

Living Wage Campaign Case Study
Colorado College Fair Labor
Private college with no unions

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All documents, statements, proposals, reports, etc. mentioned in this case study are archived at the website's documents section.

Why you should read this document

Before we started our campaign two years ago, our janitors were making \$6.92 an hour, staff members were making a little more, kitchen workers often less, and real wages had been declining for the last decade. Now the college has become the first in the country to take responsibility for its employees by adopting a self-sufficiency standard calculated from actual family budgets in the area. No on-campus employee now makes less than \$9.64 an hour, and given our momentum we expect this to continue improving. We believe that this alone is a remarkable success, given the hostile climate we and most other campus living wage campaigns face. Adjusted for relative cost of living, this is equivalent to a raise from \$9.90 to \$13.79 in Boston, \$12.94 to \$18.03 in San Francisco, \$8.51 to \$11.86 in Washington, D.C., or \$6.78 to \$9.45 in Knoxville, Tennessee.

Our group learned a great deal from prior campaigns' documentation of what they did and where they succeeded and failed. We hope that future campaigns might similarly benefit from our record of why we chose the particular strategies we did out of the toolbox we inherited from the movement.

In this case study, we will provide a quick overview of our campaign to anchor events we discuss later, describe our operating environment (§I), then discuss our broad strategy (§II) and the tactics we used to advance it (§III), and then how our strategies developed as we took subsequent steps in our campaign (§IV). For convenience, we have provided a summary of lessons learned at the end of the case study.

We dedicate this document to a certain CC janitor who once faked her uninsured boyfriend's symptoms so her Medicaid would cover a prescription to cure his illness. If we college activists had a fraction of the fighting spirit that sustains her and her boyfriend in such conditions, the world would be a better place.

Quick Overview — Campaign Timeline¹

2001, September: Amnesty International chapter meeting gets rambunctious; cries of “let’s unionize the janitors” are heard; decision to form exploratory committee toward this end

October: First meetings, gather documents from previous groups, discuss strategy and timeline

November: Meetings with administrators, faculty, workers, past student groups to write report

December: Edit report, purge everything that sounds radical

2002, January: Rolling prerelease of report for editing and revisions; public release at end of month
After receiving prerelease administration agrees to open bidding on Sodexo contract in 18 months

¹ Full timeline at <http://www.ccfairlabor.com/history.html> .

At public hearing, CCFL and administration agree to form committee examining labor practices
February: Meeting to determine movement platform and goals
Behind-the-scenes lobbying to secure CCFL members appointed to committee
March: Sodexho responds to report, sends PR VP to campus
Labor practices committee appointed; by irregular process, Dean of Student Life appoints student representatives, overruling student government
CCFL releases details of profit-skimming Sodexho wholesaler kickbacks in campus newspaper
Start pushing door-to-door canvassing, petitioning, bathroom posters to bring message to campus
April: “Reggae-in”
May: Behind-the-scenes work with labor practices committee, talks with Sodexho and workers
Survey of campus employees regarding working conditions
Presidential search process
Summer break: Prepare documents, propaganda, revitalize website
August: Release online simulator of college budget
Release digested posters based on campus employee survey
September-December: Behind-the-scenes work with labor practices committee, administrators
2003, January: Labor practices committee recommends \$13.05 self-sufficiency standard based on one parent, one child family budgets; to all current employees within four years and all employees period within ten years
February: Postering, op-eds recommending president endorse committee recommendation
March: President endorses \$9.64 living wage for next year based on two-parent, two-child family budget, agrees to reevaluate assumed family to better reflect demographic in subsequent years

§I. Environment

Student body — Colorado College is a liberal arts college enrolling around 1,900 students. It has been described with some truth as a group home for east-coast kids who couldn’t handle it. CC has a very vocal activist community, especially around environmental issues. Traditional leftist groups, such as the labor-solidarity alliance and queer and other identity groups, attract little attention except to the extent that they provide free alcohol or cultural entertainment. The dominant undercurrent within the student body is feel-good apathy. Only a tiny fraction of students are registered to vote; those who do will likely vote Democrat until they get their first paycheck. Most students are somewhat put-off by the left, but by leaving the vocal far-left uncontested the appearance of liberalism is maintained—allowing conservative attitudes to survive, even strengthened by the feeling of being a minority. CC’s conservatism is the populist leave-me-alone-and-I-can-make-it-myself conservatism of the West, not the free-market ideology of the coasts or the confederate nostalgia of the South.

Administration — We do not have a pushover administration. CC’s administration had broken a past anti-sweatshop campaign, a Not With Our Money/No More Prisons campaign against Sodexho, our contractor, and a six-year working conditions campaign by RISE, a labor solidarity alliance among progressive groups on campus. None of these groups was still functional when CC Fair Labor, our group, was created. CC’s administration is generally centrist in its orientation. They are not hostile to the progressive agenda, but rather are generally comfortable with the status quo

and want to avoid the work and hassle associated with change. Despite strong environmentalism on campus, it took heavy lobbying—including an absurd student referendum on a \$1 tuition increase—to convince the administration to adopt recycled paper. Once the referendum occurred, though, the administration complied with the request. With harder economic times, the administration has been especially wary of anything that would increase the college budget—tuition has been increasing about 8% faster than inflation, and the administration fears that all their pet projects will be ruined if the trustees refuse to approve a budget with too much spending.

Community — The surrounding community, Colorado Springs, provides an eminently hostile environment for the progressive agenda. The Colorado Springs chamber of commerce boasts a 0.0% private-sector manufacturing unionization rate and “friendly business-labor relations”—in other words union powerlessness. The union vacuum is such that our group received calls from union locals unable to find advice on making collective bargaining agreements. Colorado Springs has more churches per person than any other large U.S. city, but these faith communities are generally hostile. Focus on the Family, the largest anti-gay, anti-abortion, anti-feminist lobby in the country, figures prominently among the literally scores of Religious Right organizations headquartered in Colorado Springs. To round off the political climate, Colorado Springs is home to the Air Force Academy, Schriever Air Force Base, Peterson Air Force Base, Franklin Air Force Base, NORAD, and Fort Carson. Despite the moderating influence of liberal communities in Boulder and Denver, Republicans dominate all state, county, and municipal elected offices.

