

**University of Houston Students for Fair Trade**  
**An overview of the UH Fair Trade coffee conversion campaign**  
**2006-2007**

**By Timothy J. O'Brien, M.A.**

**March 2006** – Timothy J. O'Brien, a history department graduate student starts actively campaigning to bring fair trade coffee to campus.

**March 2006** – Calling himself the Students for Fair Trade, O'Brien posts flyers ([link](#)) around of the campus. The flyers carry Transfair's Fair Trade certified logo and call attention to the exploitation of African, Asian and Latino coffee farmers. O'Brien begins discussions with Java City and Einstein's national sales managers about their lack of fair trade blends at their U of H outlets. Both managers express concerns about their national brand's image when O'Brien threatens direct actions at their campus locations.

**March 2006** – O'Brien requests information from Einstein Brothers campus store manager about where their coffee is grown. He also contacts UH food service provider Aramark who claim they offer Fair Trade certified coffee at Starbucks. O'Brien had requested a fair trade blend at Starbucks for the previous two semesters but it was not available at the campus Starbucks locations.

**Mar. 13, 2006** - Alistair MacLean, Aramark's resident district manager at UH sends a letter ([link](#)) to SFT requesting all inquiries be directed to his attention.

**Mar. 22, 2006** – The Daily Cougar, UH's student newspaper, publishes first fair trade coffee editorial ([link](#)) written by SFT founder Timothy O'Brien.

**Mar. 30, 2006** – The UH business services office requests meeting with SFT.

**Mar. 31, 2006** – Three University of Houston representatives and three Aramark representatives meet with SFT member Timothy O'Brien and SFT advisor Lenwood Johnson. At this time the only SFT member is O'Brien. UH business services executive director Emily Messa invites SFT to give a fair trade coffee presentation at the next Food Service Advisory Committee (FSAC) meeting. The FSAC is composed of faculty, staff and student government representatives and advises the university on food vendor issues. Aramark and UH promise to help SFT by having a weekly "Fair Trade Fridays" event in the fall 2006 semester.

**April 2006** – Amnesty International UH chapter members Manisha Bhalesha and My-Lien Nguyen respond to SFT recruiting flyers and meet with O'Brien offering to help the SFT campaign to bring fair trade coffee to the UH main campus.

**Apr. 17, 2006** - City Council Person M.J. Khan sends letter ([link](#)) to UH Chancellor and President Jay Gogue supporting SFT fair trade coffee campaign.

**Apr. 18, 2006** - Galveston Houston Catholic Diocese bishop Daniel DiNardo sends letter ([link](#)) to President Gogue supporting SFT fair trade coffee campaign.

**Apr. 18, 2006** - State Representative Garnet Coleman telephones ([link](#)) President Gogue supporting SFT fair trade coffee campaign.

**Apr. 19, 2006** - UH & Aramark request another meeting with SFT.

**Apr. 24, 2006 – VICTORY**

UH & Aramark reps meet with SFT members O'Brien, Bhalesha and Nyguyen and reconfirm their commitment to work with SFT on a Fair Trade coffee campaign with the weekly "Fair Trade Fridays" event in the fall 2006 semester. UH representatives again request that SFT contact them before fall 2006 semester. Aramark representatives bow to the pressure and say Starbucks is offering a fair trade blend daily and that Einsteins and Java City also are now also offering a fair trade blend.

**Apr. 26, 2006** - President Gogue sends letter ([link](#)) to SFT acknowledging letters from Councilperson Khan, Bishop DiNardo and phone call from Rep. Coleman.

**May 19, 2006** - The Food Service Advisory Committee meeting ([link](#)) was held without UH staff informing SFT to attend. (UH lie #1) In the FSAC meeting minutes Aramark and UH say they will work with SFT on Fair Trade Fridays. FSAC committee agrees that is an appropriate course of action. Aramark talks about FT coffee at meeting even though they do not support fair trade issues.

**June 2, 2006** - SFT sends letter ([link](#)) to Jay Gogue informing him UH-Aramark contract gives him the authority to approve of all products sold on campus.

