

The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, A Thatcherite Revolution: “Free Trade”, Corporate Plunder and the War on Working People

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Prior to the recent national elections in India, there were calls for a Thatcherite revolution to fast-track the country towards privatisation and neo-liberalism (1). Under successive Thatcher-led governments in the eighties, however, inequalities skyrocketed in Britain (2) and economic growth was no better than in the seventies (3).

Traditional manufacturing was decimated and international finance became the bedrock of the ‘new’ economy. Jobs disappeared over the horizon to cheap labour economies, corporations bought up public utilities, the rich got richer and many of Britain’s towns and cities in its former industrial heartland became shadows of their former selves. Low paid, insecure, non-unionised labour is now the norm and unemployment and underemployment are rife. Destroying ordinary people’s livelihoods was done in the name of ‘the national interest’. Destroying industry was done in the name of ‘efficiency’.

In 2010, 28 percent of the UK workforce, some 10.6 million people, either did not have a job, or had stopped looking for one (4). And that figure was calculated before many public sector jobs were slashed under the lie of ‘austerity’.

Today, much of the mainstream political and media rhetoric revolves around the need to create jobs, facilitate ‘free’ trade, ensure growth and make ‘the nation’ competitive. The endless, tedious mantra says ordinary people have to be ‘flexible’, ‘tighten their belts, expect to do a ‘fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay’ and let the market decide. This creates jobs. This fuels ‘growth’. Unfortunately, it does neither. What we have is austerity. What we have is an on-going economic crisis, a huge national debt, rule by profligate bankers and corporate entities and mass surveillance to keep ordinary people in check.

So what might the future hold? Unfortunately, more of the same.

The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership

The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (formerly TAFTA) being negotiated between the EU and US is intended to be the biggest trade deal in history. The EU and US together account for 40 percent of global economic output. The European Commission tries to sell the deal to the public by claiming that the agreement will increase GDP by one percent and will entail massive job creation.

However, these claims are not supported even by its own studies, which predict a growth rate of just 0.01 percent GDP over the next ten years and the potential loss of jobs in several sectors, including agriculture. Corporations are lobbying EU-US trade negotiators to use the deal to weaken food safety, labour, health and environmental standards and undermine digital rights (5). Negotiations are shrouded in secrecy (6) and are being driven by corporate interests (7). And the outcome could entail the bypassing of democratic processes in order to push through corporate-friendly policies (8). The proposed agreement represents little more than a corporate power grab.

It should come as little surprise that this is the case. Based on a recent report, the European Commission's trade and investment policy reveals a bunch of unelected technocrats who care little about what ordinary people want and negotiate on behalf of big business. It has eagerly pursued a corporate agenda and has pushed for policies in sync with the interests of big business. The Commission is effectively a captive but willing servant of a corporate agenda. Big business has been able to translate its massive wealth into political influence to render the European Commission a "disgrace to the democratic traditions of Europe" (9).

This proposed trade agreement (and others alike being negotiated across the world) is based on a firm belief in 'the market' (a euphemism for subsidies for the rich, cronyism, rigging and cartels) and the intense dislike of state intervention and state provision of goods and services. The 'free market' doctrine that underpins this belief attempts to convince people that nations can prosper by having austerity imposed on them and by embracing neo-liberalism and 'free' trade. This is a smokescreen that the financial-corporate elites hide behind while continuing to enrich themselves and secure taxpayer handouts, whether in the form of bank bailouts or other huge amounts of corporate dole (10).

In much of the West, the actual reality of neo-liberalism and the market is stagnating or declining wages in real terms, high levels of personal debt and a permanent underclass, while the rich and their corporations rake in record profits and salt away wealth in tax havens.

Corporate plunder in India

Thatcher was a handmaiden of the rich (11). Her role was to destroy 'subversive' or socialist tendencies within Britain and to shatter the post-1945 Keynesian consensus based on full employment, fairness and a robust welfare state. She tilted the balance of power in favour of elite interests by embarking on a pro-privatisation, anti-trade union/anti-welfare state policy agenda. Sections of the public regarded Thatcher as a strong leader who would get things done, where others before her had been too weak and dithered. In India, Narendra Modi has been portrayed in a similar light.

His newly elected government is expected to move ahead with pro-market reforms that others dragged their feet on. To date, India has experienced a brand of 'neo-liberalism lite'. Yet what we have seen thus far has been state-backed violence and human rights abuses to 'secure' tribal areas for rich foreign and Indian corporations, increasing inequalities, more illicit money than ever pouring into Swiss bank accounts, massive corruption and cronyism (12).

With a new administration in place, can we now expect to witness an accelerated 'restructuring' of agriculture in favour of Western agribusiness? Will more farmers be forced from their land on behalf of commercial interests? Officialdom wants to depopulate rural

areas by shifting over 600 million to cities (13). It begs the question: in an age of increasing automation, how will hundreds of millions of agriculture sector workers earn their livelihoods once they have left the land?

What type of already filthy and overburdened urban centres can play host to such a gigantic mass of humanity who were deemed 'surplus to requirements' in rural India and will possibly be (indeed, already are) deemed 'surplus to requirements' once in the cities?

Gandhi stated that the future of India lies in its villages. Rural society was regarded as India's bedrock. But now that bedrock is being dug up. Global agritech companies have been granted license to influence key aspects of agriculture by controlling seeds and chemical inputs and by funding and thus distorting the biotech research agenda and aspects of overall development policy (14,15).

