



## **SOCIAL ACTION 164**

### SAN JOSE STATE UNIVERSITY STUDENT REFLECTIONS

**AUSTIN GEIGER**, enrolled in Social Action in fall of 2007; graduated BA, Sociology in 2008.

**Student Campaign:** *Students Against Sweatshops*

**Occupation:** Currently, working in a family trade business, which has allowed the flexibility to travel and pursue a dream and career as a professional musician. Recently, Austin and his fiancée started a music production business together.

**Impact of Social Action:** “Students who take the Social Action class will learn ways to analyze an issue, target those with power over it, find alliances and build strategies to create tangible change. These lessons are applicable not only to a possible career in activism, but also to being an agent for change at the workplace, in the community, in a person’s relationships, passions and in any type of culture one helps to create. The only way that society will change to become more equal, loving, economically and racially just, is through people acting as agents for change in every level of society and in any way they can in their lives. In this way, no matter the path that a person chooses after College, I firmly believe that taking the Social Action course will help them to be positive creators of change.

Since my time at SJSU, I have been involved with a variety of causes including many local political campaigns: the fight to raise the minimum wage in San José and more recently supporting the causes of economic and racial justice in the Bay Area through protesting, fundraising and using my music to amplify local community organizations. Although I have not pursued a career in non-profit or government work, I think the lessons learned and experiences I had in the Social Action course have helped me try to advocate for positive change in all aspect of my life. I have remained passionate about understanding large-scale social problems, institutional injustices, and how they are perpetuated in our society. I have begun writing a book about our travels across the country during the lead up to the 2020 election, the rise of right-wing ideologies, and the current economic and political moment we are living through. I also have ambitions of one day running for local and State office to have an opportunity to create policy.

I have come to realize that society does not always progress for the better and positive change agents must be vigilant to keep the arc or progress moving forward. Positive

change happens through the effort, talents and passions of many people working for a better world at many different levels.

My experience in the Social Action class left me with many valuable lessons, such as:

1. The importance of forming alliances, working with other groups or individuals who may differ greatly from you but who may have overlapping goals or values.
2. The importance researching an issue and understanding its history and which individuals, policies, organizations or institutions have power over that issue.
3. The importance of creating specific policy changes, structures, or incentives to affect an issue and to offer as solutions when pressuring those with power.

Recognizing where power is, how to target it and what specific changes are needed is extremely important. Participating in the Social Action course offers an opportunity for students to go through this process in the real world and with an issue that is important to the student. Regardless of whether the student is successful or not, the process will generate valuable lessons that will help in any future attempt at creating change. Whether that is creating positive change in the workplace, with personal relationships, in political activism, or within any cultural sphere or community a student may be a part of. The only way that society will change to become more equal, loving, economically and racially just, is through people acting as agents for change in every level of society and in any way they can in their lives. In this way no matter the path that a person chooses after College, I firmly believe that taking the Social Action course will help them to be positive creators of change in our world.

One of the biggest roadblocks we come across in fighting for structural or policy change is that of political will from the voting public, who seem many times to lack compassion or what in sociology we would call the “sociological imagination”. One of the ways I feel I can help on that front is through music and it is also the way that I can continue to re-energize myself. My experiences in activism have taught me that it is very important to have a way of energizing yourself in order to avoid burn out. I believe that targeting people and their conceptions through the more vulnerable medium of music is a powerful way to evoke emotion, compassion and help to create that sociological imagination in people. Using music to reach people also allows for the connecting of issues with an audience who in some cases would not have otherwise pursued an understanding of that issue. Music, art and culture are major platforms for affecting social change because the connection is personal, but can also simultaneously be on a large scale.”

### **Soci. 164: Social Action Alumni Questions:**

In 2002 the Wal-Mart in my hometown of Gilroy decided to use their corporate power to bully the city council into subsidizing their construction of the first Wal-Mart supercenter in the Bay Area, which included a full super market. Having many connections to the labor groups and small business in town I joined the fight against this expansion. In the end we lost this battle but the experience ignited a passion in me for issues of labor and the exploitation of global capitalism.

As a Sociology major focused on community change in the social change class, I decided to focus on the fight against sweatshop labor which had started in the mid 1990s and at that time had grown to a sizable student movement with formation of *United Students Against Sweatshops*. There was only one other person in my group and we decided to take on initially different aspects of our issue to research and would make all the decisions together.

