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Nov 04, 2016 by [Chanelle Yang](#)

## **College Students Get Smart...Power: Connecting the Foreign and Local Publics** <sup>[1]</sup>

Through my involvement in labor rights activism, I started organizing direct actions under the USC student-run organization, "Student Coalition Against Labor Exploitation (SCALE)." SCALE is a smaller branch of the national student labor rights movement. Our advocacy program demonstrates how university students engage in public diplomacy with factory workers worldwide. While at the same time, we advocate for the use of hard power inducements to enforce social responsibility on corporations and governments.

Students have developed far-reaching grassroots initiatives connecting the foreign and local publics through, what I call, the "Solidarity Model." International factory workers are at the top of the "Solidarity Model"; they must collectivize to create demands for improved working conditions. Without their demands, students wouldn't have anything to base their campaigns on. Then there's the central voice for international workers called "United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS)": a national student-run organization, which unifies smaller chapters at 150 universities across the United States, including USC, University of Washington, UT

Austin, Ohio State, Duke, and Harvard Universities.

Students and the international worker community are bound by shared core values. Our capacity to transcend borders to empower transnational advocacy grows our ability to hold companies and countries accountable for human rights. We aim to promote workers' freedom of speech and action, as well as the right to assemble and bargain for better working conditions. In essence, we're democratizing the workplace to create a universal standard of basic human rights for workers. We provide workers with a central platform and forum to stand in solidarity against unethical corporate practices. Due to our efforts, workers worldwide can relate to each other's struggles, creating an ever-growing community and collective identity, while at the same time, closing the information gap that has left abused laborers unnoticed for too long.

By observing our labor rights campaigns and direct actions, we are successfully exercising soft power. The three-tiered "Solidarity Model" shows how we foster effective public diplomacy: American students connect with international workers through social media, Facebook, Skype, and Google Hangouts. This constant feedback from workers brings us closer to their personal experiences, empowering our local direct actions and nationwide campaigns. Our efforts promote international exchange between the foreign public of factory workers and local American students.

After the Tazreen factory fire, which killed more than 100 workers (Tazreen Fashions produces clothes for Walmart and Sears), one of the Bangladeshi factory survivors visited SCALE and other USAS chapters to share her story. In April Rana Plaza's factory fire in Bangladesh killed over 1,000 workers, posing a problem that gained international attention and placed pressure on the Bangladeshi government to punish these factory owners. President Obama reacted by revoking Bangladesh's trade privileges. However, Obama's use of hard power won't help establish long-term changes to ensure factory reforms in Bangladesh and other countries.

USAS promotes the use of soft power, by utilizing our values to organize peaceful demonstrations, direct actions, community meetings, and sit-ins. We've created long-lasting relationships with labor unions and factory workers worldwide, including the factory director of the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity, Kalpona Akter. Furthermore, USAS chapters have used policies to bring change, campaigning and petitioning for universities to sign onto the Workers' Rights Consortium (WRC), a third-party, unbiased monitor that evaluates factories which produce university apparel. This April SCALE finally convinced USC to sign onto the WRC.

Shining national attention on companies that aren't held accountable for their manufacturers' unethical conditions, we engage in the ongoing battle to institute standard labor practices. This year USAS organized a nationwide movement that pushed Adidas to compensate 2,700 Indonesian factory workers with \$1.8 million in severance pay. Initially, USAS chapters organized peaceful demonstrations at Adidas stores across the United States. To threaten Adidas' reputation and business, USAS convinced 17 universities and colleges across the country to cut their Adidas clothing contracts. Resorting to hard power when necessary, USAS models an effective balance of soft and hard power.

Students are instilling in consumers, especially the younger generation, the expectation that governments and corporations need to enforce standard labor practices. We've gained the

power to transform consumers' perceptions of apparel companies, factories, and even the countries that allow labor violations.

As university students, we have more power than we think. We're not just bystanders, but actors on the global stage. The USAS labor rights movement resonates, growing our community of college activists and bringing us closer together with international laborers and fellow American students. New USAS branches in universities are cropping up, due to our publicized efforts and solidarity immersions.

During these next two weeks, I'll be in the Dominican Republic to witness how our student movements affect factory workers. One of the factories that I will be visiting is the first Dominican factory to prove that socially responsible production is possible and profitable; the factory gives workers almost three times the minimum wage, overtime pay and allows them to unionize. It also manufactures clothes for Knight's Apparel, the main apparel company for American universities. Additionally, I'll engage with student activists from other USAS chapters to share our experiences and campaign strategies.

Right now the top 10%, mostly white Spanish descents, hold most of the wealth in the Dominican Republic. With public discontent rising with Medina's leadership and the country's economic failures, unemployment is at a high 14.6%. The Dominican also struggles with its huge population of undocumented Haitian immigrant workers and denial of citizenship to Haitian immigrants' babies born in the Dominican. With its current economic strains, government corruption, and inefficiency, I'll further delve into the garment industry's role in the overall economy, development of unions, as well as other areas for growth in the Dominican labor force.

*Disclaimer: the name of specific factories can not be disclosed until a later date for privacy reasons.*

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