**Aug. 14, 2006** - SFT contacts UH about Fair Trade Fridays event.

**Aug. 24, 2004** - Esmeralda Valdez of the UH Business Services office contacts ([link](#)) SFT and reneges on agreement to hold Fair Trade Fridays event.

**Aug. 30, 2006** - SFT sends letter ([link](#)) to Gogue informing him of closed FSAC meetings and incorrect statements by Business services office director Emily Messa.

**Aug. 31, 2006** - Students for Fair Trade becomes official campus organization.

**Sept. 6, 2006** – In an effort to recruit members and educate the campus population, SFT, still only one member, starts tabling from 11-2 every Wednesday alternating between the UC Satellite and the UC.

**Sept. 15, 2006** - Jay Gogue sends letter ([link](#)) to SFT claiming that by law FSAC meetings by don't need to be open to students or student groups. Gogue does not include supporting evidence.

**Sept. 18, 2006** - Daily Cougar publishes editorial ([link](#)) written by O'Brien about the University activities allowing for the exploitation of third world workers and the refusal by Jay Gogue to stop the use of products on campus that are sourced from all types of sweatshops.

**Oct. 2, 2006** - SFT member O'Brien speaks ([link](#)) with Joel Kissell the student chair of the Food Service Advisory Committee and Residence Hall Association President. Kissell refuses even to print out the minutes to the most recent FSAC meeting but allows O'Brien to read them.

**Oct. 3, 2006** - SFT sends letter ([link](#)) to Jay Gogue again informing him of the UH-Aramark contract giving the University the right to approve and control products sold on campus and asking about UH's agreement on Fair Trade Fridays.

**Oct. 5, 2006** – Business services executive director Emily Messa contacts SFT claiming that the Food Service Advisory Committee “is not the proper forum to share your views on fair trade coffee.”

**October 10, 2006** – The Fall Staff Council meets. This event allows staffers to submit questions in advance which are then answered by the president and his cabinet as he calls the other executives. A question submitted by SFT member O'Brien was asked and answered. See question eight ([link](#)) under the heading “general.”

**Oct. 12, 2006** – The Daily Cougar publishes a story ([link](#)) about UH Staff Forum. The story quotes Jay Gogue and Assistant Chancellor and Vice President for Finance and Administration John Rudley's response to a question submitted by SFT concerning non-fair trade coffee and non-sweatshop free UH logo clothes being sold by campus vendors. Jay Gogue is quoted in the story saying “We have every right when the contracts end to renegotiate.” VP for Finance Rudley adds “We've recognized it as an issue and they've addressed it to the best of their ability.” Both Gogue and Rudley's statements are factually incorrect.

**Oct. 12, 2006** - SFT requests a meeting with VP John Rudley so that he can clarify his remarks quoted in the Daily Cougar. Rudley's administrative assistant stalls setting an appointment for weeks despite O'Brien's visiting twice to his office asking for the appointment to be confirmed or denied.

**October 17, 2006** – The Daily Cougar publishes a letter ([link](#)) to the editor written by Timothy O'Brien refuting Gogue's nonfactual statements delivered at the staff forum regarding fair trade coffee. The letter points out the UH-Aramark contract language clearly giving UH the legal authority to determine acceptability of products and services provided by Aramark.

**October 24, 2006** – SFT holds its first ever general membership meeting in the Claudette Room in the UC Satellite. Five students and two community members attend including students Martha Dew and Ross Barnard who would become active and essential SFT members.

**October 31, 2006** – SFT presents the movie Buyer Be Fair ([link](#)). The projector rented from the University breaks down halfway through the movie forcing the sparse crowd to watch the remainder of the movie on a laptop.

**Nov. 9, 2006** – The Daily Cougar publishes editorial ([link](#)) concerning Texas politician's role in allowing state and local governments to do business with manufacturers using companies with sweatshops in their supply chain.