Past labor activism — Given this environment, it is unsurprising that previous labor movements at CC had largely failed. Activist groups at CC usually face high turnover, poor organization, and make little headway with either students or the administration. The year before CC Fair Labor was organized, another group collected signatures on a petition demanding changes in the conduct of our notorious foodservice and janitorial contractor Sodexo.² Yet the next year, when we organized CC Fair Labor and contacted them to see where they had left off, it turned out nobody knew where the petition was or how many signatures had been collected. It turned out that the student who had been responsible for archiving the petition had thrown it out when he moved to Ghana. And despite sharp identification of problems and good relations with the workers, the group failed to make clear—either to administrators or to the campus as a whole—exactly what changes they proposed, essentially pointing out the problem and throwing it in the administration’s lap, saying “you deal with it now.”³ As far as we could determine, in two years of hard work the group had produced no change in worker treatment or campus climate.

Broader assessment — In a larger sense, we were pessimistic about the achievements of student, labor and activist efforts at other colleges and in the broader community. The real success stories are piecemeal and far between. We are proud when our protests raise one Wal-Mart’s customers’ awareness for one day, but Wal-Mart has thousands of stores and is now the largest employer in the country. The social justice movement exulted when we were able to disrupt a WTO meeting in Seattle. We are rightly proud to have put ourselves on the ideological map and in the media, but we did not win the day. When asked at the World Social Forum in Brazil what sympathizers in the global North should do to further their struggle for justice, Sem Terra movement leader João Pedro Stedile called the global North to “overthrow your neoliberal governments.” This is a realistic benchmark against which the *Sem Terra* and *Partido Trabalhista* in Brazil can measure their

² http://www.ccfairlabor.com/documents/ccnwom_petition.html, for example “We recognize that the administration has urged us, the students, to investigate alternatives to Sodexo Marriot ourselves. While we certainly could do this, we assert that such a research project is not our responsibility. We ask that those of you who bear that responsibility please do so.”

³ http://www.ccfairlabor.com/documents/NWOM_demands.html

power, but student and labor activism in the global North is relatively impotent to influence policies or political trends. Only when the corporate globalization movement exults, as we did after Seattle, when they manage to disrupt *our* meetings, we will know we are winning.

§II. Strategy

Goals — Our campaign’s two main goals were to improve campus workers’ economic conditions and to challenge our contractor, Sodexo, over its corporate record and over the treatment of outsourced foodservice and janitorial workers. Rather than make the mission statement⁴ a reflection of common goals, we construed our purpose narrowly, demanding that every proposed action specifically advance our stated mission. Based on our generally negative assessment of the college, community, and country’s operating climate, our strategies were pragmatic and had a note of desperation: we thought not of how we wanted to win, but rather how we could avoid losing.

Strategy I: Centrist rhetoric — Our first strategic decision was to operate from the center to pull it left, rather than staying on the more comfortable left and thereby pushing the center right. We framed our appeals in terms of shared values: “workers need to raise families”; “their children don’t have healthcare”; “we want to be an inclusive community”—rather than advocating overthrow of an entire system of oppression. In some ways, this was simply a choice of more comfortable words: we pledged to “reform” rather than “overthrow” the system, and made changes “because we care” not “in solidarity.” We used the word “community” at least once in every paragraph. Rather than criticizing the college for its hypocrisy, we applauded the college’s values and challenged it to put them into practice. Nationalism and its younger sister, school spirit, are powerful forces when channeled to good ends.

Methods — This decision to work from the center also dictated our methods. We did not have rallies, chants, protests, or building occupations, or engage in guerrilla theatre or protest through art. Instead, we wrote research reports and policy recommendations, made informational posters, built webpages, and composed emails. As in any advertising venture, style was as important as substance: in order to gain credibility with the center, we needed to maintain a professional image. Taking our cue from corporations and political campaigns that have mastered the art of spin, we invested in a consistent, professional-looking logo that we used in all communications, and made sure that everything we associated with our campaign was credible and would create a positive response in its viewers. It is also worth noting that we did not call ourselves a living wage campaign. Many do not believe in living wages; everyone believes in fair labor standards. (Also, at the outset we were not sure we were going to be a living wage campaign. Our janitors were paid only at the 5th percentile of the local market, and so at the outset we pressed for a market wage—getting the neocons on our side that wages needed to be adjusted—and then only once the bureaucratic ball was rolling started pressing for a higher standard.)

Our platform — It was only some time after we formed the group and compiled our first main report that we actually decided on the substantive agenda of our campaign. The report had some sixty interspersed bulleted “recommendations” offering proposed solutions to the problems we discussed in the text, but we decided it would be easier to sell our movement if we pushed for a specific set of realistic and easily communicable goals. This⁶ was probably the document that we spent the longest on per-word (picture forty-five minutes to select the term “livable wage” from among the possibilities, and then fifteen minutes on the subject again in each of three revision

⁴ <http://www.ccfairlabor.com/principles.html>

⁵ <http://www.ccfairlabor.com/documents/gotbenefits.pdf>

⁶ Five-point platform is at <http://www.ccfairlabor.com/principles.html>

meetings). We wanted something that was both possible to sell to the campus community and that was a group constitution we were genuinely willing to live by. Because of the traditional smear tactics used against progressive causes (that will probably have unintended consequences, big changes will be different from the comfortable status quo) and our community's intolerance for radical rhetoric, we decided it was important to have an answer to "What are you fighting for?" more specific than "workers being treated like people" or "justice for our workers." While these are indubitably good ideas, and might be useful slogans among our own, most people's first thought is "well, what does that mean?" and then "won't that raise my tuition?" Programmatic clarity was also useful internally when we were at a loss for a next move or needed some way to find consensus about what stand to take on a given issue.

