Take Action Against the Free Trade Area of the Americas

by Robert Bartle

The mobilization to take action against the Free Trade Area of the Americas is in full swing. What's at stake here is life. I'm not kidding you. When World Trade agreements can exist that override any labor, environmental, and health law in the name of profit we are all in trouble.

And though we are in trouble at present with the WTO and NAFTA, apparently these acronyms are not enough. No, our captains of industry are even greedier than this. Those who like corporate-managed trade (not “free” trade) will love the misnamed Free Trade Area of the Americas.

Here is an agreement that's going to extend NAFTA’s infamous Chapter 11. This allows a corporation to sue governments for lost or potential profits. Every case using Chapter 11 has dealt either with environmental laws or sovereignty issues and guess who won every time? Corporations. See case of M etclad vs Mexico, Sun Belt Inc. vs Canada, and so on.

It will also incorporate the WTO’s rule that one government can levy trade sanctions against another if it finds an environmental law or consumer protection law to be a non-tariff trade barrier blocking the free flow of capital and goods. None of the people heading the dispute panels deciding these cases or the heads of the panels deciding these cases or the heads of these trade agreements are voted in by the public. Have you even heard of them?

The meeting, to be held in Quebec, is already in operation in the history of Canada, building an 8 million dollar credit card companies invested in the Bush campaign to insure that they maintain their hold on the wallets of America’s working class. The AAML says that it’s an interest group, is lobbying to keep this bill from passing so that poor single moms, the chief victims of this bill, will be able to pay the welfare of their children above the welfare of big business.

Living Wage Victory

Congratulations Ann Arbor! You are now among the growing number of cities that can call themselves a living wage city!!!

On March 5th City Council approved an ordinance that allows workers to make a fair and decent living.

This goes to show that a dedicated group of citizens can make their voices heard.

Members of Washtenaw Coalition for a Living Wage deserve credit for their years of dedication working on this issue. Because of their hard work many social service agency employees, materials recycling facility (MRF) workers, parking lot attendants and other employees of city vendors will soon receive a living wage.

So thanks to all the people at Washtenaw County for a Living Wage! You’ve made Ann Arbor and the lives of several people better!

Upcoming Event You Should Attend

Critical Mass by Joel Hennes

What: Critical mass is a group bike ride in which bicyclists ride together as one giant amoebic entity to state all of society “we’re not blocking traffic, we are traffic!”

When: Friday, April 20th: 5:00pm

Where: The intersection of State St. and North University.

Why: There are many different reasons why people ride in the critical mass; here are a few:

- To increase awareness of bicyclists sharing the road with cars
- To show that bicycles are a viable alternative to cars
- The pollution caused by automobiles is a major contributor to global warming
- Roads and highways disrupt local ecosystems, destroying habitats for many species
- Oil production is responsible for massive ecological damage
- Bikes are fun to ride, and good for you
- Critical Mass is a community builder
- The majority of daily commutes are well within biking distance
- Bikes are less expensive than cars
- Bikes do not need gas
- Critical Mass is right here!

Critical Mass is a community event of people like you and me who care about our environment.

Upcoming events in Ann Arbor and vicinity that resist the FTAA in April:

April 1, 10am-5pm: Nonviolence Training: with an emphasis on taking Direct Action. The trainer will be Sheri Wander of the Interfaith Council for Peace and Justice. Where: TBA. For more info: Call 663-1870.

April 4: There will be two vigils. One organized by SOLE for sweatshop laborers. Time and Place: TBA. The second is organized by the Interfaith Council in commemoration of Dr. Martin Luther King and his work around economic justice. Where: Depot Town under the clock. Time: 7:30pm.

April 16: Tax day and national call-in day to elected officials about your opposition to FAST TRACK authority for Mr. Bush and to the FTAA. Look for spontaneous guerilla theatre and banner hang on this day in and around Ann Arbor.