**Nov. 9, 2006** - SFT members Ross Barnard, Timothy O'Brien and SFT advisor Lenwood Johnson and a student government representative meet with VP John Rudley, UH assistant counsel Valerie Coleman-Ferguson, UH Business services director Esmeralda Valdez and Rudley assistant Theodore Kelly. The meeting concerns Rudley's and Gogue's non-factual statements at the Staff Council forum. Rudley admits that statements made by President Gogue in Staff Council Forum were incorrect and that they have done nothing about the sweatshop issue. Rudley agrees to let SFT present to the Food Service Advisory Committee and to follow through on UH's promise for "Fair Trade Friday's," which meant that Aramark would provide free fair trade coffee at SFT's weekly tabling events. SFT member Barnard suggests that a flavored FT blend be offered on campus and Rudley agrees.

**Nov. 13, 2006** - SFT member O'Brien and advisor Johnson hold press conference in front of Cullen Auditorium. Channel 13 broadcasts ([link](#); to see the clip, visit our [News](#) section) coverage the same day. A channel 13 TV broadcaster reads UH director of communication Eric Gerber's statement "This matter is of ongoing concern at the University of Houston. We've had discussions and continue those discussions" Gerber's statement is factually incorrect as no meetings have been held concerning non-sweat free UH logo clothes. Report shows footage of SFT member O'Brien reading a statement.

**Nov. 15, 2006** – SFT hosts Oxfam Open House in the Cougar Den. SFT member Martha Dew manned the SFT table in the UC Arbor and passed the word of the free lunch in the Cougar Den which is downstairs. Signs at each entrance to the UC were posting saying "free pizza in the Cougar Den." Approximately fifty students attended the event which was held from 11-2. Java City's national sales manager flew from Philadelphia and exhibited and gave away free samples. Te House of Tea a local fair trade vendor also exhibited and gave away tea and fair trade chocolate samples.

**Nov. 17, 2006** - SFT requests meeting with Jay Gogue due to unanswered questions submitted to him in writing about Fair Trade Fridays and his staff continually lying and renegeing on promises.

**Nov. 20, 2006** - SFT sends email to UH Vice Chancellor John Rudley informing him that none of the promises he made at the meeting with SFT have been kept including the fact that Java City and Einstein's didn't keep fair trade coffee available daily and that Starbucks had altered signage so that the availability of fair trade coffee was not advertised.

**Nov. 21, 2006** Rudley's assistant Theodore Kelley answers SFT Nov. 20 email saying that:

- 1) Java City has been asked to provide at least three (3) fair trade blends at all times. (up from 1 current offering) At least two should be flavored varieties. All Rain Forest Alliance certified blends will be discontinued. (SFT does not approve of

- Rain Forest Alliance coffee as it does not address labor conditions, only FT certified is requested.)
- 2) Kelly is checking with Dining Room provider to see if they can offer FT coffee (only one type of coffee currently served, it is non fair trade)
  - 3) Kelly has inquired to Einstein's and Starbucks to see if they can offer more than one fair trade blend.

**December 19, 2006** – SFT members Ross Barnard, Timothy O'Brien, SFT advisor Lenwood Johnson, Amnesty International UH chapter founder and officer Manisha Bhalesha, NAACP UH chapter member Lashic Patterson, Katz Coffee founder and president and UH alumnus Avi Katz and Te House of Tea owner and UH alumnus Kevin Lacobie meet ([link](#)) with President Jay Gogue. Gogue is non-confrontational and regales the group with stories from his last job at the University of South Carolina. He agrees that his staff should keep their word and says he will take care of seeing that their promises are kept. SFT advisor Johnson brings up an issue he and various African American groups are working on and Gogue promises to take care of it.

**January 2007**, SFT schedules meetings for every other week, tabling continues on a weekly basis.

**January 19, 2007** – SFT members Ross Barnard, Tim O'Brien and SFT advisor Lenwood Johnson present to the Food Service Advisory Committee ([link](#)). O'Brien uses a power point to discuss fair trade coffee and college conversion campaigns. John Rudley attends and begs O'Brien to tell president Gogue that he allowed SFT to present to the FSAC. Dr. Thomas Degregori, an economic professor also attends at O'Brien's suggestion because Rudley wanted someone to "debate" the fair trade coffee issue. Degregori ends up supporting SFT's position and shutting down an ignoramus computer science professor who tried spouting some right wing non factual drivel.