*United Students Against Sweatshops* had been protesting and lobbying against apparel companies that made university apparel for a number of years and had decided they needed a better way to pressure companies not to use sweatshop labor. This pressure came with the creation of the Workers' Rights Consortium (WRC) which student groups created by forcing their individual universities to join the consortium which required universities to agree not to contract or licenses their logos to companies that used sweatshop labor in their subcontracted supply chains. To enforce these agreements schools would pay dues to the consortium, a non-profit, which would then investigate reports of sweatshop labor used by any of the companies making apparel for member universities. If any company was found to be using sweatshop labor the university and the consortium as a whole would end business with the company in question and use a company deemed up to standard by the WRC.

Our goal for our social change class assignment was to persuade SJSU to affiliate with the WRC. We started this campaign with just the two of us and with the pledge support of most of our classmates in the community change focus. We began by first researching as much as we could about the issue of sweatshops in the apparel industry and understanding exactly how sweatshops were maintained. We learned how apparel corporations actually controlled the entire supply chain below them creating the problem of sweatshops by creating a situation where they demanded to be the sole customer of most of their suppliers, and then after achieving this they would force their suppliers to cut costs. The only way suppliers could meet the cost demands of their customer was to use sweatshop type factories to reduce their production costs. In this way apparel companies actually held all the power in the supply chain and also, if forced by consumers, had the power to demand that their subcontractors not use sweatshop labor in their operations.

All of this information and the ability to confidently explain the entire issue became very important later when we were to give presentations to both the student government and the president of SJSU. I had to be able to answer all questions about the issue that were asked even if those questions seemed not directly related to our university. It was very important to be able to point out a specific chain of connections that tied directly to our university and other like ours.

We also needed to research exactly what was actually necessary to affiliate with the WRC and what the process was at our university for getting something like this to become policy. We contacted the WRC and registered as a student group with an ongoing affiliation campaign. The WRC sent us a lot of research and the exact documents that we

would need. We needed to identify the process and institutions involved so that we could identify who we needed to lobby. This may seem simple but the actual process of creating policy through the bureaucracy of a university can be very confusing and it was important to be thorough so that when we got to the end we wouldn't fall short of our goal due to some minor oversight. Even if you have all the support you need you always have to be able to navigate the complexity of a bureaucracy.

After we knew exactly what the process was and whom we were going to have to convince we created a game plan. We first decided to create an information campaign to bring awareness about the sweatshop issue and to point to a way that our school could be part of the solution. We created a petition and began to gather signatures. We also started the process of creating alliances with key student clubs and groups by going to their meetings and making presentations. Our plan was to first generate a large amount of support lobby the student government for their support, then we would pressure the student government to bring the resolution to the Academic Senate. We had assumed that in order to pressure the president to sign off on the affiliation, we would have to get the support of the Academic Senate, since in the past the president had refused to sign a similar resolution.

Five years earlier the SJSU chapter of *Students Against Sweatshops* attempted to pressure the president to sign a similar resolution, and after the president refused, the students attempted, unsuccessfully, to go around the president by going to the Academic Senate. We met with the leader of this past student group who gave us a ton of research but who suggested that we find a friend to work with in the student government. The past group was never able to get the support of a majority of the Academic Senate and this past leader told us that the student government had the power to get the school's attention and could get our resolution through Senate.

Lucky for us, there had been a school election that semester that more people than normally paid attention to. School Fees and tuition had been rising and the school had been cutting classes. The "Spartan Party" who had been in office as long as I had been at SJSU had not been seen as doing enough to fight the tuition increases and were not actively supporting the student actions. The Spartan Party ended up losing to a group of students who were more focused on these issues.

I had been very active in the groups who were fighting against tuition increases and had met a number of the other organizers. Through these other rallies and protests I met a fellow student who would later be part of the student government. I scheduled a meeting with him and he was completely on board from the beginning, he then set up a meeting for me with the newly elected vice president of the student government. We had a meeting and my partner and I presented our ideas and explained what exactly was needed to affiliate with the WRC. The new vice president was very excited about the issue and pledged her support.

Since the student government was new they were in the process of setting up a number of committees and my new friend, who had set up the meeting with the vice president, was going to be leading a committee that was to focus on student grievances. I actually am not quite sure what the official name of the committee was. With the support of the new student vice president and the chair we were able to set up a presentation before this committee where we submitted a draft of our proposed resolution. We asked the committee to support the resolution and to solicit the support of the entire student council, and then eventually introduce it to the Academic Senate for a vote. We had thought the resolution would have had a better chance if it came from this committee and not just regular students. We met with this committee every two weeks for the rest of the semester. During this time the committee drafted a number of their own resolutions and discussed ways to gain support. The committee eventually agreed on a draft resolution that they supported and would first bring to the student government for a vote and if it garnered the support of the student government they could push it through the Academic Senate. We had planned to take this route because we had a friendly student government and did not think we had a president that would support us without being forced by the Academic Senate. However, while we were waiting for the student government to bring up the resolution to the senate we decided to lobby the president directly.