Internal structure — This decision to make an effort to appeal to the center meant conversely that we could do less to appeal to our own activists. We adopted democratic forms because democracy is the best way to run a group, but our forms were designed to be not so radical that reduced the time available to our core missions. This means not that we chose the popular over the ethical, but rather that we wanted to strive to have both an ethical organization and an ethical wider society and recognized that there was only so much striving we could do. For example, we did not adopt a caucus structure, provide gender-neutral bathrooms at meetings, engage in wider political commentary or activism, provide childcare at meetings, or have rallies to energize our base—all desirable in an activist group with infinite time and resources, but unsustainable given our size and the magnitude of the task at hand.

Relationship with unions — In Colorado Springs, it would have been sheerest folly to maintain public ties to labor unions. ("A Union? Isn't that kind of like the mafia?") We also felt that our recommendations would carry the most weight if we presented them from the perspective of students wanting to build a strong community rather than in a solidarity struggle with workers demanding their rights. By adopting the posture of an insider trying to enrich the whole community, we avoided zero-sum rhetoric and the suspicion of self-interest that often plagues redistribution campaigns. We also made sure to emphasize having the interests of the college at heart—while this sometimes meant we had to adopt co-opted rhetoric, saying "we recognize the tight budget constraints" for example, rather than "this college has plenty enough to pay its workers decently"—making it clear that we were agitating for community values than factional interests. We profited greatly from an informal relationship with HERE, mostly sharing information and strategy thoughts back and forth, but we acted independently as students rather than incorporating workers into our group structure.

Strategy II: Relations with administration — Our second strategy decision, closely related, was to maintain good relations with the school's administration. We did not expect ever to have enough power to "force the targets to meet our demands"—the definition of tactics used in other USAS case studies—and so decided that we would have to try to convince them instead. Accordingly, we toned down our rhetoric on this dimension as well: we made "recommendations"⁷ rather than "demands." Any administrators we burned bridges with today would tomorrow be evaluating our policy recommendations—following the ANC, we criticized policies but not people. In order to persuade administrators, we needed not only to demonstrate support, but to provide persuasive arguments, credible information, positive recommendations, and to demonstrate appropriately bourgeois attire in meetings. Our group was as much a think-tank as a mass movement. This meant we cared much more about recruiting a highly-dedicated core than a mass membership, and that we had to sacrifice a measure of participatory empowerment in order to maintain tight control over our

⁷ <http://www.ccfairlabor.com/documents/recs.html>

group's message and the statements associated with it. When administrators were clearly acting against us, we pretended that they were just acting out of misunderstanding, focusing more on what we expected of them rather than what they were actually doing. For example, "Some staff members have reported being told that college policy prohibits them from signing our petition. Not only is this patently not the case, but such a policy would clearly violate the National Labor Relations Act. Because the administration has committed to representing all viewpoints in this process, we are certain they will take appropriate steps to correct this misunderstanding,"⁸ not "The administration is intimidating our staff to try to undermine our support and we won't stand for it."

Working with administrators — Because of past campaigns' failures, we were expecting an overtly hostile administration. We assumed that the campaign would be hostile, and were simply waiting for the administration to burn bridges first, rather than burning them ourselves. This sort of paranoia probably served us well: for example, most of our research was done before we adopted a name, logo, or public presence, and being tight-lipped about "oh, yeah, we're just writing a report, we'll show it to you when we're done" elicited no early opposition. Similarly, we made sure to have at least two students in the room for each meeting with administrators, so we could confirm absolutely any statement they made and not get burned that way. If we were going to start our campaign again, perhaps the main thing we would do differently is to invest more time in building a deep understanding of how policy is made at the college and of the disposition of each key administrator or official. For example, the figure we assumed in the early stages to be our arch-nemesis, the college's business director, was actually a recruitable ally. The administration was not overtly hostile to our goals ("heh heh, let's see how we can screw the workers"), but genuinely hoped to run a good college but simply had a lot on their plate and did not have good information about what was going on at our school. For another example of how better knowledge of college processes would have helped us, when we asked for specific policy changes and administrators talked about forming a committee, we did not have the background to understand real-time during the meeting itself exactly what was being proposed, and especially if this was standard practice or not. Better knowledge of the bureaucracy would also have helped the campaign move more quickly and nimbly. While we were appropriately wary of showing our hand too soon, we would likely have progressed faster if we had had a better idea at the outset of who we needed to convince and what bureaucratic steps were necessary to form a new policy. Since much of our debate was assessing our progress and figuring out what we were going to do next, had we known the system better, we could have put to better use countless hours spent discussing political strategy. Involving lots of faculty members earlier on could have helped us get the insider knowledge we needed about college processes.

Networking — Much of the success of our campaign was in generating buzz among the campus structure. Only a handful of people will read a report, but more will if you give them a copy and then make an appointment to come in and discuss it. Even more if friendly faculty members or committees bring it up with them at meetings. Our greatest recommendation may be to spend a lot of time discussing tactics within the group, but still more talking about it with people outside the group. The feedback will be sobering—not many people get excited by this stuff—but sobriety is not necessarily a bad thing. We found that asking people what they knew or thought about the topic was a great way to start a meeting: they were likely to become friendly, build interest in the topic, and feel like part of our campaign instead of feeling like we were on a high horse dictating morals to them. They also often knew things that we didn't. Building a network, meeting opponents, building personal as well as business relationships with administrators not only spreads the message more effectively, but helps to tune tactics and message to the audience. In our campaign,

⁸ <http://www.cfairlabor.com/documents/supportstaffspeech.html>

we participated in the presidential search process (discussed later) intending to bring up our issues at meetings with presidential candidates, but in each case other students had already brought it up before we got a chance to. Pressure from a million points.

Strategy III: Group infrastructure — Third, our group invested heavily in formal infrastructure. It is fun and easy to organize an activist group, but it requires much more to build a group that lasts. Noticing the failures of previous groups to pass on research and organizational logistics, we created an online document archive to ensure that each group member had access to all of the group's accumulated knowledge.⁹ We made sure that senior activists developed and trained protégés in lower classes so that no crucial function would be lost when a student graduated.

