

US-EU Free Trade Agreement: A Corporate Stitch Up By Any Other Name

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Global Research, June 22, 2013

Region: [Europe, USA](#)

Theme: [Biotechnology and GMO, Global Economy](#)

The Transatlantic Free Trade Agreement (TAFTA) between the US and EU is currently being negotiated. The deal plans to create the world's largest free trade area, 'protect' investment and remove 'unnecessary regulatory barriers'. All well and good for big business, but the treaty poses a [serious threat for ordinary people](#) as it could weaken labour, social, environmental and consumer protection standards. Given the issues at stake, just how much transparency and democratic accountability is there regarding these negotiations and who is driving the agenda?

The deal has been masterminded by the '[High Level Working Group on Jobs and Growth' \(HLWG\)](#), which was set up in 2011 and chaired by European Trade Commissioner Karel De Gucht and the then US Trade Representative Ron Kirk. In its final report, the Group not only recommended entering into the negotiations, but went into some detail as to what should be put on the table, with the far-reaching aim of moving towards a "transatlantic marketplace."

With so much at stake, the public should know just who sat on the HLWG which set the whole process in motion. According to the European Commission (EC), the group has no identifiable members. The EC has also stated that "several departments" contributed to the discussion and the reports of the (memberless) group, but added that "there is no document containing the list of authors of the reports."

A request by Corporate Europe Observatory (CEO) to disclose membership/report authors was met with the response: "Unfortunately we (the EC) are not in a position to provide you with the information requested."

CEO argues that the group should be subject to the transparency requirements set up in EC's [rules on 'expert groups'](#), including transparency about who participated. But it is patently not.

When asked about the 'outside expertise' (as the EC calls it) that had influenced the reports produced by the HLWG, CEO was told that the impact assessment of the proposed EU-US trade deal contained a [summary](#) of the expert evidence gathered since its inception. CEO was also directed to the Commission's [overview page](#) for public consultations, where it is stated that more than 65 percent of the input to the first two consultations on the proposed EU-US deal came from companies and industry associations.

CEO has also requested information about the EC's contacts with industry lobby groups wanting to influence the trade pact. It asked for a list of meetings with such lobby groups,

minutes and related correspondence. The Commission responded that this “concerns a very large number of documents” and asked CEO to “narrow down the scope of your request, so as to reduce it to a more manageable amount of documents.” Six weeks after CEO’s request and after several email exchanges, CEO was told that the Commission was “currently in the early stages of assessing your request and [...] not yet in a position to give a detailed estimate of the number of documents potentially covered.” The Commission official added: “Our best guess for the moment is that we will only have a first overview of the situation during the middle of June and will update you at that point.”

While still waiting for more information on what seems to be hundreds of documents related to big business lobbying around the EU-US trade deal, CEO fared better with an access to information request to the United States Trade Representative.

Based on the information provided, CEO discovered that the authoritative-sounding ‘high level working groups on growth and jobs’ was nothing but a bunch of unelected and unaccountable, notorious pro-free-trade bureaucrats from both sides of the Atlantic.

Of course, even without access to various sources of information, we already know who supports the negotiations. CEO notes that in addition to the biotech sector, groups lobbying for the deal have included [Toyota, General Motors](#), the [pharmaceutical industry](#), [IBM](#) and the [Chamber of Commerce of the US](#), one of the most powerful corporate lobby groups in the US. Business Europe, the main organization representing employers in Europe, launched its own [strategy](#) on an EU-US economic and trade partnership in early 2012. Its suggestions were widely included in the draft EU mandate.

An increasing number of politicians and citizens groups are demanding that the looming EU-US negotiations be conducted in an open way, not least because there are concerns that the deal will open the floodgate for GMOs and shale gas (fracking) in Europe, threatens digital and labour rights and will empower corporations to legally challenge a wide range of regulations which they dislike. One of the key aspects of the negotiations is that both the EU and US should recognize their respective rules and regulations, which in practice could reduce regulation to the lowest common denominator. The official language talks of “mutual recognition” of standards or so-called reduction of non-tariff barriers. For the EU, that could mean accepting US standards in many areas, including food and agriculture, which are lower than the EU’s.

The US wants all so-called barriers to trade, including highly controversial regulations such as those protecting agriculture, food or data privacy, to be removed. Even the leaders of the Senate Finance Committee, in a [letter](#) to U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk, made it clear that any agreement must also reduce EU restrictions on genetically modified crops, chlorinated chickens and hormone-treated beef.

Demands include an “ambitious liberalisation of agricultural trade barriers with as few exceptions as possible”. Similarly, food lobby group [Food and Drink Europe](#), representing the largest food companies (Unilever, Kraft, Nestlé, etc.), has welcomed the negotiations, with one of their key demands being the facilitation of the low level presence of unapproved genetically modified crops. This is a long-standing industry agenda also supported by feed and grain trading giants, including Cargill, Bunge, ADM, and the big farmers’ lobby COPA-COGECA.. Meanwhile, the biotech industry on both sides of the Atlantic is [offering](#) its “support and assistance as the EU and the US government look to enhance their

trade relationship.”

As with the EU-India Free Trade Agreement*, it is easy to conclude that there is a deliberate ploy to bar the public from any kind of meaningful information about or input into the world’s biggest trade deal ever to be negotiated. Europeans could well end up becoming the victims of one of the biggest corporate stitch ups ever. As CEO notes, the trade deal appears to be a unique opportunity to achieve through closed and non-transparent negotiations what hasn’t been possible so far in a transparent and democratic way.

Little wonder that many millions throughout Europe now regard the EU an unaccountable proxy allowing powerful private private interests free rein to dig their profiteering snouts into the trough of corporate greed at the expense of ordinary people.

Notes

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<http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-eu-india-free-trade-agreement-corporate-driven-neocolonial-plunder/5338049>

Information source for this article: <http://corporateeurope.org/blog/who-scripting-eu-us-trade-deal> (Trade and Agribusiness website sections)

To prevent GM crops in Europe, visit ‘stop the crop’ campaign at: <http://www.stopthecrop.org/about-stop-crop-campaign>

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