April 20 5pm: CRITICAL MASS/PARADE meet State St. and N. University a little before 5pm to prepare. This is a regional action throughout Michigan: Traverse City, Lansing, Marquette and more. Get on the bike! Bring costumes, banners, signs, noise makers, mindfulness. We will also be a tour of some of our favorite corporations: Starbucks, TCF, Citigroup affiliates, BP/Amoco (potential AEC Wildlife Refuge plunderers). Please join us!

April 21 Noon: Detroit’s Labor Notes is organizing a march to the tunnel and then inviting activists to join their conference. The two workshops after the march will be dealing specifically with what we do beyond Detroit. The facilitator for one of the workshops is from Argentina and helped organize those to stop a Structural Adjustment program of the IMF. The March starts at the Cobo Center and ends with a rally and speakers at Hart Plaza near the tunnel. Contact Labornotes.org, (313) 842-6262 for more details.

Some other ways to Resist and Create alternatives to FTAA:

- Do door-to-door in your neighborhood or at the mall with information on FTAA. Contact Robert if you want to do this with others: rockthepoat1@hotmail.com
- Drink Fair Trade coffee!
- J oin the Critical Mass ride!

Crime Notes

Snidely Creditors Tie Damsels to Tracks

The American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers (AAML) is currently challenging the ethics of a new bill the Republicans are pushing through Congress, a bill threatening to make it harder and costlier to file for bankruptcy. Though not an actual court case, the ramifications of the AAML’s lobbying efforts will be immense. Bush and his Congressional scalpries, under pressure mainly from large credit card companies, are trying to pass a bill that makes it impossible for a citizen who declares bankruptcy will not be able to have his/her college debts take priority over his/ her credit card debts. Instead, a person who has declared bankruptcy must try to ration his/her earnings between child care, alimony, and debts to creditors. This bill has attained its force due to the millions of dollars credit card companies invested in the Bush campaign to insure that they maintain their hold on the wallets of America’s working class. The AAML says that it’s an interest groups, is lobbying to keep this bill from passing so that poor single moms, the chief victims of this bill, will be able to pay the welfare of their children above the welfare of big business.

Flesh-Eating Subway Virus Released, Contained

Earlier this month big business reared its head again in Grosse Pointe, Michigan. The issue: Sandwiches. John and Dave Chetcuti’s Atom’s Vegan Cafi opened last fall in a Grosse Pointe mall several doors from Subway. The building’s landlord, Fisher Road Properties, signed a contract years ago with Subway agreeing to prohibit any store open in the vicinity that would compete with Subway’s menu. When Atom’s opened the franchise owners of the Grosse Pointe subway franchise as well as Fisher Road Properties took the Chetcuti’s to court, hoping to run them out of business. On March 12 the case was settled and the Chetcuti’s were allowed to operate Atom’s Vegan Cafi again in Grosse Pointe, Michigan. The issue: singing beef. Michigan law states that a worker who has been hurt on one job must receive compensation from all of his employers. The case is complicated by the fact that the Kerbers were paying Gilbert under the table, making it impossible for the Internal Revenue Service to determine how much the Kerbers should compensate their injured employee. Because there were no documents asserting Gilbert’s employment with the Kerbers or any record of the wages he earned there, in the eyes of the law, the Kerbers had no responsibility to pay Worker’s Compensation. Rather, the Second Injury Fund must compensate Gilbert for lost wages. The Kerbers nullified their responsibility as employers by paying Gilbert under the table.

Authorities Rescue Victim By Paying Off Perps

In an interesting twist, the first plaintiff in this Worker’s Compensation case, Kevin Gilbert, joined forces with his employers to file suit against Michigan’s Second Injury Fund. This fund was established for injured employees who work more than one job. Its role is to pay the Worker’s Compensation wages on behalf of the “non-injury” employers. Gilbert sustained his injury while working at Rodney and Ronald Kerber’s farm business, but Gilbert was also employed elsewhere. Michigan law states that a worker who has been hurt on one job must receive compensation from all of his employers. The case is complicated by the fact that the Kerbers were paying Gilbert under the table, making it impossible for the Internal Revenue Service to determine how much the Kerbers should compensate their injured employee. Because there were no documents asserting Gilbert’s employment with the Kerbers or any record of the wages he earned there, in the eyes of the law, the Kerbers had no responsibility to pay Worker’s Compensation. Rather, the Second Injury Fund was responsible for compensating Gilbert. In an ironic interpretation of employment law, the Michigan Court of Appeals decided on behalf of Gilbert and the Kerbers that the Second Injury Fund must compensate Gilbert for lost wages because the Kerbers nullified their responsibility as employers by paying Gilbert under the table.
Vegetarians, Revisited
by Margot Ford McMillen