Group organization — Our group was organized around a tight core of perhaps five students who were willing to meet every day if necessary, and wider group of perhaps 15 students who would mobilize for important strategy discussions or for initiatives such as tabling or circulating a petition. We also depended on support from the wider campus community, especially in being able to tailor our message by soliciting feedback from a broad group of administrators, faculty, staff, and students on drafts of important documents. (Besides the group core, we had a broad set of allies—mostly roommates of group members—who served as a standing focus group to see how different campus sectors would react to given documents. Feedback from people other than college activists is so helpful...) We were also able to apply the expertise of longtime CC'ers to process and strategy decisions, and on being able to place our message in official meetings and fora and hear back what sort of response it got. The main tension in our group's organization was between the core and the wider group, especially when core members rotated into the periphery depending on class workloads but expected to be consulted in every decision even when they were not available for consultation. We were able to address this somewhat by creating the documents archive to prevent the formation of insider knowledge, but there were times when the leadership did degenerate into a clique. Within the core, the group was small enough that we did not need formal leadership positions, but we did ensure on a broad consultative process that would avoid official party-line documents from being issued without full vetting by as many people as possible.

Group composition — The composition of the students in our group broadly reflected the composition of the campus as a whole: roughly gender-balanced, mostly white, drawn from all years. Because our message was more resonant with students from a working-class or lower middle-class background, we were more successful in recruiting dedicated activists from these groups. Because of the tight control we needed over our message, the discontinuity between the conservative center of campus and the radical far-left, and our desire to remain very mission-centered, we did not make formal alliances with other groups. We did share knowledge and participate in synergetic events through the heavily-overlapping web of group affiliations within the small campus left community—for example, launching a “living wages don't discriminate” campaign in conjunction with the Black Student Union.

Day-to-day group functioning — In order to track immediate objectives, member responsibilities, long-term campaign and strategy ideas, and research information needs, our group relied heavily on technology. We kept a running to-do list that we updated at every meeting. Our meetings ranged from twice a day at the extreme to every other week when little was going on. Between meetings we communicated by email—the group's two main leaders interchanged around 500 emails during six months of the campaign. Key emails and to-do lists were archived in a secure section of the website and emailed to members so that everyone was aware of what was going on—but limited so that, unlike with some activist listservs, it did not become so busy it was not read at all.

⁹ <http://www.cfairlabor.com/documents.html>

Specific group roles — Within the group we had a few roles that seemed crucial enough that they should be designated as a specific person’s responsibility. The “agenda nazi” ensured that we stayed on task, making meetings manageable and productive—serving essentially as an internal chair. The “spokesman” made statements on the group’s behalf, was the press contact, represented us in one-on-one interviews and meetings, networked with other groups, and in general served as the group’s external chair. The “political consultant”—recruited from mainstream partisan politics rather than college activism—watched group positioning, made sure that we did not stray into activistspeak, and monitored the mainstream campus political climate. The “archivist” kept a central repository of all the group’s information and applied this repository to drafting literature, posters, emails, and the website. The four together consulted with the wider membership to make the most important group strategy decisions, simply because large group discussion is too broad to get deep enough.

§III. Tactics

Traditional reasons for protest tactics — Our group has not engaged in any direct action or protest. Public protests (called “actions” by our movement, as though there are no other types of action and anything else is inaction) in general have four goals: (1) to raise awareness in the community; (2) to demonstrate public support; (3) to keep the mass base energized, and (4) to force targets to acquiesce to demands. These four goals are crucial to activist movements, but are not often best served by actions. First, while “actions” are sometimes effective in raising general awareness, they often do not allow a group to present a coherent, complex, appealing, targeted message. Some sort of public relations effort is certainly necessary to put an issue on the map, but the mainstream public often finds protest alienating rather than informative. Those who have ever rallied in front of a sweatshop retailer know that the facial expressions of the immediate target audience—those shopping from the stores—often indicate not that they are impressed by protesters or shocked at sweatshop conditions, but rather confused, annoyed, or even amused. Second, when there is indeed a massive, dedicated base, a protest can impressively demonstrate public support, as recent war protests have done. But a group of fifty demonstrators, twenty demonstrators, or five demonstrators has the reverse effect. A protest will only be an effective demonstration of support if it actually demonstrates a great deal of support. Third, protests will only energize certain segments of the mass base. Some form an identity around activism, and will go to a rally for almost anything. But realistically speaking, only a few percent of the population will go to a rally, and energizing those few at the expense of alienating the many is at least a tradeoff that should be recognized. Repeated protests that appear to accomplish nothing, just like too-frequent meetings or too many committees, may even enervate a base that would be eager to work but who has little time to waste. Fourth, the connection between the “action” and the target’s decision is often tenuous. Often, the hope is to gain press, build popular pressure, and create annoyances that will force a decision. Often, though, “actions” burn bridges with targets and turn them into enemies, and at the same time produce even negative press and reduce popular sympathy. This is not to say that “actions” are never necessary—very successful actions have occurred at a number of universities. But I am arguing that action should be a last resort and should be integrated into a complex, multi-tactic campaign, rather than a first and repeated impulse that is not part of a wider strategy to win support and influence.