Part of that 'development' agenda is based on dismantling the Public Distribution System for food. Policy analyst Devinder Sharma notes that the government may eventually stop supporting farmers by doing away with the system of announcing the minimum support price for farmers and thereby reduce the subsidy outgo. He argues that farmers would be encouraged to grow cash crops for supermarkets and to 'compete' in a market based on trade policies that work in favour of big landowners and heavily subsidised Western agriculture.

By shifting towards a commercialised system that would also give the poor cash to buy food in the market place, rather than the almost half a million 'ration shops' that currently exist, the result will be what the WTO/ World Bank/IMF have been telling India to for a long time: to displace the farming population so that agribusiness can find a stronghold in India (16).

We need only look at what happened to the soy industry in India during the nineties (17), or the recent report by GRAIN (18), to see how small farmers are forced from their land to benefit powerful global agritech. If it cannot be achieved by unfair trade policies and other duplicitous practices, it is achieved by repression and violence, as Helena Paul notes:

"Repression and displacement, often violent, of remaining rural populations, illness, falling local food production have all featured in this picture. Indigenous communities have been displaced and reduced to living on the capital's rubbish dumps. This is a crime that we can rightly call genocide - the extinguishment of entire Peoples, their culture, their way of life and their environment." (19)

Although Helena Paul is referring to the situation in Paraguay, what she describes could well apply to India or elsewhere.

In addition, the current secretive corporate-driven free trade agreement being negotiated between the EU and India could fundamentally restructure Indian society in favour of Western corporate interests and adversely impact hundreds of millions and their livelihoods and traditional ways of living (20). And as with the proposed US-EU agreement, powerful transnational corporations would be able to by-pass national legislation that was implemented to safeguard the public's rights. Governments could be sued by multinational companies for billions of dollars in private arbitration panels outside of national courts if laws, policies, court decisions or other actions are perceived to interfere with their

investments (21).

A massive shift in power and wealth from poor to rich

Current negotiations over 'free' trade agreements have little to do with free trade. They are more concerned with loosening regulatory barriers and bypassing democratic processes to allow large corporations to destroy competition and siphon off wealth to the detriment of smaller, locally based firms and producers.

The planet's super rich comprise a global elite (22). It is not a unified elite. But whether based in China, Russia or India, its members have to varying extents been incorporated into the Anglo-American system of trade and finance. For them, the ability to 'do business' is what matters, not national identity or the ability to empathise with someone toiling in a field who happened to be born on the same land mass. And in order 'to do business', government machinery has been corrupted and bent to serve their ends. In turn, organisations that were intended to be 'by' and 'for' ordinary working people have been successfully infiltrated and dealt with (23).

The increasing global takeover of agriculture by powerful agribusiness, the selling off of industrial developments built with public money and strategic assets, such as energy sources, ports and airports, and secretive corporate-driven trade agreements represent a massive corporate heist of wealth and power across the world. Through their financial institutions and corporate entities, the world's super rich regard 'nations' as population holding centres to be exploited whereby people are stripped of control of their livelihoods for personal gain. Whether it concerns rich oligarchs in the US or India's billionaire business men, corporate profits and personal gain trump any notion of the 'national interest'.

Still want a Thatcherite revolution?

Notes

- 1) <http://mypaper.sg/top-stories/modis-advisers-dream-thatcherite-revolution-20140407>
- 2) <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2013/04/inequality-and-after-thatcher-what-really-happened>
- 3) <http://socialdemocracy21stcentury.blogspot.co.uk/2013/04/uk-real-per-capita-gdp-19192001-where.html>
- 4) <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/jobs/7465199/Quarter-of-adults-out-of-work-official-figures-shown.html>
- 5) http://corporateeurope.org/sites/default/files/attachments/brave_new_transatlantic_partnership.pdf
- 6) <http://www.globalresearch.ca/us-eu-transatlantic-free-trade-agreement-more-secrecy-and-more-duplicity-revealed/5369272>
- 7) <http://www.globalresearch.ca/us-eu-free-trade-agreement-a-corporate-stitch-up-by-any-other-name/5339789>

- 8) <http://corporateeurope.org/trade/2013/12/regulation-none-our-business>
- 9) http://corporateeurope.org/sites/default/files/record_captive_commission.pdf
- 10) <http://www.monbiot.com/1998/01/21/the-corporate-dole-queue/>
- 11) <http://www.american-buddha.com/cia.psyops.htm>
- 12) <http://www.countercurrents.org/peebles020514.htm>
- 13) http://archive.tehelka.com/story_main39.asp?filename=Ne310508cover_story.asp
- 14) <http://dissidentvoice.org/2009/07/monsanto-a-contemporary-east-india-company-and-corporate-knowledge-in-india/>
- 15) <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/walmart-and-monsanto-on-indous-agriculture-initiative-board/article3176462.ece>
- 16) <http://www.bhoomimagazine.org/article/cash-food-will-strike-very-foundation-economy>
- 17) <http://www.twinside.org.sg/title/flood-cn.htm>
- 18) <http://www.grain.org/article/entries/4929-hungry-for-land-small-farmers-feed-the-world-with-less-than-a-quarter-of-all-farmland>
- 19) http://www.theecologist.org/News/news_analysis/2267255/gm_crops_are_driving_genocide_and_ecocide_keep_them_out_of_the_eu.html
- 20) <http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-eu-india-free-trade-agreement-india-up-for-sale-to-western-corporate-capital/5332214>
- 21) <http://corporateeurope.org/trade/2014/01/critics-score-against-extreme-corporate-rights-ttip-must-not-be-fooled-commission>
- 22) http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Ruling_Elites/Superclass.html
- 23) <http://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/articles/rrtalk.htm>

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