**January 25, 2007** – Trying to stoke some activism on campus, O'Brien writes an editorial on the Killer Coke campaign ([link](#)).

**February 5, 2007** – The Daily Cougar publishes an editorial ([link](#)) on fair trade coffee written by active SFT member Martha Dew, a graduate student in College of Social Work.

**February 5, 2007** – Ross Barnard meets with Student Government president Francisco Zeyala and explains the concept of fair trade coffee. Barnard also asks for support for a fair trade coffee bill. Zeyala read SFT member Dew's editorial published the same day and apparently mistakes an editorial column for a news story.

According to the SGA website they have had approximately one issue in the entire current one year term. Their issue dealt with getting professors to get their book orders submitted to the bookstore in time.

**February 7, 2007** – UC reservation honcho James Pettijohn threatens SFT members Taylor Gibson and Tim O'Brien with the police if they don't stop tabling in the UC. ([link](#))

**February 7, 2007** – SFT member Ross Barnard presents the fair trade coffee issue to the SGA. ([link](#)) The Daily Cougar makes his talk front page news and puts a large picture of him above the fold. SFT members Taylor Gibson, Manisha Bhalesha and Tim O'Brien also address the SGA urging them to pass a 100% fair trade coffee bill.

**February 14, 2007** February 14 UC Director Keith Kowalka responds ([link](#)) to SFT letter concerning UC reservations staff threatening SFT members O'Brien and Taylor with the police.

**February 16-19, 2007** - SFT members Ross Barnard, Martha Dew, Taylor Gibson, Tim O'Brien and Esteban Tovar join over three hundred students, allies and producers in attending the United Students for Fair Trade ([link](#)) convergence in Boston, Massachusetts. The Activities Funding Board granted SFT one thousand dollars in travel money which will be put toward reimbursing airfare.

**March 7, 2007** – SFT members attend SGA meeting to press them to do something with their bill. The Daily Cougar publishes their whitewashed version ([link](#)) of the meeting.

**March 22, 2007** – SFT presents the fair trade coffee issue to the Student Government Association and makes the top story on the front page ([link](#)) of the Daily Cougar.

**April 2007** – ufairtrade.org launches SFT into cyberspace. Webmaster, photographer and new SFT member Aaron Alexander, apparently jacked up on fair trade coffee pulled some all nighters to build the site.

**April 1, 2007** - The student government finally introduces SFT's fair trade coffee bill, which is sent to committee which effectively kills the issue until the new administration takes over. The SGA representative's comments in the new story reflect their ignorance about what a representative democracy role is in society and further shows why their body is not taken seriously by the student body. ([link](#))

**April 4, 2007** – The Daily Cougar publishes SFT member Barnard's letter ([link](#)) to the editor which blasts the incomplete and inaccurate coverage of the April 1 SGA meeting.

**April 11, 2007** – The SGA starts a new term and the SFT founder O'Brien, now the graduate senator at large, introduces another bill calling for only fair trade certified coffee to be sold on campus. The Daily Cougar's story ([link](#)) barely mentions the fair trade coffee bill. The bill is sent to committee after all SGA senators except Josephine Tittsworth, the school of Social Work senator speak against it.

**April 17, 2007** - The Daily Cougar publishes SFT member Taylor Gibson's blistering editorial ([link](#)) concerning how the SGA has handled the SFT's call for a bill for only fair trade coffee to be sold on campus.

**April 18, 2007** – **PARTIAL VICTORY**: After an extensive debate, the SGA passes a fair trade coffee bill ([link](#)) The Daily Cougar puts the news of the coffee resolution passing as the top story on the front page. ([link](#)) One example of the plantation mentality exhibited by most SGA members is when all African American SGA senators spoke against the 100% fair trade coffee bill even though fair trade benefits African coffee farmers.

The final bill provides that:

The UH Food Service Vendor shall provide visible literature educating consumers of the availability and social responsibility of Fair Trade Certified coffee at the point of sale of each coffee vendor.