Our alternatives — Instead of organizing actions, we found ways to accomplish these four goals in a way that was more effective and appropriate to our circumstances. First, in order to raise community awareness, we used posters, emails, canvassing, tabling, our website, research reports, and campus newspapers. Because seeding information and awareness into the wider campus

community builds a foundation crucial for any aspect of a campaign, I will go into each of these media a little more later on. Second, to demonstrate community support, we used petitions and telephone polls. Well-organized door-to-door petitioning can help a great deal in building a connection between the campaign and the wider community. Preparing slick campaign literature to hand out while petitioning is key to building support. We designed our campaign literature¹⁰ with the “recycler test” in mind: students should know what the campaign is about by glancing at the literature for just long enough to toss it in the recycler. Telephone polls using randomly-selected students from a school directory are a great way to assess the campaign’s profile and success, and when the campaign is indeed succeeding in bringing its message to the students, provides a relatively low-resource way to communicate that support quantitatively—e.g. being able to state that 80% of students support your group’s campaign (and especially, if you have anyone in the campaign who needs to do a statistics project, 80% plus or minus 7% sounds *very* convincing). Be sure to have a well-prepared script for phone conversations, to ask questions the same way every time, and to figure out beforehand exactly what you want to know about your level of student support—for example, why people who don’t support you feel that way, how people have heard about you, what questions people have about you. Third, the main reason I have found that the activist base becomes disinterested is the feeling that a campaign is going nowhere or there is not something “real” that they are working on. Keeping a clear set of goals and responsibilities, and making sure these responsibilities are clearly tied to the campaign’s long-term objectives, is perhaps the most effective way to keep students involved. But rallying just to have something to do is a waste of time and energy, and in the long term, group members will realize this. Fourth, getting targets to acquiesce to demands—the ultimate goal of any campaign—is usually more complex than organizing a demonstration. Administrators would often just as soon have police evict building occupiers than accede to their demands. Protests themselves do not “force” anyone to do anything. Often, protests are thought of as a demonstration of support and determination, and a way to attract media attention, with the hope that this will convince an administrator. If this strategy, subjected to appropriate scrutiny, appears that it is working, go with it. But we did not feel that our administration would respond well to protests, but would respond much better to a centrist, grassroots, less militant organization.

Raising awareness — In designing our awareness campaign, we had two main goals in mind. First, we wanted to build a credible brand. The reason people are uninformed, as a whole, is not because the information is not out there but because they don’t see it or they dismiss it when they are confronted with it. We wanted to create an image for our group that people were comfortable with: that people felt our numbers were sound, that we were mainstream and professional, and that we were accomplishing things. Making posters on a computer and then printing them, rather than using cutouts and xeroxing, made us more professional. Reading a few books on design and layout helped—consistent fonts, consistent group logo, etc. make things look professional. Building information depth—for example, stating on a poster that the information is from a fuller report and the report is available online,¹¹ and then in the report citing a document that is also available online¹²—helps to make people feel your facts are credible even if they don’t bother to follow up and read more. Naturally, in order to make people comfortable, we avoided association with things that do not have universal support: citing “community” and “diversity” bring everyone on board; “union” and “solidarity” are more dangerous; “means of production,” “exploitation,” and “corporate octopus” make people run. (Though we threw “Enron-like” into a few articles on

¹⁰ http://www.ccfairlabor.com/documents/literature_3-28-02.pdf

¹¹ e.g. <http://www.ccfairlabor.com/documents/IsCCaGoodEmployer.pdf>

¹² <http://www.ccfairlabor.com/documents.html#documentation>

Sodexo profit-making schemes after the accounting debacle.)¹³ Similarly, the music of our movement was reggae rather than hip hop because it emphasized the themes we wanted to play on in a way that appeals to a wider audience. (Based, again, on random polls—reggae is “feel good” music, hip-hop is confrontational and direct. Our only “action” was a reggae-in in which members and supporters played reggae so it was audible from every point on campus.¹⁴) Second, we wanted to seed information in the wider community about what we were doing. The rage in advertising these days is to create a buzz in a wider community. We tried to get enough information out there that people would start talking about it. Calling trivial accomplishments “major victories”¹⁵ was one way to build an image of a campaign worth paying attention to (and not entirely dishonest—accomplishing anything, as a student activist movement is something of a victory). Getting information into the community was also a crucial way to recruit volunteers for tabling and petitioning drives.

Media used — We used a number of media to raise community awareness. Posters, especially placed in bathroom stalls where people read them,¹⁶ were a main way of communicating with students and the janitors who clean the bathrooms. When we designed less information-intensive posters, we put them up in buildings and on billboards,¹⁷ but people usually only glance at those; our phone polls showed that the main way we got attention was the bathroom posters. Having information-technology people in our group, we were also able (somewhat illegitimately) to obtain a list of every email address on campus—a resource no other group has—and so were able to send out mass emailings very occasionally.¹⁸ We also maintained weekly and monthly update listservs that people could sign up for when they signed our petition.¹⁹ Door-to-door petitioning drives and canvassing, especially in freshmen areas, gave us a chance to talk one-on-one to people and answer questions about the movement. Briefing canvassers on the party line, and preparing good literature and talking points, was crucial in presenting a focused message, but just offering to get back by email to people who had questions the canvasser could not answer, also allowed us to answer questions and resolve concerns. Tabling was less important to our movement, in part because we relied more on posters and did not want to waste scarce volunteer resources, but we did set up a table for a few days after each major postering campaign or announced victory in case students had questions. Our website was another main way both to promote a professional, impressive image and to get information out into the community. People will not remember a long URL; until we had the budget to register our own domain, we used ccfairlabor.8m.com, provided by the 8m.com free web hosting service. Among faculty and administrators, our most important tool in raising awareness was our research reports.²⁰ Due to their greater skepticism and greater investment in the community, they will read a longer document and the added length is necessary to offer a convincing case. One way to get people to read it is to ask them to revise a prerelease copy—if each student solicits comments from the faculty members they have connections to, it is pretty possible

¹³ http://www.ccfairlabor.com/documents/enron_3-8-02.html. Note that this is not anti-corporate language—this was written right after the Enron scandal when even the right was worried about it.

