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Globalisation

Americas: The Fast Track Attack

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AFTER QUEBEC CITY, where the Summit of the Americas convened behind a giant wall and a fog of teargas, the World Bank won't even try to hold its next scheduled meeting on "fighting global poverty" or was it "fighting the global poor" in Barcelona, Spain. The deliberations will be held electronically instead; interested critics of globalisation will be invited to submit your constructive and responsible suggestions via email.

[<https://association-radar.org/IMG/jpg/ftaa1.jpg>]

Quebec City: Inside...

Indeed, the international powers-that-be are running somewhat scared. On the other hand, a few weeks per annum of righteous street action aren't going to shut down the institutions of finance capital.

Indeed, wherever necessary the United States can simply dictate (sorry, that's "coordinate") the measures necessary to defend international capital, as in the bail-out of banks during the Latin American debt crisis of 1982, the rescue of US capitalists facing disaster in the Mexican peso crisis, or the imposition of its imperialist terms on the industries and banks of Korea and the rest of East Asia in the Asian crisis of 1997-98.

There is, however, one potential confrontation on the political horizon of unusual importance, even more so now that the Republicans' loss of the US Senate has forced 'bipartisan' government back on the agenda.

The jewel in the crown of US corporate trade policy would be the consummation of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) that was under discussion at the Quebec Summit.

To accomplish this, however, requires a mechanism that will insulate the ratification process from the inevitable and messy clash of conflicting interests who would be affected - labour, consumer, environmental, domestic manufacturers and importers - in other words, from democracy.

[<https://association-radar.org/IMG/jpg/ftaa2.jpg>]

Quebec City: ... and outside

That mechanism is called "fast track authority", under which the administration negotiates a trade agreement and the Congress must then vote it up or down, without the possibility of amendments.

Presidents since Gerald Ford have been granted this power - that's how the US-Canada Free Trade Agreement and NAFTA were pushed through during the Reagan-Bush Sr. era - until it lapsed during the Clinton administration.

George W. Bush, strutting around as if he had actually been elected, wants that authority back, as he told the Council of the Americas on May 7; "One tool I must have is renewed US trade promotion authority. I urge the Congress: restore our nation's authority to negotiate trade agreements, and I will use that authority to build freedom in the world, progress in our hemisphere and enduring prosperity in the United States."

Freedom, right. We'll come back to that, but notice first that there's a problem: "The White House knows it is in for a battle. Labour unions and their backers on Capitol Hill have vowed to fight against giving the president such a free hand . . . Even as the president spoke, 61 senators sent him a letter warning that they would oppose any new trade agreement that did not allow the United States to protect its companies against unfair trade practices by foreign governments. ("Bush Declares Free Trade A Moral Issue; Chides Critics," New York Times, May 8, 2001).

As in previous struggles, and even in Seattle, opposition to "free trade" comes wrapped in a variety of packages - progressive and protectionist, internationalist-solidaristic and crudely nationalist - as we said, conflicted and messy. For us, as socialists, the critical point is that this "free trade" regime, with its forced abolition of any regulations on capital, is not only harmful to the interests of US labour but absolutely devastating to workers and peasants in the poorer countries.

A proper democratic process would entail full and open debate on exactly who benefits, and who loses, from NAFTA/FTAA-type "free trade." The significance of the moment, however, lies precisely in the probability that the fate of FTAA will be decided before the negotiations begin, according to whether Congress restores presidential fast-track authority.

Once fast-track is adopted, it is extremely unlikely that any negotiated deal, no matter how appalling, would be voted down - if only because Republican congresspersons would never wish to inflict such a crippling defeat on a president of their own party, and because politicians of both parties would be under tremendous pressure from the corporate lobbies on which their campaign treasuries depend.

On the other hand, without fast-track it's unlikely that the administration would even want to walk into the FTAA negotiating minefield. Here, for the first time since the 1999 Battle of Seattle, a combined effort of organised labour and the diverse forces of the "Global Justice" movement can throw some serious sand in the gears of the globalisation machine.

