermanson 2009). The pressure on Kukdong’s management escalated in June 2001, when Nike cut back significantly on the number of its orders, officially due to fluctuations in seasonal demand. This convinced Kukdong’s management to take the steps necessary to bargain with the workers, which—due to their relationship with the CROC—involved shutting down and opening under the new name of Mexmode and “compensating” the CROC for “damages” (i.e., paying



them off). As described above, in September 2001, Mexmode's management finally agreed on a collective bargaining agreement with the workers' independent union (Hermanson 2009; Ross 2006).

In the New Era Cap case, CWA organizer David Palmer (interview, 2007) told me:

I remember the night that we settled the contract. Their biggest collegiate customer was Ohio State. I got a phone call from the students at Ohio State at 10:00 at night one night—and they let me know that I had the ability to go back to the employer that night at the bargaining table and tell them that if we didn't get the deal done tonight, Ohio State was the next college to go off-line. It was really a nice moment for me--you don't get many of those types of moments when you do this work. We got the deal done that night.

We can see that in this case, the activists in the local struggle viewed the indirect leverage from USAS as significantly strengthening their influence opportunities—and these are activists in the US, where labor organizers do not normally need to fear for their lives or physical safety, as do those in the Philippines described above and in many other countries in the Global South.

This chain of indirect leverage is enabled by the fact that a US college campus has much greater mobilizing opportunities for students than a sweatshop factory does for workers.

Although students may sometimes face blowback from the administration for their actions, they are not in danger of losing their livelihoods or lives. The presence of student publications, the ability to hold events like teach-ins and rallies, etc. all enhance the mobilizing opportunities for students. College administrators are expected to not only tolerate but even engage with student activists, even when they disagree with the students' agenda. The broad acceptance of the right to protest and engage in other dissident activities on college campus makes it much easier for

college students to mobilize than sweatshop workers.

The fact that they are also valued consumers that the big apparel companies seek to court also contributes to their indirect leverage over the apparel firms. Because these companies want access to them as a semi-captive audience on campus for their marketing and therefore want to maintain the licensing agreements they have with colleges and universities, the companies are susceptible to pressure in the form of threats to suspend or cancel those licensing agreements, a form of structural leverage. Additionally, for such companies their brand is their most important asset, the basis of their appeal to consumers (Arvidsson 2006; Korzeniewicz 1994). This makes them very vulnerable to delegitimation through strategies such as associating their brand with sweatshops, since if their image is damaged, the very thing that makes their products appealing in the first place declines in value.

Student activists also potentially have many influence opportunities they can use to exert the necessary leverage over college administrations to pull this off. As USAS member Jessica Rutter (interview, 2007) put it,

A campus is a closed environment and it's easy to get access to the press, at least the campus press. There's also an enclosed decision-making process. As students, you have access to the college president, the person who makes the decisions, something a lot of other groups don't have.

USAS used a range of tactics, including hunger strikes and sit-ins, to take advantage of their influence opportunities to push college administrations to adopt and enforce pro-labor codes of conduct for their licensees. USAS member Thomas Wheatley (interview, 2007) described to me at sit-in at the University of Wisconsin, Madison in 1997—part of the first wave of sit-ins by the nationwide network of student activists that would later become USAS, as part of the initial

campaign for codes of conduct for licensees. Initially, the sit-in embarrassed the administration, bringing a great deal of local media coverage, thereby delegitimizing the administration. However, given the large size of the administrative building, even a large group of students sitting-in (Wheatley estimated that it reached one hundred at its height) could not effectively disrupt the workings of the administration and they seemed to lack effective structural leverage—that is, until the student activists began banging on the walls so that no one could focus on their work. After about an hour of this, the university’s president came down to negotiate with the students, conceding to them on the substantial majority of their demands.