It took a long time to get the president's office to set up a very short meeting with us to make a presentation. While we were planning our presentation the student vice president convinced the Spartan Daily to write a small story about our campaign. This gave us a small amount of press before our meeting with the president. We had hoped the president or one of his assistants would know something about us before our presentation. The only way we were able to get a meeting was after the student vice president called and set up the meeting for us.

When the date of our presentation to the president arrived, the student government had voted to support the committee's resolution and to bring it before the Academic Senate. We met with the president and a few of his assistants very briefly. We presented a lot of information about our issue and the Workers Rights Consortium, we pointed out that we had the support of the student government and that a number of other UC and CSU schools had already joined. We gave them a copy of the affiliation letter he would have to sign, the affiliation contract and a write up of how much it would cost in affiliation dues. We also made the argument that because SJSU had a history of social justice with the actions of Tommie Smith and John Carlos in 1968 and that the school had just built the statues to commemorate them SJSU should embrace social justice as a theme for the school and that affiliating with the WRC would be a great way to show that. The president listened and asked a few questions and that was it. They said they would look into the matter. At the time, we thought we had no chance with the president, and the student government was taking a long time to bring up the resolution before the Academic Senate because they said we needed to get more support.

Our semester ended and the next one began and we had vowed to keep working on the issue even though our class was over. I can't remember how long but a few months later I got a call from my contact at the WRC congratulating us and informing me that they had received a signed agreement from the President and that our school had already began

paying our affiliation dues. We were blown away and incredibly excited. The student government still had not brought up the resolution to the Academic Senate, and the president ended up just signing the letter and contract and somehow agreed to pay the dues. I am not sure of the current status of SJSU and the WRC but for a while we were there, our school became part of what has to date been the best way to fight the use of sweatshops in the university apparel industry. The WRC has continued to grow; I recently heard the head of the WRC on National Public Radio discussing their campaign against sweatshops in Bangladesh after the recent collapse of a garment factory in that country that killed hundreds of workers.

I learned a lot from this experience and from all of my experiences as a student activist but from this specific campaign I think the biggest thing I learned was the power of allies and the need to maintain relationships and create a larger network of progressive activists. You will never know how we can help one another. One of the main reasons I believe that the president decided to affiliate with the WRC in the end was because of a number of other things that were going on at that time. At that time the students on campus had become very active and were organizing rallies and pretesting against a number of issues. I had been a part of a number of the protests against the tuition increases, as part of that campaign we had staged a protest against the Chancellor of the CSU when he was at SJSU for a speech and also held a protest at the president's office demanding he not accept the pay raise he received while raising our tuition and cutting classes. These actions received a lot of press and painted the president in a negative light.

Also, at this time we were holding anti-war protests on campus and also had shown a lot of support for the faculty association when they had rallies and threatened to go on strike. All of this was going on and the president was getting a lot of pressure from students and faculty. The president personally was receiving a lot of bad press that claimed he didn't support the student groups or the faculty. I believe that in the end it was all of this other pressure that made him decide to sign the affiliation letter to avoid potentially another issue where he could be painted the bad guy. Although our group never had more than five people working on this issue I think the president recognized that since we had the support of all the other activist groups on campus and the new student government, it could have potentially been another fight that he didn't want to be a part of.

Although our group did not actually hold any of our own protests and rallies, the ongoing protests and pressure that was put on the administration and specifically the president helped us achieve our goal. The advice I would give is that it is incredibly important to develop and maintain your social capital and to make allies. I can say that we were only successful because of the allies we made with other student groups and the student government, which gave us the confidence and backing to pressure the president. It is also very important to know your issue thoroughly and be able to make concise and strategic presentations. I would also say that it is important to recognize that student government elections do matter and that past students fought hard for the right to have a say in their institution and that the power that lies in those types of institutions, however small it may be, can be very useful. Even in other issues, current activists need to recognize what power they have access to, and how they can best direct it. We were just a

very small group and never got very many signatures but were able through developing allies, to convince the president that we had more power than we probably did. It is also important to reach out to allies in a variety of places because you never know who you will meet and inspire and in which direction your campaign can go. Although we did not have to go through the Academic Senate, the fact that we got the student government support went a long way to persuading the president. Equally, I think that the ongoing activism and the network of student activist that we were a part of also helped greatly in convincing the president to affiliate with the Workers Rights Consortium.