¹⁴ <http://www.ccfairlabor.com/documents/reggae.pdf>

¹⁵ e.g. http://www.ccfairlabor.com/documents/committee_charge_members.html

¹⁶ e.g. http://www.ccfairlabor.com/documents/introducing_CCFL.pdf ,
<http://www.ccfairlabor.com/documents/BadBusiness.pdf> ,
<http://www.ccfairlabor.com/documents/Outhouse.pdf>

¹⁷ e.g. http://www.ccfairlabor.com/documents/reggae_3-28-02.pdf

¹⁸ <http://www.ccfairlabor.com/documents/email2.htm>

¹⁹ e.g. http://www.ccfairlabor.com/documents/update_3-25-02.html ,
http://www.ccfairlabor.com/documents/update_4-5-02.html

²⁰ <http://www.ccfairlabor.com/report.html>

to get 30 faculty members to read a full 20-page document. Not only will the comments they provide be useful, but faculty members love to talk, and giving them information about your organization and your issues is a good way to create buzz. Similarly, asking the leaders of other student groups for comments or recommendations is a good way to build ties. For this audience, we found that footnotes were crucial: in our fifteen-page report we had 180 footnotes. Editing is also good. (By the way, great excuse for getting faculty members to read your reports: ask them to edit them and make suggestions. Especially if they are cited in the report and/or have critiqued your writing in the past, they will likely respond well and can become good buzz-generators and allies of the campaign.) Finally, campus newspapers tend to be overworked and understaffed, and so are usually glad when you write articles for them.²¹ Weekly worker profiles are a great idea if you have the time resources; if not, announce victories, the state of the campaign, and random propaganda. We wrote a whole article just about our campus contractor's profit rate.²²

Sources of information — We had two main cases to make in our research reports and propaganda. First, we had to make a case that workers were genuinely maltreated. For this, we relied on a combination of testimony gathered directly from workers²³ and a campus-wide survey taken by a sociology class that allowed us to quantitatively document worker hardships.²⁴ Finding worker contacts generated by the previous failed campaigns gave us a head start in discovering which issues were most important to workers. Second, we had to make an economic case that better treatment was economically viable. Some of this was pure economics—make sure someone in the group knows some economics. Second, knowing the specifics of the university budget was a major help. Having meetings with people in the know—budget directors, business office people, office of institutional research people, people from faculty committees, economics faculty members, etc.—can help to build this knowledge base. For example, the CC's major budget problem was that healthcare costs were too high because in order to receive federal funding they had to offer staff the same benefit plan they offered faculty. We argued that if they paid \$2 below the market and offered health insurance, the only people who would take that job are people with at least \$2 an hour in healthcare costs, and that recruiting so many sick workers was dragging the budget down.²⁵ There are a lot of places to find savings in higher wages—if your university is public, so is its budget; if not, it's probably only partially public, but you should still be able to figure out how much is being spent on expensive human resources staffers to replace workers that are quitting due to low wages. Information from the Economic Policy Institute and other online living wage resources was very helpful in establishing that living wages had been done and could be successful. However, generating a general but customizable bullet-point economic argument for living wages instead of having each group piece it together themselves would be a good step in building a national living wage movement.

Tiered tactics — In a campaign that used a large number of tactics, it is difficult to determine which exactly was successful. Perhaps the key was using a large number of tactics simultaneously (particularly in getting information out) and having a depth of campaign tactics so that if one seemed to be failing we had another tactic ready to follow up. By having four or five tiers of confrontationality, we were able to avoid ever having to reach the bottom tiers. It is important, though, to recognize that a college is indeed a big bureaucracy, and that they will probably need to appoint a committee to deliberate and then make a nonbinding recommendation, then have more

²¹ e.g. <http://www.ccfairlabor.com/documents/whyccflmakessense.html>

²² http://www.ccfairlabor.com/documents/enron_3-8-02.html

²³ <http://www.ccfairlabor.com/documents/janitorsmeeting.html>

²⁴ <http://www.ccfairlabor.com/documents/CanWagesSupportFamily.pdf>

²⁵ http://www.ccfairlabor.com/documents/finances_3-28-02.pdf

deliberations before actually making policy. Keeping a bunch of tactics running means that when one stalls you can focus on another one while waiting to see if the other one is failed or just delayed. It is worth emphasizing that we expected the administration to burn us, and so had incredibly militant tactics planned. We didn't just have plans for taking over the administration building; we were going to take over admissions during Admitted Student Weekend.²⁶ That our good ideas might not perish from the earth, but might rather cross-pollinate with other groups ideas, I'll list a few good ones that we didn't end up ever using: putting propaganda on "table tents" (those little triangular fliers) in cafeterias, showing up for prospective student tours and telling them about college labor practices, starting a prospie petition email listserv, and call-in campaign, putting together education packages that RA's could use (at our school they get paid in part based on how many activities they sponsor, so they would be eager to do this), making buttons for supportive faculty members, and organizing to get conscientious objector religious exemptions from campus meal plans. Many tactics have to be tailored specifically to university power structures and processes. CC Fair Labor has participated in the presidential search at CC, an effort to rewrite the mission statement, a college-wide race-consciousness campaign (living wages don't discriminate) after the campus newspaper printed a racist article, has solicited endorsements and discussion from powerful committees such as the women's and minority concerns' committees and the community service office, and has staged appearances political science department discussion groups and all-campus hearings about the foodservice. If there is a campus event bulletin, read it regularly and show up to all the events. In part, having multiple tactics can be credited to our emphasis on infrastructure: we kept running minutes for every meeting, and so had a written record of everything we had ever thought of.²⁷

Building administration accountability — The main way that the administration managed to break previous campaigns at our college was to stall until the campaigns fell apart on their own. To survive this tactic, we had to do two things: minimize administration stalling and build a campaign that would not fall apart. To minimize administration stalling, our main strategy was to build accountability by making agreements firm, written, and public. We tried as much as possible to communicate with administrators via email because this automatically produces a paper trail;²⁸ when in meetings we conspicuously took notes and, when important agreements were made, asked for the meeting's consensus to be put in writing at the end of the meeting²⁹ while everyone was still there. When agreements were made, we made as great an effort as possible to publicize them, for example by putting news updates on our website, on posters, in campus newspapers, and in emails to group mailing lists.

