In another historic victory for the anti-sweatshop movement, (not too long after the victory at UPENN) the University of Michigan President Lee Bollinger joined the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC), a non-profit organization that will investigate the conditions in factories of companies producing collegiate apparel. In response to student occupations of administrative buildings in Ann Arbor and Madison that started on Wednesday, Bollinger released a joint statement today with the University of Wisconsin at Madison and Indiana University Senator Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) will join the university students today as they describe their successful 60-hour occupation of the Deans office where they constructed a mock sweatshop this week. Students vowed not to leave the office until the president agreed to join the WRC. “Sweatshops and abuse of child labor must end and the students here are playing a crucial role in making that happen by raising public awareness and demanding change,” said Senator Harkin.

After more than 5 months of meetings, protests, teach-ins and resolutions by the student government, Bollinger finally conceded to the students demand that the University of Michigan work with other universities in pressuring firms to improve their apparel factory conditions, both at and abroad. “We are thrilled that the University of Michigan has decided to take the high road as an ally of workers who produce U-M apparel,” said Lee Palmer, a junior at the University.

We are thrilled too.
COLUMBIA MUST BE NEXT!
Coffee Talks

The other day, over our ritual lunch of beans, tortillas and coffee, in the highland town of Acteal, Chiapas, Don Mariano spontaneously asked: “So, is it that there are two kinds of money? One that we call dinero and the other economia? What is the ‘economy’?” he asked. What a question, I thought. My friend hesitantly attempted an answer. If money is the coins and bills we use, the economy is like invisible money. The larger it is, the more invisible money it has acquired. It’s like the coffee market. For example, you harvest and sell coffee beans to the “coyotes” (their name for middlemen) for approximately $1 per kilo, and they in turn sell them for three times that to a distributor abroad, until they end up in foreign supermarkets or restaurants where people pay $1 per cup. Don Mariano nodded knowingly, making me wonder whether this was a rhetorical question. Of anyone, he knows best the meaning of the economy. He understands it from the ground up. It lives through him. Literally.

In this southernmost Mexican state, Mariano’s relationship to coffee is not simply described by market relations and monetary value. But there is another aspect of invisibility prescribed by the economy: the lives, like Mariano’s, that are narrated by the same coffee we abundantly drink.

In Chiapas, this has a very particular meaning. Today, 70,000 troops or one-third of the Mexican army occupies the state of Chiapas. Low-intensity war has been the government’s response to an indigenous rebellion led by the Zapatistas—which came to the fore in 1984—and the increasing organization of peasant communities in opposition to the government and their neoliberal economic interests. In Chiapas is the evidence of the coercive nature of the PRI (the ruling party that has been in power for over 70 years) and its desperation to maintain their political and economic reign-for-ever. As part of its strategy to annihilate the opposition, covert organized armies or pro-government paramilitaries proliferate-recruited, trained and funded by the Mexican military.

Coffee is the second largest import of the United States, next to oil; it is also the sole source of income for Acteal. Mariano and I were chatting one