There's another aspect of the fast-track attack that directly connects with the meaning of "democracy" in the current era of global capital.

The Meaning of "Democracy"

At the Summit of the Americas, the assembled hemispheric state representatives - with only Cuba of course excluded, for the crime of being ruled by an unreconstructed Communist party in the United States own backyard - solemnly proclaimed that in the American family of nations, with all its attendant privileges, right of admission will be reserved only for those countries that embrace democratic government.

It will be tempting for those of us on the left to dismiss this as pure farce, especially when spearheaded by the North American colossus that cheerfully engaged with fifteen years of gruesome military dictatorship in Chile, the Argentine military's dirty war against its own population, rule by torture in Brazil and Bolivia, to say nothing with a quarter century of US financed genocide in Guatemala ("ancient history", Bill Clinton called it), the Somoza family's forty-five-year rape of Nicaragua and a decade of death squads in El Salvador . . . But it is a mistake to simply dismiss the newfound attraction to democratic government. Sickening and hypocritical as it may be, it's not purely fraudulent. Indeed, maintaining democracy of a certain type is precisely half of the elite vision of efficient hemispheric management.

Dictatorial regimes, you see, may be expedient or sometimes even essential for preserving wealth, privilege and the sanctity of capital - the US-sponsored Pinochet Chilean coup of 1973 being a prime case - but they can also be inconveniently destabilising in at least two ways.

Sometimes, dictatorial regimes may choose or be forced to adopt populist postures, protectionist policies or occasionally even nationalisation of basic resources and utilities. Such measures, without abolishing or even threatening the basic relations of capitalism, can threaten to undermine the security of particular multinational corporate investors - and are seriously out of order in the present era of universal privatisation and global freedom of capital.

Second, and worse, dictatorship breeds the kind of popular resistance that may demand going beyond simple restoration of formal democracy to significant social reform - demands which, in the conditions of desperate poverty, land hunger and inequality throughout much of Latin America - would threaten the basic structures of capitalism.

The maintenance of democracy, then, is not mere window dressing but rather highly relevant to the corporate "free trade" agenda. But there is a crucial proviso, the second half of the elite strategic vision: Democracy must be carefully controlled and drained of most of its social content, particularly its radical potential. Thus, the US economic and political elites have had the luxury of advocating democracy only in the 1990s, after those class and popular movements that could give democracy real meaning in Latin America had suffered severe defeats.

The two parts are inseparable: The population must be able to elect the parties and politicians of its own choosing; but those parties and politicians once elected must be strictly constrained from violating the neo-liberal agenda, absolutely forbidden to put the pressing needs of their society above those of multinational investment, and as much as possible insulated from social pressure to do so.

In short: there must be an established and enforced Free Trade Area of the Americas.

Naturally, the form of democracy best suited to this regime is the kind that has been most nearly perfected in the United States of America: Diverse social interests and bourgeois cliques are to be amalgamated into large but amorphous political parties, controlled by vast pools of money rather than by their membership. Preferably there will be exactly two such parties, hotly divided on major ideological issues (such as abortion, religion or tax policy) while pursuing the same underlying corporate-dictated strategic plan.

With sufficient patience and skill, the population can be mobilised into a certain state of political excitement around key points in the election cycle, yet remain sufficiently unorganised and cynical that actual voter turnout doesn't go much past the 50% threshold, especially among the poor.

That's precisely the kind of hemispheric democracy that FTAA seeks to create and sustain. And it is precisely this kind of democracy - formally intact, with most meaningful debate and all elements of popular control removed - that is represented in giving the executive branch "fast-track authority" to negotiate deals that will determine the lives of hundreds of millions of people more profoundly than the outcome of any election.

Armed with this understanding of the meaning of FTAA and fast-track, perhaps the unions and the direct-action resisters, the partisans of the teamsters and the turtles and the rustbelts and the rainforests, can again come together and respond appropriately.