In the case of the Kukdong campaign, the implicit threat of sit-ins, hunger strikes and other such tactics was enough to move college administrators to act, since the memory of the most recent wave of delegitimizing, disruptive student activism was fresh. This set off the chain of indirect leverage that pushed the lead firms to pressure their contractors to deal with the problem by negotiating with their workers’ union. USAS is thus able to indirectly exercise influence over the sweatshop factory owners in a way that is often difficult for the workers themselves. What USAS’ actions effectively do is alter the POS for the sweatshop workers. USAS national organizer Zack Knorr (interview, 2007) said,

For the four or five years that we're students, the place that we have the most power is our universities. And so we should use that power as strategically as possibly to move universities. That's why the initial focus was on university licensing--because that's the most direct power that universities have over these companies.

Assessing the exact financial impact of USAS’ action on these companies may well be impossible. For one thing, USAS’ goal is not normally to actually get their schools to sever

relations to these companies. USAS' goal is to get the companies to change their outsourcing practices so workers can unionize and conditions in factories otherwise improve while maintaining colleges' ties with these companies. As such, when a company is caught violating workers' rights, as happened at Kukdong, USAS demands that college administrators *threaten* the company with a *suspension* of their contract--with an actual suspension being a last resort. One of the reasons USAS has taken this path is their close ties with organizations representing sweatshop workers, who generally oppose boycotts, for fear that boycotts may, instead of improving their working conditions, permanently eliminate their jobs. (In recent years, USAS has launched a few actual institutional boycotts, pushing school authorities to completely sever ties with certain companies--but in these cases, the workers USAS sought to help had already been laid off en masse, meaning there was little left to lose (Blaskey and Gasper 2012; Garwood 2011; Greenhouse 2009, 2010; MacLaren 2013).) Thus, USAS uses as leverage the threat of financial losses rather than actual financial losses.

This, however, should not be grounds for dismissing USAS' ability to exercise such leverage. As McAdam (1983) has observed, the success of disruptive actions which allow activists to exercise leverage over authorities relies as much on the social psychology of the situation--the authorities coming to form a "crisis definition of the situation"--as on the actual disruption itself. McAdam explains, for instance, that the sit-ins of the civil rights movement were effective as much because of the fear they generated among the white population who stopped going to downtown shopping centers out of uncertainty about when and where violence might break out (as white supremacist thugs attacked the sit-inners), as the disruption caused directly by the sit-ins and the boycott by black supporters. In the case of the anti-sweatshop movement, it is enough that companies fear the potential loss of an important market. When

schools first began signing onto the WRC, companies could dismiss the whole thing. Indeed, in April 2000, Nike canceled its contracts with two schools and Nike CEO Phil Knight canceled a major donation to a third when these colleges signed onto the WRC (Asher and Barr 2000; Greenhouse 2000a, 2000b). By the summer of 2001 in the midst of the Kukdong campaign, however, Nike felt compelled to be responsive to the demands of the member schools of the WRC and apply pressure to the factory's managers.

By exercising this chain of indirect leverage, USAS is not just changing the nature of their own playing field—the POS—at colleges and universities. In many cases, they have also altered the political opportunity structure in the geographically and socially distant sweatshop factories where workers are struggling to make ends meet and to empower themselves through organizing labor unions. Indeed, this is arguably USAS' ultimate goal. For example, McSpedon (interview, 2007) told me, “The long-term goal for me was to create a structure and to create systems that opened up space for workers to organize in a way that it was closed when we started. And so then, within that, creating the codes of conduct, creating a monitoring system, all of that was really toward that end of workers having the power in their workplace to organize and have a voice and these structures are just meant to facilitate and support that.”

As a result of USAS' actions, the workers now had more mobilizing and influence opportunities. With international attention focused on them, it was harder for factory owners to engage in repression, which could endanger their legitimacy in the international market, opening up more possibilities for organizing. Less repression also means there is more room for actions like strikes, opening up influence opportunities, particularly structural leverage. With their patron firms pressuring the contractors to

negotiate, influence opportunities open up even further for the workers' unions. We can see this clearly not in the case of Kukdong, which I discussed in depth, but others such as BJ&B and New Era Cap as well.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The potential loss of valued institutional consumers via the suspension of college licensing agreements forced major apparel companies, such as Nike and Reebok in the Kukdong case, to apply pressure to their contractors. This in turn forces the owners and management of these contractors to both reduce the amount of repression and intimidation they use against their workers and to become more open, giving access to labor unions by engaging in collective bargaining with them. Thus, because of the ties between different social institutions, the actions student anti-sweatshop activists take on US college campuses can alter the political opportunities for workers in factories in countries like Mexico and the Dominican Republic. The degree of social reach USAS achieves through such a chain of indirect leverage is quite striking.

