

Them's fightin' words

What Trade Organization?

BY HILARY J. WHITE

The poor will forever be with us. The downtrodden, the victimized, the oppressed, those for whom the system just doesn't work. We know this — it is a fact.

But the question that no-one seems willing to ask is how do these 'poor' get into that condition? Who does the victimizing, oppressing and treading-down? Whose fault is it? This weekend I went to a...well, I hesitate to call it a conference, maybe, 'rally' would be a better word. Sponsored by a group of activist organizations, ostensibly about the effects of the agenda of the World Trade Organization (WTO) on women. The WTO is meeting, as we speak, in Seattle to work out the agenda for international trade, just in time for the new millennium.

I went to the meeting not really knowing what to expect. I didn't know what the WTO was, where it came from or what its 'Big Plan' is for all of our futures. And if I only had to go on what I learned at the meeting on Saturday, I would still be in the dark. I listened dutifully to the Raging Grannies sing some tunes, a guest speaker read some feminist poetry, and a very serious woman talk about the tragic situation in Honduras after the terrible effects of Hurricane Mitch.

And still I wondered, after an hour or so, what the WTO is and how it affects women. I realized after a very rousing speech from the representative of the Canadian Postal Workers Union, that if I wanted the actual facts, I was going to have to look elsewhere. It seemed, however, if I wanted to have my emotions riled up into a fightin' mood, I was in the right place.

I have since learned that the decisions being made by the WTO and by its national backers will have some extremely far reaching effects on all of our lives. The organizations which have expressed their serious concern are all groups which work to uphold the rights and freedoms not only of individual citizens but of whole sovereign nations. There are fears that the current trend towards 'globalization' of world trade will erode the rights of a nation-state to protect its domestic markets, its natural resources, its ability to protect the rights of its working and unemployed citizens, even its right to enact binding legislation and its very sovereignty. These are some very serious complaints and they are being made by a surprisingly broad range of groups.

Forming the front lines are religious groups, anti-poverty organizations, trade unions, and environmentalists. But they are being joined recently by people who have more traditionally been associated with the 'Right Wing'.

The threat that is perceived by these people, and increasingly, by members of government, is the breakdown of the rights of smaller, less powerful nations (like Canada), to protect themselves from the steamroller effect of the playing field of free trade.

Obviously there is real cause for alarm. We have seen the effects on our nation of the first Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

The question that seems to be getting lost in all the emotionalism,

jargon, and name-calling, is simply — what can we do about it? It is understandable that people are going to be intimidated by the scale of the questions. These are issues that seem to fall outside the purview of the ordinary citizen.

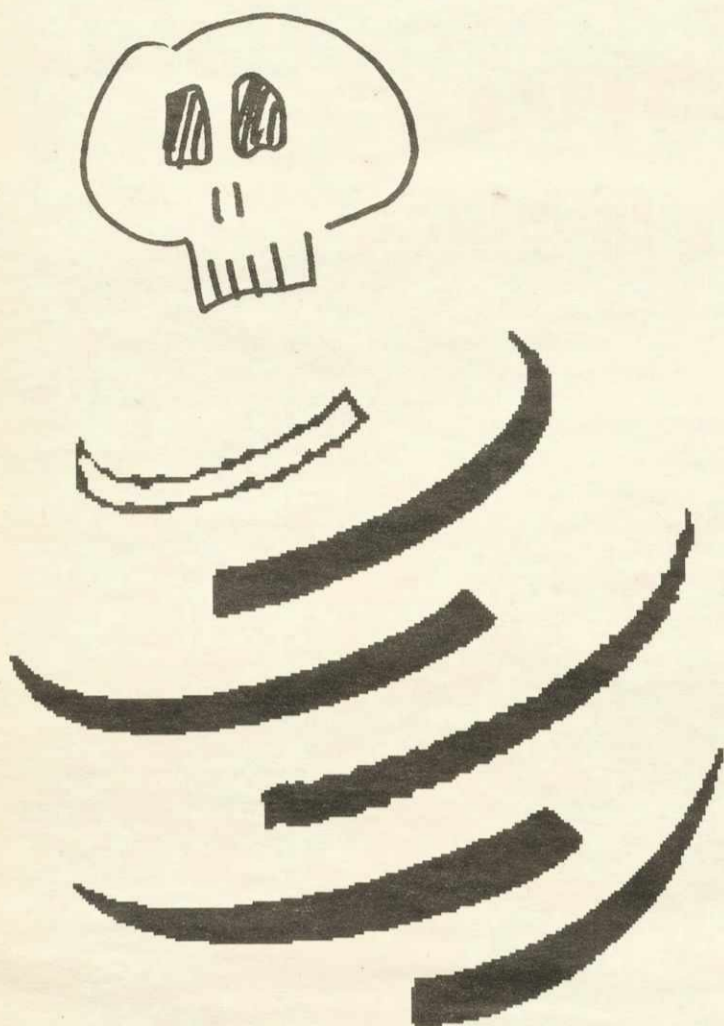
We have elections for this kind of thing. We vote competent people into office, people with degrees in international trade law and economics to deal with the really big stuff so we can get on with our lives in some semblance of peace.

The rally I went to on Saturday failed to make me feel more empowered. It failed to inform me. It failed even to rile me up into a fightin' mood. I could not take the Grannies seriously. From the panelists, I had only the impression that they were as much out of their depth as I was. A great deal was said about the evil powers of oppression and economic tyranny, about whose fault it all is. Scary words like layoffs, sweatshop, and wage-slave were thrown out.

But I went away feeling apathetic, thinking what the hell can I do about it? I was not impressed with the ability of the people there to make any meaningful impact on the decisions of the trade negotiators, to make me feel like trying to do so, or even to really let me know what was going on.

I was not inspired to try to do anything until I set about informing myself. I will now be following the week long negotiations. I will be reading everything I can about what is going on in Seattle. I will listen to the news. I will get on the internet and look up the sites of the WTO, the federal NDP, the Council of Canadians, the World Council of Churches. I might write some letters to the MP of my choice.

I will, in other words, do the things that are required of a well-informed citizen. It is now that cool heads and clear information is most needed. This is indeed some really important stuff. But I don't think I will be going to any more rallies.



Some web sites for those who care to get informed:


- www.wto.org Official pronouncements from them to us.
- www.citizen.org *Whose trade Organization?* by Lori Wallach and Michelle Sforza, with a forward by Ralph Nader.
- www.policyalternatives.ca A citizen's guide to the World trade Organization
- www.clc-ctc.ca Canadian Labour Congress
- www.icftu.org International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (the other kind of free trade)
- www.parl.gc.ca All of our elected federal ministers, if you feel like making a fuss

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