GJOP Global Justice Overcoming Poverty

Network BULLETIN

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WTO MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE, JANUARY 2024 A FAILURE TO BE FACED

The World Trade Organization (WTO) met in Abu Dhabi 26-29 February 2024 for its 13th Ministerial Conference (MC13), which brought together delegates and ministers from 164 countries to discuss issues related to fisheries, agriculture and digital trade.

The Conference met at a time when peasant unrest is being reported across the world. Since January 2023, farmers have been protesting in at least 65 countries in Africa, Europe, Latin America and Asia. In Asia, more than 10 countries witnessed mobilisations by peasants in the run up to the Conference.

In **South Korea,** a policy of tariff reductions has resulted in a massive influx of agricultural products. Peasant groups want insulation of domestic markets from cheap imports.

In **Sri Lanka**, the government continues to import food with low nutritional value. Farmer groups want guaranteed prices, with a building up of neglected paddy marketing and storage boards. In **India**, tens of thousands of peasants marched on New Delhi, holding the government accountable for broken promises**.** Reports indicate a staggering farmer suicide every hour in 2022. **Indonesia** saw a glut of rice imports in early 2024, just before the harvest season. The Indonesian Peasant Union was on the streets demanding a stop to this policy, which will surely drive down farm gate prices and further bankrupt farmers. Farmers in **Nepal** are protesting that they can't compete with imports of Indian vegetables. In the **Philippines, Thailand** and **Japan** farmers demanded that their respective governments enact policies that would improve their lives.

In addition to farm protests, fish-workers and artisanal fishers[1] have been protesting against the loss of livelihoods, depletion of fish resources, imports and the privatising of coastal areas with massive reclamation projects and seabed quarrying. As a counter to the corporate capture of oceans, the fishing community organised a people's tribunal in 2022 where they highlighted issues such as ocean grabbing, the dangers of extractive industries and the deregulation of foreign investment in order to develop distant-water fishing fleets and fishmeal factories.

Governments of countries of the Global South are unable to respond to these widespread crises and protests because of their flawed adoption of free trade and investment policies. Since its founding, developing countries have been on the defensive in all aspects of the WTO negotiations. In Abu Dhabi, once again a familiar script is playing out as the crisis-

[1] Artisanal fishing consists of various small-scale, low-technology, low-capital, fishing practices undertaken by individual fisherman.

ridden WTO attempts to push forward its flawed and outdated agenda of trade liberalisation in fisheries subsidies, agriculture and services (especially in digital trade).

For three decades now, WTO negotiators from the Global South have been trapped in the logic of market access and, rather than highlight fundamental issues confronting their peasantry and fishing communities, they have been trying to discipline subsidies through WTO agreements. This farce must stop, as free trade and WTO agreements so far have only served to destroy the livelihoods of hundreds of millions of peasants, fishers and workers in the Global South.

The way forward for the South is a path outside of the WTO. Developing countries should not proceed with any further negotiations and, instead, strengthen democratic forums and mechanisms in the United Nations, such as the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). In this way they will be able to promote multilateral agreements that lead to genuine economic development, cooperation, sustainable development and the well-being of their populations.

An alternative global trade framework based on the principles of food sovereignty, social justice, solidarity and internationalism is more urgent than ever.

Source: Third World Network, 'Statement to the 13th WTO Ministerial Conference, Abu Dhabi, 28 January 2024.' Based on the Thai version, condensed and edited by Mary Boyd.

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'ANOTHER WORLD IS POSSIBLE!' ANOTHER WORLD NOW!

The 16th World Social Forum (WSF)[2] was held in Kathmandu, Nepal, 15-19 February 2024, bringing together more than 50,000 people and 1,400 movements and organisations from across the world. The Forum has long been held as an *'open space for the free and horizontal exchange of ideas, experiences and strategies oriented toward enacting and generating alternatives to neoliberalism'.* It took place in Asia after nearly two decades, at what is a critical inflection point for the peoples of the Global South.

In a message in the lead up to the event, the United Nations Secretary-General, Antónia Guterres highlighted how 'uniting for the common good is critical as conflicts rage and geopolitical divisions grow', emphasising the imperative to 'reform an outdated, dysfunctional and unfair global financial system', and how the WSF 'represents an important space to lift voices, focus on the most vulnerable, restore hope, and find innovative solutions for people and the planet'.

Workers, farmers, peasants, fisher-folk, forest peoples, trade unions, social movements, women's organisations, cultural workers, artists, LGBTQIA+ organisations, Indigenous peoples and students gathered in solidarity and voiced their demands and proposals for a more just, equitable, peaceful, and sustainable world for all.

[2] The World Social Forum (WSF) is an annual meeting of civil society organisations, 'a permanent open space for diverse movements and organisations engaged in concrete action towards a more solidary, democratic and fair world'.