Building group survivability — At the same time, we needed to make sure that our organization would be around in subsequent years to hold the administration accountable. Previous campaigns had suffered when key group members graduated or when key documents were lost. By building an online centralized archive of all our documents and strategy thoughts—and putting it on a freshman's web account—we ensured that graduating members would not take group intellectual capital with them. In choosing committee leaders, we made sure that each key senior had a freshman

²⁶ Emphasizing that we were preparing for battle: a calendar for April 2002 written in November 2001 notes, "Prospie campaign; massive email stuff from prospies, alumni, groups on campus. If they haven't folded yet, we have to continue it next year. Probably roughly the same tactics."

²⁷ These are securely archived; email me (k_stinchcomb@coloradocollege.edu) and I can give you a password.

²⁸ <http://www.ccfairlabor.com/documents/supportstaffspeech.html> ,
http://www.ccfairlabor.com/documents/committee_correspondence.html

²⁹ http://www.ccfairlabor.com/documents/consensus_1-29-02.html

or sophomore in the second-in-command role for that committee to make sure that no part of our organization would fall apart with member graduations. This long-term planning also served to reduce administration incentives to stall. At several points in the campaign it became clear that the administration was proposing a timeline to ensure that group leaders graduated before any changes were made. By making our survivability planning evident—for example, ensuring underclassmen leaders were present at key meetings, and emailing administrators the URL for the documents website and the online petition archive³⁰—we forced the administration to choose a tactic other than delay.

§IV. The next step

Our Sodexho victory — Immediately after our report’s public release, the administration agreed to an open bidding process on the Sodexho contract, in which labor practices would be among the factors considered.³¹ We believe this victory came so quickly because our case against Sodexho was very strong and because we had made a strong argument that doing this would not be counter to the college’s economic interests. We should note that we never called for Sodexho’s removal directly—instead, we put Sodexho in an impossible situation, demanding only that we open bidding and consider labor practices and their relationship to the college values in the process. This is a much more difficult recommendation to oppose.

Sodexho’s response — Sodexho, confronted with a credible and damning report of their business practices, and an administration willing to respond, threw its public relations machine into action. Their tactics were twofold. First, they attempted to diminish our group’s credibility, calling us “the unwitting tool of a union with an axe to grind”³² and stating that our report had numerous factual errors. Because we had not made any public connection with unions, this mudslinging did not stick. Second, they tried to influence the mainstream campus opinion. They threatened to sue hostile campus newspaper writers for slander, while apparently trying to buy off another reporter with a free trip to England. (Side note: truth is a defense under slander charges, and the constitution guarantees to defendants the right to compel testimony under subpoena on their behalf—meaning that if you are ever sued for slander you and your lawyers can basically demand free run of the company’s archives to try to prove that at least most of what you said was true. This is the worst nightmare of a company like Sodexho, and so the threat of lawsuits—although a common and somewhat effective tactic—is just a bluff.) They also began to court other campus progressives, for example increasing the number of organic and vegan options and improving food quality. By in large, our credibility was not significantly damaged, and we were able to bypass the Sodexho-friendly “balanced” newspaper reporter and get our articles published independently.

Sodexho’s next tactic — Soon after, Sodexho decided that the only way it could improve its reputation and save its contracts was to respond substantively to our objections. The hotel and restaurant employees union (HERE) stated that our report was the turning-point in their Sodexho campaign—on three other campuses, Sodexho soon agreed to drop union-busting tactics. On our campus, which was not running a unionization campaign, Sodexho increased workers’ wages, took steps to reduce intimidation, cooperated fully with CCFL and college requests to meet independently with workers,³³ and hired a consultant to figure out other ways to improve their practices. Their improvement was large enough that CCFL is willing to consider their bid for the contract, provided that they continue improving. While Sodexho in general is a dirty and anti-

³⁰ <http://www.ccfairlabor.com/petition/index.html>

³¹ http://www.ccfairlabor.com/documents/lord_1-25-02.html

³² http://www.ccfairlabor.com/documents/catalyst_rice_2-1-02.html

³³ <http://www.ccfairlabor.com/documents/janitormeetinginvite.html>

worker company, their management style is not entirely different from that of other major foodservice companies, the main factor in how a college contract functions is not the company but rather the college environment and how the college negotiates the contract. Rather than place trust in the stewardship of a different set of managers, we assume that any set of managers will get away with anything they can, and that it is up to the college to set the boundaries. We would, though, prefer an in-house arrangement or union representation for the workers—the ultimate checks on contractor’s power—and will likely lobby for one of these changes once the foodservice contract is set.

The other recommendations — With the Sodexo situation rapidly changing, we met with administrators to consider our other recommendations and how those might be accomplished. Our tactic in building campus consensus for other recommendations that the administration deemed more costly was to boil them down into a five-point platform that we could easily communicate. We scheduled a public meeting with administrators to talk about the timetable and constraints facing our recommendations. At the meeting, a member of a previous campaign that had essentially been broken by the administration began angrily criticizing the administrators present and demanding instant commitments to be made at that very meeting. I mention this problem and our reflections on it because it seems a problem that other groups are likely to face also. In a perverse way, this outburst might have helped us in that it allowed us to establish ourselves as the “good cop” holding back the previous campaign. But it may also have alienated some members of the previous campaign from our movement. The lesson was that message control is key, especially in public meetings, and that if one is adopting a centrist message one must ensure that the uncompromising radicals have some space and role within the movement that will not compromise the public message. Just as a few anarchists can often succeed in getting an entire protest labeled in the press as violent or vandalistic (or get the whole group teargassed), so a few radicals can embitter relations with the administration and the public message of the campaign. One key is to have strictly-defined guidelines about who speaks for the movement, the consultation process required before making major statements, and the overall message goals for any given engagement.