The location of the 100% Fair Trade Certified coffee kiosk will be in the 24 hour lounge in the M.D. Anderson Library, and should be established within a reasonable time frame.

**May 29, 2007** – UH Students Against Sweatshops, another group founded by Timothy O'Brien met with new interim president / chancellor John Rudley. SFT members Diane Aguirre, Martha Dew and SFT advisor Lenwood Johnson attended to show their support for UH SAS. Community members Njera Shakur and Kenya Shabazz of the Black Panther Party and UH Amnesty officer Alex De Latorre also attend. Rudley loses his cool and wanted to know what issue O'Brien will bring up next. Rudley asks for O'Brien and his group to meet with him again before the fall semester starts.

**June 6, 2007** – The first ever summer SFT meeting is held in Chili's on campus. Fair Trade greeting cards (link to <http://www.hopeforwomen.com/>) is the main agenda item. A meeting with the Barnes and Noble campus bookstore manager is scheduled for two days later.

After the meeting five SFT members track down faculty Senate President and sociology professor Joe Kotarba in his department to follow up on the progress of the fair trade coffee bill the student government passed. Kotarba provides some useful information about navigating the bureaucratic maze and questions SFTers about their group, their cause and their reasons for being involved in fair trade. Kotarba commented that SFT was unique because there was virtually no activism on campus therefore the administration was clueless about how to proceed.

**June 8, 2007** – SFT members meet with campus bookstore manager and lobby him to order fair trade greeting cards. The meeting goes well. The manager explains that the fair trade greeting card seller must be added to the B & N list of approved vendors before he can order them.

**August 20, 2007** We kicked off the semester by holding a bake sale on the first day of classes. Although we don't raise a ton of money we see lots of old friends and got fat and happy on leftover brownies and non-Coke product sodas. (UH is locked in a death grip contract with Coke that prevents anyone from using non-Coke products on campus) We also go into the garment sales industry as we roll out our UH SFT t-shirts. The shirts feature our logo and are 100% organic cotton and made by a fair trade coop in Nicaragua.

**August 21, 2007** At our first meeting of the semester we awarded Aaron Alexander with the Timothy J. O'Brien Community Service Award for his great work in creating our website.

**August 29-September 3, 2007** Tim and Esteban attend the Student Farm worker's Alliance encuentro in Immokalee, Florida. The SFA (<http://www.sfalliance.org/>) supports the Coalition of Immokalee's (<http://ciw-online.org/>) work in fighting for fair wages for migrant workers in South Florida.

**September 4, 2007** After materials gained from public information requests suggest that a Starbucks will be installed in the M.D. Anderson library's 24 hour study lounge, we request a meeting with Jim McShann, the VP for Finance and Administration. At our request the student government ("SGA") had passed a resolution mandating that location vend only fair trade coffee an option which Starbucks does not offer. McShan's secretary Faith Aguirre confirms the meeting (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RNsIlhuHnW0>) and then reneges via email (<http://uhfairtrade.org/files/McShanMeeting09-04-2007.pdf>) a few days later.

**September 19, 2007** Transfair USA informs us that they've awarded us a \$1,000 grant for Fair Trade month activities. <http://transfairusa.org/> It's the first grant we've received that didn't come from the university.

**September 20, 2007** Since the administration refuses to meet and discuss why they won't let our fair trade bill work its way through the system, we decide to do a direct action at a faculty senate meeting. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ugOJJ0pCXE>) During the protest faculty senate president Joe Kotarba promises to set up a meeting between interim president and SFT (email) Kotarba later reneges on his promise.

**September 20, 2007** Campus Progress informs us that they've given us a \$1,000 grant. <http://www.campusprogress.org/>

**September 24, 2007** Another fair trade success story on campus! The campus bookstore sold out of their initial of Fair Trade greeting cards. ([www.hopeforwomen.com](http://www.hopeforwomen.com)) They had stocked that at the beginning of the summer at our request. (see June 8 entry)

**September 26, 2007** Tim and Ross host and Open Journal show on KPFT 90.1 FM.

**September 26, 2007** Interim President John Rudley, apparently shaken by the direct action that exposed his head-in-the-sand attitude toward fair trade and sweatshop issues, took out a full page [advertisement](#) (or "advertisement") in the Daily Cougar. The ad being riddled with factual errors, dimwittedly executed propaganda, and questionable funding (it was not paid for by student fees) leads to no less than three editorials by Fair Trade and Sweatshop group members.