It's happened again. One of my dear friends has told me that, if you love the planet, forget about driving less or living in a smaller home. If you're a real environmentalist, he said, you've got to be a vegetarian.

I applaud my friend's dedication. I applaud anyone's dedication to food issues, and their willingness to follow commitment with action. With fast food stores on every corner and grocery stores loaded with cheap factory fare, it's hard to commit to any kind of healthy diet. I would never ask vegetarians to give up their commitment. But there's more to the story.

Francis Moore Lappe's book Diet for a Small Planet launched vegetarianism into American mainstream thinking. John Robbins followed with Diet for a New America, and other books on sustainable living have gotten in line. The benefits of a vegetarian diet almost made environmental sense when foods of all kinds were fresh, canned or frozen – nourish them, then sprayed with -icides to keep them from overripening during transportation. These were chemicals unimaginable.

People have suffered to raise our vegetables. With antibiotics, sprayed with insecticides, and given every kind of growth chemical science can come up with. Male milk calves and worn-out cows, by-products of milk production, go to slaughter. Worn-out egg layers, by-products of egg production, go to slaughter.

But maybe you're vegan. If you buy veggies from a big producer, you're still supporting the meat industry. Here's why. Waste from animal factories is a necessary part of the veggie industry. The waste, or “nutrient,” sometimes is composted, sometimes is not. Sometimes it's pumped to lagoons and left to rot.

The stuff is used by organic growers as well as conventional growers. If you don't believe me, ask the certifiers for a copy of their standards. Waste from animal factories is spread on organic fields to produce wheat, popcorn, organic pastures. But Old McDonald was a small farmer, not a corporation.

Many small farmers combine plant and animal raising to restore land burned out by industrial methods. The goal is to have only the number of animals that the land can sustain, and that animal manure can nourish. The factory places have thousands of animals in one place or hundreds of acres of one vegetable crop. This destroys nature's balance.

If you want to consider your food choices as environmentally sound (and who doesn't?) you need to get to know farmers who are working hard to raise food and to stay on the land. Use these winter months to organize a farmer's market or delivery system on your church or school parking lot. Make it a rule that producers market sustainably-raised foods from your region.

You're committed to environmental issues, ask to visit the farms where your food is grown. Offer to buy an entire year's worth of produce in return for an explanation of everything the farmer does with his or her land. Those who farm sustainably are glad to tell you how we do things and why. And we need your consumer dollars to stay on our farms.

Margot Ford McMillen farms and teaches English at a college in Fulton, Mo. Email: mcfmllm@iwaynet.wcmu.edu

This article was originally published in The Progressive Populist.

Where can you buy local produce?

Farmers Market

Featuring locally grown produce, flowers, shrubs, plants, jams, jellies, baked goods, grains, fruit, eggs, dairy products, homemade clothing and apparel, toys, jewelry, home decorations, furniture, dried flowers, pottery, candles and more!

All in an open-air atmosphere.

HOURS OF OPERATION:

May 1 - Dec 24
7:00am - 3:00pm, Wednesdays & Saturdays
Jan 1 - Apr 30
8:00am - 3:00pm, Saturdays only

In historic Kerrytown in downtown Ann Arbor.

Call (734) 994-FARM.

Remember... Critical Mass!

Friday, April 20th: 5:00pm

Hope to see you there...

Thanks for reading!

If you would like to contribute to or have any feedback for The Armchair Activist we would love to hear from you!
Simply email Joe at: jsexauer@umich.edu