

Making Trade Work for People & Planet

by Nancy Price

The world erupted in the 1990s against corporate-driven free trade agreements, designed by the wealthy to expand their power and reach. On January 1, 1994, when the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) entered into force, Indigenous Zapatistas rose up in Southern Mexico. Met with violent repression, their spirit inspired popular movements of Indigenous and tribal communities, people of color and the poor elsewhere to rise up against racist neo-colonialism, capitalist exploitation of their labor and destruction of nature for raw materials.

In 1999, four years after 123 nations had signed the World Trade Agreement, 50,000 workers, teachers, students, farmers, environmentalists, and civil society groups from all over the world marched in the "Protest of the Century" to shut down the WTO Ministerial Meeting in Seattle, chanting the same, "This is what Democracy looks like," heard recently at #BlackLivesMatter in Portland.

Protests against the corporate-driven free trade agenda have continued to the present, including against the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. Their push for cash crop exports from third world countries destroys peasant farmers, while their push for privatization of water and utilities devastates the poor. Protests were also mounted against agribusiness' pushing genetically modified crops and chemicals on farmers and consumers around the world. A large mobilization in late 2003 in Miami led to collapse of the 34-country Free Trade Area of the Americas negotiations.

At present, the WTO has grown to 169 countries and the US has signed 14 trade agreements with 20 countries that are:

- Anti-democratic and profoundly racist;
- Exploiting of women and girls who work in textiles, clothing and electronics industries;
- Based on destructive extraction of raw materials;
- Reliant on private security and state police to protect corporate property and profits, with land defenders disappeared and killed;
- Dependent on long, climate-damaging, air and ocean supply chains;
- Increasing costs for the poor due to privatization of essential public services;
- Commodifying all aspects of culture and nature for profit.

Now, the pandemic is exposing how fragile the global, corporate trade system is, with its

privatization of healthcare; offshoring production of essential medicines and medical equipment; and competition for supplies leading to rising costs, and countries imposing export restrictions threatened with trade dispute lawsuits. Leaders in trade and finance are calling for a pause in all current trade agreement negotiations, a moratorium on corporate cases against governments, and an easing by IMF on debt repayment by developing countries whose export economies are collapsing.

Transforming Global Trade Policy: Before NAFTA 2.0, the new United-States-Mexico-Canada Free Trade Agreement, entered into force, fair trade advocates were alarmed it was little improved. Thus, in Spring 2019, Democrats in both houses of Congress spent months improving it: eliminating the corporate investor-to-state (ISDS) dispute process on most industries, and strengthening labor, environmental, and pharmaceutical provisions and enforcement rules, and discussion of renewal after six years.

Re-Localization: Now is the time to model the Grassroots Institute mapping project, to embrace the new forms of economic enterprises led by women, Indigenous Peoples, people of color, unions, worker cooperatives, small-scale farmers and groups meeting local needs. Rather than global trade, we need to develop community sourcing to meet local needs based on principles of a circular economy. We must also use innovative solutions to waste and recycling, based on the carrying capacity of the locale or region and the Rights of Nature.



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Beyond NAFTA 2.0

In July 2019, *Beyond NAFTA 2.0: Toward a Progressive Trade Agenda for People and Planet*, edited by Ethan Earle, Manuel Pérez-Rocha, and Scott Sinclair, advocates for the same types of trade policies promoted by WTO protesters in Seattle two decades earlier. It calls for a "radical transformation of the rules" to give "priority to Human Rights and the Rights of Nature over corporate rights," and a "new world trade system based on partnership and sustainability, equitable distribution of benefits, and respect for the Earth's ecological limits." It also calls for countries in the Global South having rights to prioritize local and national economic development for all citizens, providing access to good jobs and high-quality universal public services. Most importantly, trade agreements would combat climate change, protect Labor Rights, and set high standards for the regulatory framework with binding, enforceable obligations between countries, rather than the usual "race to the bottom."