Fair Trade Coffee Urged on Campuses

Associated Press
April 23, 2003

Social activists on America's campuses have turned their attention to the fuel that keeps students going through all-night study sessions and gets them to class in the morning: coffee.

As many as 200 schools, activists say, are responding to calls to change the way they purchase coffee so that poor farmers, mainly in Central America, get a bigger cut of the profit from the beans they grow.

"You can make a difference for a child you've never met," said Cindy Megill, a junior at central Pennsylvania's Juniata College. "Or you can buy a cup of coffee with a corporate logo on it."

Like students at other schools, Megill - a tea-drinker herself - is pushing Juniata to exclusively serve fair trade label coffee in campus dining halls and cafes.

The campaign stems from what some see as a global crisis in pricing coffee, the world's second-most traded commodity. According to Stephanie Faith Green, the president of United Students for Fair Trade, the price of coffee has dropped 70 percent in the last five years, leaving many farmers in the developing world impoverished.

Activists want schools and other institutions to purchase only coffee that has earned a fair trade certification from TransFair USA and fair trade organizations in other countries.

Certification is granted to importers paying a minimum price of $1.26 per pound to a farmer who has grown the coffee beans in an environmentally friendly way. Of the estimated 25 million coffee bean farmers worldwide, fewer than 1 percent have received fair trade designation.

For economic reasons, the world's biggest coffee retailers mostly purchase beans grown on high-volume farms that charge about half the price of fair trade producers.

Kraft Foods, for instance, does not offer fair trade coffee.

"We believe it is a well-intentioned approach and it definitely benefits a small number of farmers who are not able to find a market," said Pat Riso, a spokeswoman for Kraft, which markets Maxwell House, Sanka and other brands. "But the reason we don't offer it is because consumer demand for fair trade products is quite limited."
Green gives Starbucks high marks for at least working with fair trade proponents - though she thinks it can still do better.

"When you have mutual interests, it leads to constructive conversations and solutions," said Susan Mecklenburg, the director of environmental and community affairs for Starbucks, which purchases 1 percent of its coffee from fair trade sources.

Green said that's a good start but that 1 percent "needs to be increased."

Her work with Georgetown University has taught Green, a sophomore, that the conversion to fair trade coffee is a laborious process.

It requires colleges to review contractual agreements with food service providers who must, in turn, revisit obligations to distributors.

"It's not just about coffee, fair trade is about a whole trading system" that includes chocolate and other products, Green said.

Georgetown has switched to fair trade at all but two campus locations.

Although fair trade coffee costs slightly more, enlisting non-activist students in the movement is not difficult in the era of $4-per-cup boutique blends.

"When you tell someone that a farmer was paid 2 cents a pound for the coffee they're drinking and then tell them that for 5 cents more the farmer can send his children to school and donate money to build a local hospital, coffee is not a hard thing to sell," said Kansas University organizer Laura Adams.

Matt Warning, an economics professor who spearheaded the transition to fair trade coffee at the University of Puget Sound, noted the movement brings about change by using market demand rather than active protest.

"It's easy activism where they can just buy the better stuff," said Warning. "It's a bit of a no-brainer, it doesn't require big sacrifices."

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