

Canada-European Union Free Trade Agreement (CETA): A 'Corporate Bill of Rights'

What would a people's trade agreement look like?

By [Yves Engler](#)

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[Yves Engler](#) 7 November 2013

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What would a trade agreement intended to benefit all Canadians look like?

This is of more than academic concern right now as the Harper Conservative government will eventually unveil the full details of the Canada-European Union Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA).

From what we know about it now this agreement is little more than a 'corporate bill of rights'. It gives corporations even more power to shift investment as they see fit and directly strengthens their interests in everything from public procurement to patent laws.

The one-sidedly pro-corporate nature of the agreement reflects the power that corporations yield over discussions of international trade. Despite the corporate world's current stranglehold over international economic decisions, a here and now People's Alternative to CETA is feasible.

To protect multinationals from the scourge of "discriminatory" government policies, CETA includes an investor-state dispute settlement process. This will give corporations based in Canada and the EU a new supranational tool to sue governments for pursuing policies that interfere with their profit making.

But rather than giving even more power to the top 0.1% richest people in the world, who are the investor class, an economic accord driven by a People's Alternative would set up a labour-state dispute settlement process. In these tribunals workers could sue governments that fail to force employers to abide by labour law and International Labour Organization statutes.

CETA also gives multinational corporations unprecedented rights to bid on public contracts. In a bid to create a "level playing field" for multinationals in public procurement, the agreement will weaken provincial and municipal agencies ability to "buy local" and pursue other environmental and socially minded policies.

Instead of undermining public agencies' ability to pursue ecological and social goals when tendering contracts, a progressive economic accord would prod firms to follow the highest ecological and social standards within the trading area. A People's Alternative would give priority to firms that cut their carbon emissions in line with the stronger levels mandated by the EU. It would also prioritize companies that establish works councils, which give workers some formal voice in the operation of the firm and are common throughout Europe.

Under CETA Canada will lengthen the time drugs remain under patent, which is expected to drive up already high Canadian pharmaceutical drug costs by more than \$850 million a year. Instead of extending Canadian patent laws to more closely reflect Europe's rules, why not harmonize daycare programs to reflect the best of the trading area?

Most European countries provide public day care services, which have both costs and benefits to the economy. According to the logic that says trading partners are supposed to be on similar economic footing, it makes as much sense to standardize daycare systems as it does patent rules.

Another argument presented to justify extending patents is that it will lead to more research and development taking place in Canada. But, over the long-term, publicly funded day care would better accomplish this objective. Particularly beneficial to the intellectual development of poor kids, quality public day care increases the likelihood that disadvantaged children will be successful in school and contribute to future innovation.

With the corporate perspective so thoroughly dominating public debates on international trade it can be difficult for critics to do anything more than oppose the current policy direction. But when we disentangle the "economy" from what's good for corporations a pro-people international economic accord is entirely feasible.

If we enjoyed real democracy, our governments would consult the people about their priorities in trade agreements.

If we lived in an economic system of one-person-one-vote, rather than the one-dollar-one-vote corporate system we have today, trade would flourish but trade agreements would look much different. They would be concerned with benefiting ordinary people, not just the already wealthy and powerful.

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