We thus see that the POS for different groups of activists interact in complex ways, allowing activists in one geographic and social location to open opportunities for those in another, distant geographical and social location with more limited opportunities. The students in USAS were able to take advantage of their more open political opportunity structure to pursue a strategy than not just helped sweatshop workers, but changed the POS within which they operated. This gave the latter more openings to both organize and exert pressure—more mobilizing and influence opportunities—on their employers than they would have had without the alliance with the student group. Looking at such interaction effects gives us one way to understand the POS in a more dynamic fashion.

Beyond the anti-sweatshop movement, other groups are employing a similar strategy. Perhaps the classic case is the movements on college campuses in the 1980s to push schools to divest from companies doing business in apartheid South Africa (Martin 2011). The Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), an organization representing highly exploited tomato pickers in Florida, and their supporters have also mobilized in part through indirect leverage to aid these workers who labor in what are essentially sweatshops in the fields. CIW has successively targeted big brand-name companies such as Taco Bell and Burger King who are major purchasers of tomatoes, pressuring them to pay Florida tomato-growers more and have that additional amount passed onto the workers in their wages. As part of this campaign, the Student/Farmworker Alliance has pushed college administrators not to renew contracts with the targeted brands that give them the right to set up franchises on campus until such time as they agree to the CIW's demands (Eyck 2008; Student/ Farmworker Alliance 2011). Drawing inspiration from the movement to divest from apartheid South Africa, there is now an on-going movement pushing colleges and other organizations to divest from oil and other fossil fuel companies as a means of fighting climate change (Howard 2015; Powell 2014). All of these campaigns successfully use the relatively open mobilizing and influence opportunities on college campuses to initiate a chain of indirect leverage, applying pressure to college administrators to apply pressure to companies at one or more remove from the college—and, in the case of the anti-apartheid movement, ultimately to the South African government.

The gains made by USAS and their allies that this article looks at are localized and often temporary. While they have been able to help workers in specific factories unionize, they have not been able to fundamentally alter the structure of the apparel industry in a way that makes sweatshops less likely to emerge. Many of their victories they have achieved have also proved to

be short-term. The gains made by unions, such as better health and safety conditions or limits on overtime, push the costs of production for that factory up—which means the factory’s owner is less competitive in the bidding war for contracts with the lead apparel firms. This gives the factory-owners a strong incentive to shut down their factory, then open up a new name, now unencumbered by a union, something that happened at BJ&B in 2007 (Clean Clothes Campaign 2007; Nova 2007). USAS members are aware of these limitations on their wins and have sought routes to significantly altering the structure of the apparel industry. The latest example of this is their support for the 2013-2020 Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, which required the lead apparel firms to pay for upgrades to unsafe factories when their Bangladeshi owners cannot afford it and gives local labor unions a role in monitoring and enforcing the Accord (Brown 2015; Nova 2014; Rahman 2014). (Unfortunately, despite the Accord’s effectiveness—or more likely because of it—opposition to it from Bangladeshi factory-owners and the Bangladeshi government has led to the effective end of the program. Officially, it has been taken over the Bangladeshi government, but the government has neither the staff nor the funding to carry it out; and, given the government’s close ties to factory owners, very likely it does not have the political will either (Bair, Anner, and Blasi Forthcoming (2020)).)

Despite the limited nature of these victories, however, they do show that it is possible for an activist group in one geographical and social location to help allies in a different geographical and social location to open up their local political opportunity structure, however time delimited this change is. Future studies might study other cases to see if bringing about these changes in distant POS is necessarily short-term or if distant allies can bring about long-term alterations in the POS for their coalition partners.

