

PM: News Uncovered

By Polly Mann

In October 2012, the WAMM newsletter published an article by Lori Wallach of Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch about a secret trade agreement that, if passed, would have a tremendous impact on the U.S. and other countries and "reach directly into the lives of individuals." The administration is hoping to have it concluded by the end of this year so I think it's time to raise awareness again. But the agreement is so secretive that Congress is still not even allowed negotiation observer status, which, according to Global Trade Watch, "is astounding given that the U.S. Constitution provides Congress [with] exclusive authority over trade policy." Parts of the agreement, have, none the less, been leaked. Even so the corporate media apparently has little interest in probing the implications of the agreement.

However, progressive populist Jim Hightower has been paying attention. A recent issue of his newsletter, "Hightower Lowdown," contains a 4-page article about The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TTP), proposed by President Obama's trade officials. There is plenty of reason to believe that readers of the WAMM newsletter will oppose the TPP from what he describes. Hightower said we need to spread the word and I've taken the liberty of recapping his recap. So here it is.

The TPP could be compared to NAFTA. Remember NAFTA? It was going to make us all more prosperous. However, thousands of factories closed, thousands of jobs went overseas, Mexican farmers lost out big time and hundreds of towns and cities, including Detroit went down the tube. The following are some of the more salient issues about the newer Transpacific Partnership:



Psyche, painting by John William Waterhouse, 1903.

Food Safety. Any regulations more stringent than “international standards” could be ruled as “illegal trade barriers” and U.S. standards could be weakened.

Fracking. The U.S. Dept. of Energy would lose its authority to regulate exports of natural gas to any TPP nation. Unregulated natural gas with its damaging fracking process could be exported to member nations without environmental and economic impact reviews.

Jobs. U.S. corporations could move jobs from the U.S. to low-wage nations.

Drug Prices. The big pharmaceutical companies would be given more years of monopoly pricing on their patents and would be able to block distribution of cheaper generic drugs.

Banksters TPP would prohibit transaction taxes (such as the proposed Robin Hood tax) and would restrict “firewall” reforms that separate consumer banking from risky investment banking; this would roll back reforms adopted to fix extreme bank-deregulation that caused Wall Street's 2007 crash; and it would provide an escape from national rules limiting the size of “too-big-to-fall” behemoths.

Internet Freedom. Corporate-created content would be given copyright protection for 120 years! It would also provide a police force to monitor “user activity” and conceivably cut off access. Consumers could be assessed mandatory fines for non-commercial, small-scale copying.

A Corporatocracy. There is no expiration date on the agreement and no provision enabling modification.

Investor-State Dispute Resolution. In such a court corporations would be able to sue TPP governments over environmental, health, consumer, zoning, or any other public policies that corporations claim are undermining their TPP rights or their “expected future profits.” Cases would be decided behind closed doors by three-person international tribunals of private attorneys who most often would have a strong corporate bias. They would not be accountable to any electorate and their decisions are final and without appeal.

Icing On the Cake. Even before TPP is imposed, corporations are demanding \$14 billion for cases brought under free trade agreement. Among those suing governments in investor-state tribunals are:

1. Philip Morris attacking Australia's and Uruguay's cigarette labeling policies
2. Chevron, for gross toxic contamination in the Ecuadorian Amazon;
3. Eli Lilly, demanding Canada's patent laws provide its drugs monopoly protection
4. several European investments firms, assaulting Egypt's minimum wage laws.

Why Has the U.S. public been kept in the dark about TPP? Because the corporate and political powers have hoped to keep the issue private. TPP negotiations began in 2008 by the second George Bush. Obama's top trade representative, Rob Kirk, stated that secrecy was necessary because the deal's details would “outrage Americans and spook Congress from rubber stamping it.” U.S. Rep. Alan Grayson, who has been a vocal transparency advocate, says that it was kept secret because “it puts corporate interests ahead of American interests.” In 2010 all nations involved signed a formal pledge to keep details of the deliberations from the public.

Corporations have put a “ton of money” behind TPP's passage. At the same time there is grassroots movement and knowledgeable organizations are working against

passage. Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch has been taking a lead. Some pundits contend TPP is so convoluted that the average person can't understand it. However, Hightower points out that populist forces now opposing TPP have won many such battles in the past, such as:

Stopping Clinton's demand for fast track authority in 1998

Sidetracking the Multilateral Agreement on Investment in 1998

Derailing an expansion of the World Trade Organization in 1999

Defeating the Free Trade Area of the Americas (14-nation expansion of NAFTA) in 1999

Halting trade deals such as AFTA (Andean countries), NAFTA-style deals with APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation), and SACU (Southern African Customs Union), Malaysia and Thailand.

Back in June, Senator Elizabeth Warren voiced her opposition to President Obama's selection of Michael Froman as the top international trade representative to succeed Rob Kirk because of her concern over the lack of transparency in matters relating to TPP. "I have heard the argument that transparency would undermine the Trade Representative's policy to complete the trade agreement because public opposition would be significant," Warren explained. "In other words, if people knew what was going on, they would stop it. This argument is exactly backwards. If transparency would lead to widespread public opposition to a trade agreement, then that trade agreement should not be the policy of the United States."

It looks like it's up to us to start asking questions.

Polly Mann is cofounder of Women Against Military Madness, continues to be active with WAMM and is a regular contributor to the newsletter.

#### Endnotes

1. Wallach, Lori and Beachy, Ben. August 5, 2013. "Covert Partnership has huge destructive potential," Opinion: Bangkok Post
2. August 2013, Volume 15, Number 5