

## **WTO and Confronting Corporate Power**

Presentation by Gabriela Flora (Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy)

“After Seattle: Organizing Locally Against Corporate Globalization”

at the University of MN, January 29, 2000

Organized by United Steel Workers, Mac Arthur Program and Mayday Bookstore

The members of civil society that came to Seattle and helped shut down the WTO talks were united in one demand—opposition to the launching of a new round of trade liberalization by the WTO. (How many of you were able to participate?)

The need to review the results of previous WTO rulemaking and to make repairs in the areas that have been damaging to developing countries was stated clearly, and for the most part, ignored by the handful of global economic powerhouses that dominate the WTO. That was the reason for the mobilization in Seattle and the reason for a similar effort coming up in Washington DC in April.

Seattle was a wake up call for the rich industrialized countries and a call to arms by developing countries and civil society. The interests of farmers, workers, consumers have, for too long, been subsumed by the interests of global capital.

Advocates for sustainable development, environmental protection and resource management have been locked out of the discussion of global trade rules since their inception in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) following WWII. So too have voices for the poor and disenfranchised been excluded, here and abroad.

Although Seattle was a victory, it was a skirmish in a very long war that will be waged over several generations. Prior to Seattle, we had very little hope of making changes in the way global rules were being set. Now the situation has changed completely.

Despite the collapse of the talks in Seattle, there are key WTO negotiations that will continue in areas of agriculture, services such as telecommunications and transportation, and the patenting of life. These issues, carried over from previous WTO rounds, will be aggressively pursued to demonstrate that the WTO is not dead. But, if the WTO continues to ignore the voices of concern expressed by people from around the world, the outcome will most likely be failure and the survival of the WTO will be in question.

So what's next for civil society? We must devise a way for our partners around the world to collaborate on three key areas.

First we need to determine those issues that we want no WTO involvement in such as the creation of global investment rules like the failed MAI that supersede sovereign authority.

Second, we need to highlight the areas of the current WTO rules, such as those prohibiting the dumping of agricultural exports, where we want the WTO to enforce its own rules.

Third, we need to identify key issues that we want the WTO to take affirmative action on, such as prohibiting the patenting of life and essential drugs.

Drastic changes in the US patent laws allowing for the privatization of life in the early 1980s were given international standing through the WTO's Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs) Agreement. This privatization has encouraged both horizontal and vertical concentration in the food and ag system. In the last three years there have been well over \$15 billion worth of mergers and acquisitions between seed, chemical and pharmaceutical companies.<sup>1</sup> Many of the mergers and acquisitions in the agricultural sector are pursued in order to combine key pieces of genetic information that can be used to increase the profit margins of the companies that sell the inputs and process the products of the world's agricultural producers. By linking genetic material to inputs, production methods and processing through genetic engineering, companies increase their share of the market. This has serious impacts for all of us - consumers, laborers and farmers - here in Minnesota.

Of course the notion that we must think globally but act locally is part of the challenge for all of us. What is currently going on in MN? And where do we go from here?

The campaigns against sweatshop labor (both in US and abroad) have captured the imagination and energy of thousands of students on campuses here and around the country.

The coalitions between labor, environmentalists and farmers became visible to the world at the protests in Seattle and are being strengthened as we speak.

Challenges at the state level to merger mania in the food and agricultural system is growing. The MN attorney general has joined other ag state attorney generals in critiquing the Federal Attorney General's office for approving the merger of Cargill and Continental. The Twin Cities own Farmers Legal Action Group is working to ensure that anti-monopoly laws already on the books are enforced (such as the Packers and Stockyard Act). We need to continue to pressure our legislators to enforce current anti-trust laws and strengthen them.

The emerging campaigns against genetically engineered foods have started to take root. Here in the Twin Cities, the Genetic Engineering Action Network of MN (GEAN MN) was formed several months ago. The group has been working on public education around GE issues, getting citizen involved in influencing public policy around GE and linking with farmers, labor, religious and other groups.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Dupont is buying Pioneer for \$7.7 billion and Monsanto has spent \$8 billion purchasing smaller biotechnology companies since 1996.

Upper Midwest Resistance Against Genetic Engineering (RAGE) is working to bring anti-biotech activists in the corn belt together.

This legislative session a bill will be introduced (Phyllis Kahn) where developers of the technology are liable for economic damages caused by genetic drift of GE seeds.  
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There has been a disturbing trend of public resources being invested for private industry gain. In MN we have seen a culmination of this with the hiring of a former biotechnology company president as the new Dean of the College of Agricultural, Food and Environmental Sciences. We are seeing reductions in sustainable and alternative ag research and an emphasis on biotechnology as the silver bullet for ag in this state. Private money and interests dominating research at a land grant institution brings up questions of academic freedom, whose controlling research, is this "value free science" and whose interests are being.

Left of Food and Science-- implications the privatization of public research.

We need to bring land grant institution research back into the public domain and interest. Within the Univ. discussions around this issue must be fostered.  
 At the state level -- \$10 matching funds (oppose or ensure that there are stings attached- e.g. research conducted there has to remain in the public domain.

Network of individuals and groups discussing impacts of WTO on local level and outreach and activism around these issues. Sat. 1:00-3:00pm Resource Center for the Americas

Tuesday at St. Martin's Table similar event film "Battle in Seattle"

March 1- march from St. Paul Cathedral to Capital Rotunda advocating reform in MN's food and ag system.

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