

The World Trade Organisation (WTO) Doha Round

An update from the Trade Justice Movement (February 2008)

In view of the fact that recent evidence shows poor countries are likely to be net losers from the kind of deal on the table at the moment, and that 'aid-for-trade' packages are no substitute or compensation for this, the Trade Justice Movement believes it would be wrong for the UK Government to push for a rushed deal in the coming months. It would make more sense to take time to assess potential impacts on poor countries and then create trade rules that will benefit them from the outset without the need for aid compensation. It is fundamentally unfair to ask poor countries to take a hit economically in the name of 'preserving the multilateral system'.

Background

In 2001, developing countries, under significant pressure to show 'global unity' following the terrorist attacks on 11 September, agreed to launch a new round of trade talks, on condition that it would focus on development and address the problems created during the previous round of talks (the Uruguay Round). A real opportunity was created for the global community to take a new approach to international co-operation and work to rebalance unfair world trade rules.

As the world's trade ministers had set off for the World Trade Organisation (WTO) ministerial meeting in Doha, Qatar in November 2001, over 8,000 trade justice campaigners rallied in London publicly launching the Trade Justice Movement and sending a clear message to the UK Government and other rich countries that British people want to see a trade system that benefits the whole world. The wider global justice movement demanded fairer and greener trade rules that would also make the world a safer place.

Over six years later and hopes that the WTO Doha Round would work for development have been cruelly disappointed. Negotiations remain in deadlock, whilst pretences that the talks would focus on achieving development outcomes have been dropped for crude horse-trading by the richest and most powerful countries.

During the six years since the talks started, we can look back at a series of failed opportunities by the European Union (EU) and the United States (US) to commit to meaningful reforms of their damaging agricultural subsidies. Six years later, we can look back at a series of excessive and harmful demands by the EU and the US to liberalise developing country markets without consideration for their impact on poor people.

The WTO Doha Round was meant to rebalance the unfairness of the Uruguay Round, not retrench it. The governments of the world should avoid making the same mistake twice. It seems unlikely that there will be a deal reached in 2008 given the hurdles still present and the time constraints posed by the US Presidential elections.

A massive public campaign for Trade Justice

Since 2001, the member organisations of the Trade Justice Movement have provided shared ways for the public to mobilise in the UK, as campaigns have been doing in other

rich countries, so that debate and citizen action increase the pressure on governments to change unjust international trade rules. We act in solidarity with those doing the same in the developing world.

The Trade Justice Movement believes that the combination of assertiveness by developing country governments and global public pressure, in both rich and poor countries, can bring about positive change at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and elsewhere.

Together with many other campaigning groups internationally, the UK Trade Justice Movement has helped to place the issue of poverty into the heart of the trade debate both in the public domain and at the WTO. This focus on justice has expanded the space for developing countries to take more assertive positions in the negotiations. Leaders of developed countries acting against the interests of the world's poorest people now know the world is watching when they continue to chose unjust trade policies.

UK citizens have played their part in this global struggle by regularly taking action on vital trade justice issues. Public pressure has already contributed to important policy changes. For example:

- Rich countries had to withdraw their demands for new WTO agreements on liberalising investment, competition policy and procurement. Developing countries won this fight against the imposition of WTO rules to reduce the power of governments to regulate business and the ability of poor countries to harness investment for their development needs.
- The issue of agricultural dumping and the elimination of export subsidies is now at the top of the trade agenda alongside issues around rich countries aggressively pushing for poor countries to open their markets.

Hundreds of thousands of supporters of Trade Justice Movement member organisations have campaigned, helping to create massive public pressure in the UK and beyond for trade justice in international trade negotiations at the WTO.

For example, in the UK our campaign has seen:

- The largest ever lobby of UK Parliament
- The biggest public protest of the last general election
- Over 225,000 people taking to the streets of Edinburgh ahead of the G8 summit in protest of unfair trade rules
- More than 800, 000 UK voters casting a 'Vote for Trade Justice' calling on the UK government to respect poor countries' right to decide on trade policies to help end poverty and protect their environment.

Amid a backdrop of global protests against one-size-fits-all economic liberalisation, the 150-country WTO talks have stalled repeatedly. There have been a number of attempts to reach a break-through but these have so far come to nothing, most recently at the Davos World Economic Forum in January 2008. All countries are urged to make painful compromises on tariffs and subsidies in farm and manufactured goods. Poor countries are being asked to liberalise markets with little regard for the impact on poor people and the environment.

It is clear the offer on the table at the WTO is a bad deal for development – it will do very little to tackle poverty and could cause unemployment and hardship.

The Trade Justice Movement will continue to call on the UK and other governments to urgently put in place a system of international trade rules that can meet the global challenges facing the international community at the beginning of the 21st century: poverty, social injustice and environmental degradation such as climate change.

Everyone has the right to make a decent living, feed his or her family and protect the environment. But, at the WTO and elsewhere, the rich and powerful are pursuing trade policies that put profit before the needs of people and the planet. To end poverty and protect the environment we need Trade Justice not free trade.