There is also the question of how lengthy a chain of indirect leverage can grow before it



becomes ineffective. In their classic work on the boomerang effect, Keck and Sikkink (1998) argue that the simpler the narrative of cause-and-effect, the easier it is for bystander publics to understand the issue and become supportive of the cause. A longer chain of indirect leverage doesn't necessarily mean activists' message has to become more complex. Amanda Plumb (interview, 2007), a USAS member at Duke University, told me, "People could understand, 'Don't let Duke's name be put on this stuff [apparel made in sweatshops]' and 'We're asking Duke to set up some standards.'" As Keck and Sikkink argue, the real key in successfully framing these issues is to identify social actors who can be held morally accountable for the issue at hand. The way USAS frames the matter, these include not only the lead apparel firms, but the school administrators who partner with them. The average student supporter of USAS does not need to understand the complexities of outsourcing and how it creates downward pressure on wages. They just need to be offended by their school's ties to sweatshops. Nonetheless, the longer the chain of indirect leverage grows, the more likely it is that activists' narratives will have to become more complex—and there may be a point where this blunts the effectiveness of trying to exert power through a chain of indirect leverage. There is also the possibility that if the chain of indirect leverage grows too long, the influence exerted through it may become more diffuse and less effective.

This system of indirect leverage works because of interlocking political opportunity structures across organizations in multiple social institutions. Activists are able to use openings that give them access to elites and points of leverage in one social arena to generate openings and/or points of leverage in another arena. This is possible not simply because all social institutions in a society are in some way joined, but because the specific organizations and institutions in question are connected at the top--the power-holders have ties with each other that

allow them to put pressure on each other, even if they do so reluctantly and under duress from social movements. In the case of USAS, this tie is formed by the licensing agreements between colleges and apparel firms. This tie is also the channel for the movement's ability to exercise indirect leverage--the means by which they can use their relative power and freedom on college campuses to influence the decisions by corporations in a way that benefits sweatshop workers half a world away.

The other cases of indirect leverage such as the anti-apartheid movement, not to mention work by other scholars showing interaction between the opportunity structures across social institutions (Soule 2009; Wahlström and Peterson 2006), point to the likelihood that such interlocking political opportunity structures may be more common than may be evident from previous research. It is possible that much of the early work on political opportunity structure, which implicitly or explicitly limited it to looking at movements' interactions with states, in fact obscured the complex ways in which the POS a movement faced was constituted by multiple, interlocking social institutions, not simply state structures. Joseph Luders' (2006) work on *economic* opportunity structure, for instance, is based on an examination of the civil rights movement--the case study where McAdam (1999) first elaborated the concept of POS in relation to the US' federal state structure. It seems likely that the pressures the civil rights movement exerted on both business and government interacted in complicated ways that could be mapped out through a multi-institutional analysis of political opportunity. The same is doubtless true of many other movements.

Beyond a deeper understanding of political opportunity structure, this paper brings a new dimension to our understanding of coalition-building. Much of the literature on coalitions focuses on the difficulties of forming and maintaining coalitions between groups from very

different backgrounds (Bandy and Smith 2005; Bystydzienski and Schacht 2001; Lichterman 1995). Other scholars look at the strategic benefits of coalitions, specifically how different coalition members are able to take on different, complementary roles (Armbruster-Sandoval 2005; Aunio 2012; Bob 2001; Keck and Sikkink 1998). My work adds another layer to understanding the strategic reasons groups enter into coalitions—one group may have access to a more open POS than other coalition members and use their openings as a means to leverage open the POS of coalition partners to give those partners more room to mobilize and/or exercise influence. Such cases are not limited only to transnational examples. Local community-labor coalitions (Fantasia and Voss 2004; Luce 2014; Moody 1997; Wells 2009) also frequently involve cases where labor unions ally themselves with other groups that may operate in a different POS, including students groups (among them, USAS specifically, which has increasingly made labor issues on college campuses one of their focuses). This may also elucidate one of the ways conscience constituents choose which groups they work with—some of the USAS members I quoted above cited the strategic dimensions of what they were doing as why they chose to work on the issue of sweatshops as opposed to other social problems.

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