The committee — At the end of the meeting, the administration agreed to form a committee to consider our recommendations. Naturally, we wanted the committee’s decisions to be binding, but the administration (naturally) did not agree to this suggestion. Better knowledge of the college’s bylaws and the usual decision-making process would have helped us at this point. In a highly irregular process, the college president bypassed the student government’s endorsement of a CCFL member to represent the student body’s opinion, instead accepting an alternative slate of student representations chosen by the dean of students. (For reference: the dean of students has a wall in his house dedicated to photos of Newt Gingrich, Nancy and Ronald Reagan, and both Bush families, along with framed invitations to several inaugurations, etc.) Perhaps because of this scheming, the committee’s formation took weeks rather than days, but we kept up contact and nagging and avoided make a big deal of being burned. Instead, we made sure to keep a paper trail in case an unfavorable recommendation required us to declare the committee illegitimate and irrelevant, but decided to lay low and work with the committee.³⁴ As it turned out, support from committee members was overwhelming, and by working quietly with them behind the scenes³⁵ we were able to secure an entirely favorable recommendation.³⁶ With a favorable committee recommendation secured, our focus is now on ensuring that this recommendation is implemented.

³⁴ Archived securely, email k_stinchcomb@coloradocollege.edu and I can give you a password.

³⁵ e.g. <http://www.ccfairlabor.com/livingwages.html>

³⁶ <http://www.ccfairlabor.com/committee.html>

Presidential search — Our fortunes were dramatically helped by a presidential search process when our previous college president retired. As the best-organized research and publicity organization on campus, our group was able to find information on the candidates that the search committee had not been aware of. One of the three final choices had been the hatchet-man John Silber had used to bust a faculty unionization attempt at Boston University, and we were able to pass this information along to the search committee and the college community—along with a celebrity endorsement from BU, Howard Zinn stating that he “would not want [the candidate] to be my college president.” Our favored candidate, Dick Celeste, was a former democratic governor, had a pro-union record and some personal experience with blue-collar employment. It is hard to assess whether our research had any effect—it seems that Celeste was likely the candidate of choice all along—but in any case, all other candidates seemed pretty radioactive after the interview process, the candidate of our choice was selected, and our research role not only may have cemented a decision against the other candidates, but also demonstrated our prominence as a research organization and powerful lobby on campus. We gained credibility by taking part in community processes in ways that both advanced our core values and indicated our concern for the well-being of the campus as a whole.

Assessing our strategy

CC Fair Labor started its campaign in a fundamentally hostile climate. The campus community is dominated by a silent conservative majority; campus workers are de-unionized, depoliticized, and generally lacking in class consciousness; the surrounding community is overwhelmingly hostile; the administration is slow and generally prefers to delay rather than to change. While our successes have been limited relative to schools in friendlier environments, we believe our successes are considerable given the challenges we faced. Furthermore, in the current national and worldwide swing to the right, we believe that the majority of campus activist movements face a climate that is similarly hostile. In those many parts of the country that are becoming dominated by conservative mythology, once-positive ideas like unions and living wages are becoming slurs.

We note our remarkable successes in advocating a strategy for campus activism that we believe is winnable. This is not the if-Republicans-seem-to-be-winning-pretend-to-be-Republicans syndrome that has proved so harmful to national political debate. It is rather a recognition that the terms and particularly format of the debate has shifted. The majority of the country still believes in the powerful idea that a full-time job should provide enough to raise a family on. They still believe that no child should be denied healthcare, education, and the other resources necessary to succeed. But at the same time, people want political tactics that make them feel comfortable. Instead of class revolution to overthrow the systems that oppress the proletariat, they want to work together for common-sense pro-family bipartisan policy reforms. Our task as a movement, it seems, is to convince the center that the two are really the same. If people want to talk about families rather than solidarity, we can engage them in this area and make a strong case. But our fundamentally pessimistic assessment is that only a certain small percentage of people will ever engage in rallies, sit-ins, hunger strikes, and building takeovers, and if we adopt these as our most prominent symbols, we will never be able to reach beyond our current base to involve the great majority of people that are actually on our side. But when we adopt messages that bring the center to our side rather than pushing them away, we can be a force to be reckoned with.

Summary of lessons learned: what we think we did right

- Goal focus: figure out five or so things you want to change. Rather than asking “what are we going to do next?” ask “what will advance our goals?” Don’t assume that if you keep up the pressure they will cave (“if they won’t do it we will FORCE them to”). If ten rallies didn’t change the administration’s mind, twenty won’t either. Think about the endgame, who is going to make the decision.
- Programmatic clarity: spell out the group’s vision, and make sure both the group and community are comfortable with each specific policy recommendation. Your group cannot stop the war in Iraq, so don’t talk about it during group meetings.
- Moderate diction: workers need to raise families, children need healthcare, we want to be an inclusive community.
- Moderate media: think about your average campus target when packaging materials. Ours are more impressed by letterhead, logos, footnotes, bullet points, telephone polls, etc., rather than angry music and chanting rallies. Play to your strengths—college students are the smartest, slickest, most persuasive people in the world. Make your propaganda look better than theirs.
- Communicating with the campus: ask for advice, especially with important documents, from lots of people outside the campaign. Run everything by a focus group. What activists find elegant (e.g. that great quote about if they come for you in the morning) will turn off normal people. If you are making your activists feel comfortable you are pushing your targets into the open arms of the right.
- Modes of communication: bathroom stall posters, door-to-door petitioning, personal emails, etc. Nobody will read your stuff unless you feed it to them.
- Relations with administration: criticize policies, don’t villify people; emphasize having the interests of the college at heart. We never tried to smear our college in the media, and even if we had we probably wouldn’t really have attracted any attention.
- Group size is not a goal in itself. Don’t ask for volunteers, rally participation, etc. if you won’t put it to use. Campus apathy is unconquerable, bad policies aren’t.
- In meetings with the admins: create a professional environment; figure out strategy for the meeting before; bring at least two group members; come with a printed agenda; dress nicely; don’t make unplanned demands; take notes; get meeting consensus in writing
- Group survivability: the campaign will take years. They will try to break you. Build bunkers beforehand. Especially keep archives so when people graduate the campaign doesn’t lose knowledge.
- Expect to get burned. Make sure you have a plan B. Make sure you have plans C, D, E, and F. Don’t play chicken unless you know they’ll swerve.