

# Critics charge MAI to expose schools to corporate inroads

BY AMIEL BLAJCHMAN

OTTAWA (CUP) — Coca-Cola may write curriculum, Reebok could sue schools and foreign multinationals might even be able to hand out their own degrees if the global deal known as the "North American Free Trade Agreement on steroids" is signed.

A broad-based education coalition is anxiously eyeing the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) negotiations in Paris, where reps from the world's richest 29 countries have been at the bargaining table for over two years trying to figure out a way to liberalize investment flows and clarify investment rules for multinational corporations.

But Canadian education experts say the deal will only undermine an already under-funded public education system.

While the Canadian Teachers' Federation is talking generalities about cash-strapped school boards being vulnerable to marketplace influence, local teachers' unions across the country are talking specifics.

Under the agreement, companies would be given the right to sue elected governments to protect their profits.

Wayne Cushman, a policy analyst for the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, says this could mean trouble as private companies get increasingly involved in the development of primary and secondary school curricula.

"Once you get private companies bidding for curriculum and give them a right to it, it's impossible to step back. The company can turn around and sue you," he said.

Jennifer Story, national deputy chairperson of the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS), says the deal could also pose problems for post-secondary education.

She says that even regulations passed by governing bodies at

universities and colleges could be under fire, as the MAI would control all domestic regulations.

"Corporations can challenge sub-state government regulations, including any that deal with education and student assistance provisions."

And donations to universities or colleges — viewed as an "investment"

— could use the MAI's legal mechanisms to protect against students or faculty placing their products or services in what they consider a bad light.

A company or individual could sue a post-secondary institution if student activities or faculty research or teaching was found to interfere with their "investment".

Which, Story says, could be an extension of what happened at the University of Madison in Wisconsin recently.

Reebok donated \$7.9-million to the school in 1996 in return for exclusive advertising rights on the university's

athletic clothing. Part of the deal disallowed any university official from making any negative remarks about the company — a clause removed after student and faculty uproar.

But a spokesperson for Canadian international trade minister Sergio Marchi says the dozens of educational organizations opposing the MAI, including the B.C., Yukon, Alberta, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island teachers' associations, are over-reacting.

"These are the most uninformed claims I've heard," Dexter Bishop said. "It is absolutely beyond my comprehension how someone could make these claims."

Others say the impending corporate inroads into education aren't even necessarily a bad thing.

"A good relationship between [business and education] is a good idea," said Rob Anders, the Reform Party's critic for the Human Resources Development portfolio. "Businesses are able to donate supplies and such to schools."

Although Bishop dismisses the education coalition's concerns, he has given them some good news, indicating that it is unlikely the deal will be signed by the targeted deadline at the end of April.

## Tories

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loader, I didn't abuse the full cooler of beer waiting on a make-shift bar in the centre of the room either.

The room was a bastion of conservative stereotypes. How many men in one room can wear turtlenecks underneath sweaters? I felt like I should have been lounging with 'Kip' in Aspen after a long hard day of skiing. And after awhile, the old boys came down for a visit. The room was half-full of fogies (whom I was told by one party insider not to under-estimate) and young men with aspirations-in-tow. Thankfully, none of them had cigars.

Another round of hoots made its way through the office. I think a PC candidate in the valley had just won a seat, but they may have been cheering on the pizza man heading for the back of the room.

This pizza would be the bane of my existence for the rest of the evening, as a man who incessantly referred to me as 'Red' (on account of my hair) was always asking me to hand him a piece.

Sick of being food-boy, and tired of hedging bets about how long a minority government would last in Nova Scotia, I left Erskine's free food behind. I had no right to any of it. I didn't even vote for her.

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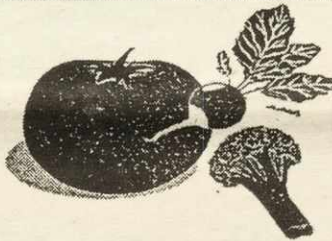
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