

“Free” Trade Agreements, Small Farms, and America’s Eaters

By Bonnie Preston

The so-called “Free” Trade Agreements — NAFTA and its children — including the up-coming Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) are not about trade. Devon Peña, who blogs at Food First, calls them “Free [to exploit] trade treaties.” In broad terms, they are a plan to establish corporate sovereignty, giving the largest multi-national corporations (MNCs) the power to run the world. They are already more powerful than most governments, and wealthy enough to buy the US government.

One of the most critical aspects of these agreements, and one of the biggest challenges to local and national sovereignty, is the imposition of intellectual property rights by MNCs. Leaked documents have shown that requirements under the TPP can lead to MNCs patenting life itself. It already includes patents on seeds, including Monsanto’s GMO seeds. Under terms of TTIP, Europe could be forced to allow GMO seeds into Europe, if Monsanto sues them. If the TTIP comes into force, laws requiring labeling of GMOs or banning GMO use could be outlawed in the US.

One of the most devastating enforcement mechanisms of these agreements is investor-state-relations, which gives a corporation the right to sue a government for “future lost profit.” Think about that for a moment. Isn’t a basic premise of capitalism the idea that investors are taking risks? Capitalism provides no guarantee of profit

So, if any country involved in the TPP, tries to protect its indigenous life forms and some multi-national corporation decides that this protection impinges on their future profits, India could find itself in a punishing law suit that is decided by a secret tribunal of trade lawyers.

At the same time, these trade regimes are a license for MNCs to exploit people and nature. This happened after NAFTA came into force in January 1994. In only a few years, millions of Mexican peasant farmers were forced off their land as US subsidized products flooded into their country and sold for less than local foods. These farmers found work at sub-poverty wages, in the maquiladoras along the border, or on a corporate-owned farm in Mexico or the United States. This destruction of farmers’ lives is being repeated around the world on a massive scale.

Those of us who eat (do you eat?) are also exploited. Trade agreements have decreased the

safety and health value of food, and this will only get worse as more countries fall under the sway of free trade. This is a two-way street. Some US policies seriously compromise our health and will be forced on other countries, while lack of food safety in other countries will threaten us. Unhealthy industrial food will become even more dominant everywhere.

The massive agribusiness operations that rule farming are devastating the environment, and they are strengthened by current trade principles. Fred Kirschenmann has said that we must farm in harmony with nature, a law of nature that industrial agriculture violates. Results include dead soils, which do nothing but hold up plants instead of nourishing them — and therefore us — and dead zones in the ocean, which kill massive quantities of sea life.

Numerous reports over the last decade have shown that only small-scale, diversified, closed loop farming can feed the world as the population grows. Using all waste products from a farm (closed loop farming) creates healthy soil without any outside inputs. A focus on small, local farms feeding their communities will cut the greenhouse gas emissions of industrial agriculture. It will put people to work in a productive way, and enrich local economies. It is a win/win/win that current trade policies, with the strengthened rights and greater reach coming with new trade agreements, will short-circuit. We cannot let that happen.

Bonnie Preston is the AfD representative on the board of the Maine Fair Trade Campaign.

Biopiracy (is) biological theft; illegal collection of indigenous plants by corporations who patent them for their own use

— Vandana Shiva



Trade regimes are a license for multi-national corporations to exploit people and nature.

Strength

Trade increases the wealth and glory of a country; but its real strength and stamina are to be looked for among the cultivators of the land. — William Pitt