At the opening ceremony, Walden Bello, Co-Founder and Co-Chair of the Board of Focus on the Global South (Focus[3]) spoke, taking a stand for Palestine. Focus also released their statement at the Forum, 'Peace, Justice and Self-determination for Palestine: Oppose Occupation, Apartheid, and Genocide; Ceasefire Now'**.**

In addition, Bello made interventions on building movements to fight the rise of fascism and on the roots of war in a thematic panel on Peace, Conflict, War, Occupations, Displacement and Security organised by Focus, the Asia-Europe Peoples' Forum (AEPF) and several other peace movements.

In a panel organised by the Asia Peoples' Movement on Debt and Development (APMDD), Focus made a strong contribution to discussions on food sovereignty, agrarian reform, peasants' rights, rights to food, land and water. As well the panel addressed challenges facing social movements on the ground, drawing on the struggles of communities and networks in the region and the extensive work of Focus with allies and partners.

The call to the participants and their movements and organisations was to 'go back to the basics – in organising, movement building, creating social pressures amidst the constant threats against activism and reclaiming rights through solidarity.'

Source: 'Vignettes from the World Social Forum 2024 in Nepal: Peoples' Power and Solidarities for a Just and Fair Future', 1 March 2024, Focus on the Global South. Edited by Mary Boyd.

BIDEN OPPOSITION TO 'BIG TECH' TRADE RULES IN WTO A WIN FOR WORKERS AND CONSUMERS

In October 2023, the USA Trade Representative (USTR) announced that the USA had removed its support for some of the proposals in negotiations on digital trade (or 'e-commerce') at the World Trade Organisation.

In response, the Director of International Programs at the Center for Economic and Policy Research, Deborah James, released the following statement:

"The Biden administration's setting aside of outdated Big Tech[4] proposals in trade agreements is a win for workers, small businesses, fairness, democracy and development around the world. It is also a victory for civil society, including members of the Our World Is Not for Sale network that has campaigned against these provisions since 2016. The USA first tabled these Big Tech proposals when public opinion was unaware of the dangers of Big Tech corporations monopolising our technology and controlling our data."

Today, much of the world is far more aware of the dangers of Big Tech, including its monopoly practices, spreading of disinformation, abrogation of privacy and civil rights and violation of workers' rights by giving first priority to making maximum profits. Knowing this, Big Tech is trying to prevent governments legislating against their practices with new, binding global trade rules on these issues.

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[3] *Focus on the Global South* (est.1995 is an influential global network that challenges neoliberalism, militarism and corporate-driven globalisation while strengthening just and equitable alternatives. Its offices are i Bangkok, New Delhi and Manila.

[4] Big Tech is the name given to information technology companies that are the largest or have the most market dominance in their field.

The use of artificial intelligence (AI) has increased exponentially in recent years. Big Tech, not wanting government regulation of their practices, is pursuing proposals that would bar governments from having access to the source code[5] underlying algorithms. Companies use AI to decide more and more business practices, many of which violate the rules of competition, privacy and civil rights. And so, Big Tech's corporate wish list includes locking up source code in a trade agreement to ensure that governments can't regulate most of their business practices!

But oversight and regulation must not be subject to review by a trade tribunal, which prioritises trade considerations over human and fundamental rights. True public oversight of Big Tech would require scrutiny not only by regulators and judiciaries but also by academics, the media, critical engineers and trade unions.

Considering the myriad harms to society resulting from unrestrained Big Tech, there is no justification for using trade agreements to bar governments from requiring source code disclosure or from regulating data flows.

Developing countries that are being pressured to join these agreements should strengthen their resolve. The Africa Group's rejection of these proposals at the WTO in December 2017 was far-sighted.

The Biden Administration has taken a first step toward making its digital trade policy more worker-centred. The next step must be to ensure that Big Tech pay all legitimate tariffs and taxes everywhere they are operating. There is abundant evidence that Amazon, Netflix, Apple and Microsoft, etc. can afford normal trade taxes on electronic books, movies, music and software, as they profit selling products around the world. These taxes are essential revenue sources for developing countries to bolster their digital infrastructures, as well as their public services, climate resilience and other key needs. A tax holiday for the most profitable of Big Tech corporations does harm to workers and small businesses around the world.

Source: 'Biden Administration Reversal on Proposed Big Tech Trade Rules Is a Win for Workers, Consumers, Trade Policy Experts Say', Press release, Center for Economic and Policy Research, 25 October 2023. Edited by Alison Healey

NEOLIBERALISM

The Neoliberal assault is a dominant factor in the breakdown of the social order that leaves great numbers of people angry, disillusioned, frightened, and contemptuous of institutions that they see are not working in their interests.

Robert Brenner, political economist.

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[5] Source code is the fundamental component of a computer program that is created by a programmer.