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Free Trade is Fair Trade

An Anarchist Look at World Trade

Boston Anarchist Drinking Brigade

January 2000

Many of those who oppose the World Trade Organization (WTO) advocate something they call “fair trade,” in contrast to the “free trade” the WTO advocates. In fact, the kind of commerce promoted by the WTO is anything but free, while the alternatives defended by its opponents are in no way fair. Both the WTO and most of its critics, who range from old fashioned right wing nationalists to labor activists, environmentalists, and leftists of various kinds, favor continued government intervention in economic activities, whether domestic or international. And any such state regulated trade will never be either free or fair.

All governments around the world interfere in the economies of the countries they rule and intervene in cross border trade on a regular basis. They subsidize some businesses, like agriculture in the united states and europe, pay for international advertising for wealthy corporations, and institute tariffs and customs rules that ban or complicate the free flow of goods between people on opposite sides of political borders. Such rules and regulations favor powerful domestic businesses at the expense of producers in other countries.

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Retrieved on Feb 2nd, 2017 from Bad Press

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“Free” trade agreements and organizations like NAFTA and WTO may alter some of the details of this intervention, but do not challenge the principle that governments are entitled to tell their subjects what they may and may not buy and whom they may trade with. Under NAFTA, for instance, it is illegal to buy lower priced therapeutic drugs in Canada and resell them in the United States. WTO does not propose to free up trade between individuals, either. It sets rules which the bureaucrats who run the organization feel best serve the interests of corporations favored by the various governments that make it up. It does not even take into consideration private, voluntary arrangements among individuals and groups, unsupervised by regulatory bodies, customs officials, border guards, “public health” functionaries, coast guards, etc. It just promotes continued government oversight of people trying to engage in commerce with each other.

Most critics of WTO also advocate government supervision of economic matters. Unions urge governments to bar imports of goods which sell more cheaply than those produced by their members. Environmentalists want governments to implement regulations that protect wildlife and limit pollution. Human rights activists want governments to force businesses to allow their employees to organize to improve their working conditions. The goals of these people are admirable: protecting well paid jobs, defending plants and animals against exploitation and death, and enabling low wage workers to improve their economic status. However, the means advocated to achieve these goals are the same sort WTO promotes: government force. No one seems to be proposing an alternate means of achieving a better world for working people in all countries, as well as the beings with whom we share this planet.

Many have expressed concerns about the WTO weakening national sovereignty, implying that the United States government is a force for good that should be defended. They seem to forget that the federal government robs workers in this country

while dispensing corporate welfare. Such critics fail to understand that the united states and other national governments routinely limit individual sovereignty, the only kind that is really important. Different levels of government may be more or less oppressive or just, depending on the specific situation and the specific interests of the individual concerned, but none have any moral justification for any of their actions. They all steal money from workers in the form of taxes, enforce laws perpetuating unfair land ownership, maintain a monopoly on the means of exchange, and defend the unjustly gained wealth of the rich, thus impoverishing working people. And they should all be opposed.

Protesters against WTO have pointed out that it is not democratic, unlike at least some of the national governments to which it is contrasted. Granted, the governments of the united states, the european union, canada, india, japan and elsewhere are elected, democratic ones, but this does not mean they are legitimate, benign, or represent the interests of individual residents of the countries they rule. The democratic government of the united states, for instance, makes war on people in kosovo and iraq, supports the chinese police state, subsidizes the growing of tobacco and other favored crops in the united states, and bans the domestic use of therapeutic drugs available in other countries. And this is the same government some critics of WTO seem to feel can be an advocate for the interests of the world's workers and natural environment. We need to get the various national democratic governments, as well as the WTO, off the backs of the people they push around and brutalize. If democracy, like voting, really changed anything, it would be prohibited.

Abolishing WTO and NAFTA will not benefit working people here or abroad. Abolishing government would. Stemming cross border trade will not raise the wages of mexican workers, improve conditions in malaysian factories, or lighten the load of chinese farmers and laborers. International trade has not

hurt these people: international governments have, by restricting their freedoms in such a way that they have little choice but to slave away at unjust wages for wealthy others. Governments all over the world deny their working subjects economic freedom and favor the interests of the wealthy owners of land and industry, thus impoverishing the many and enriching the few, who in turn enrich the politicians.

Real free trade would look nothing like what exists now or would exist with WTO in charge. Without governments to prohibit people from living their lives as they see fit, free people could set up their own forms of money and banks to increase the availability of credit to regular people. Their money would not be stolen from them by predatory governments. They would not be disarmed by their democratic representatives and rendered unable to defend their land and property from voracious multinational corporations favored by politicians. They would not be forced by governments to pay rent to landowners who can claim title to land and property only because governments support ownership of land neither used nor occupied by the owners. And workers would be free to take possession of the factories and other means of production which they currently use, since there would be no government to enforce the demand of the current “owners” for a portion of the labor of others. Without having to sacrifice any portion of the wealth generated by their own labor, free workers would be affluent workers. Such people would be free to exchange goods and services with others, regardless of geographic location or ethnicity, as long as the interaction was voluntary. If trade were really free, the only exchanges that people would agree to would be fair ones. And true, unhindered competition between various worker owners all over the world would prevent some from accumulating vast amounts of wealth at the expense of others.

Real free trade would be risky in ways that a government supervised economy would not be. There would be no state

run welfare system, no labor laws, no laws against pollution and the wanton slaughter of wildlife. But that does not mean individuals and the natural environment would be set adrift to fend for themselves. People are more than capable of forming voluntary organizations to provide for hard times, assist each other with creating jobs, facilitate direct commerce between producers, and campaign for a more humane treatment of non-human beings. People free to trade with each other would also be free to look at the ways they live and work and come up with ways to do both that are more humane and ecologically sound than those that currently exist. They have done this all through history and do it now, alongside the institutions of the warfare/welfare state.

Anarchy and free trade would not solve all problems or lead to a utopia. They simply would free up people to interact with others as they choose, to the benefit of both, or all, parties. Individuals and voluntary associations would then be free to trade fairly with each other, band together as they see fit to promote their common interests, and protect their shared environment, all without being pushed around by politicians and the economic elites they empower and defend.