**September 29, 2007** The Houston Chronicle publishes a story on Students for Fair Trade. Check it out [here](#).

**October 2, 2007** The Houston Chronicle published Tim's [letter](#) to the editor correcting several errors in their story on our group.

**October 3, 2007** SFT president Ross Barnard gets his first editorial published in the Daily Cougar. Check it out [here](#).

**October 8, 2007** The Daily Cougar publishes two fair trade editorials one by Aaron Alexander which you can read [here](#), and one by Jessica Wilson who is not associated with SFT. Check it out [here](#).

**October 16, 2007** Our Fair Month activities kick off a rocking double bill of live music in the UC arbor. Giant Princess kicks it off followed by local favorites Sideshow Tramps. <http://www.sideshowtramps.com/> See pictures on our Flickr account under the “who we are” page of the website or on our Facebook.

**October 17, 2007** The Cougar Den is the location of our Open House / lunch which is our main Fair Trade month event. We’re joined by local and national fair trade vendors, Stir-It-Up, Fudgette, 10,000 Villages, Eco Teas, Te House of Tea, Organic Sweeteners, and Katz Coffee. Most vendors provided free samples. We’re also joined by our allies Students Against Sweatshops and the Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty. We feast on some veggie fare from Stir-It-Up plus some free lunches provided by our arch enemies Aramark. (hey, we got it free and we need to attract folks with free food). Over 75 people signed in but the total attendance is estimated at well over a hundred faculty, students and staff. The Student Video Network also came and taped a story on us.

**October 18, 2007** We closed our Fair Trade week events by hosting a sparsely attended showing of Black Gold. <http://www.blackgoldmovie.com/>

**October 26, 2007** Tim contacted Houston Chronicle reporter Jenalia Moreno after he read her business profile on Wholesome Sweeteners and suggested she write about another fair trade business during fair trade month. She responds by writing an excellent story on Fair Trade businesses in Houston that quotes SFT member Tim and Esteban. Check it out [here](#).

**October 30, 2007** Ross produced, directed and starred in an awesome fair trade video to enter in Transfair USA’s fair trade month contest. <http://blip.tv/file/458762/> The rumor has it that after graduation Ross is headed for a film career. Look out Brad Pitt!

**November 9, 2007** Ross and Angela attend Cougar Preview to showcase our group to incoming freshman and transfer students. ([link](#))

**December 5, 2007** Tim, Ross, Esteban, Yuna and SGA person Sam Dike meet with Keith Kowalka about the SGA fair trade bill that calls for signage at every coffee outlet.

**December 7, 2007** Ross and Tim are notified by the Assistant Dean of Students that their penalty for doing a direct action at the Faculty Senate is one year probation.

**December 10, 2007** Tim meets with Daily Cougar staff concerning the “paid for by Students for Fair Trade” disclaimer they added to our fair trade month advertisements. The initial outcome is a written apology from the Daily Cougars advertising manager and free advertisement. Check out the letter [here](#).

**December 15, 2007** Our first in between fall spring semester meeting is held. We decide to co-sponsor the Sweatshop group's speaker event scheduled for February 27. See <http://uhstudentsagainstsweatshops.wordpress.com/>

**December 17, 2007** Tim meets with Dr. David Small, student services VP concerning unsatisfactory resolution with the Daily Cougar adding it's editorial comment to our prepaid advertisement.

**December 20, 2007** Tim meets with the Dean of Libraries Dana Rooks. Public information requests reveal that the library budget will pay to install a Starbucks in the 24 hour study lounge. The coffee materials also indicate that the University is operating under the assumption that having a coffee shop in the library will increase your GPA. See document [here](#). (scroll to the bottom of the page for their increased GPA claim)