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Big Oil, TTIP and the Scramble for Europe

By Colin Todhunter
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If sanctioned, the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) would be the biggest trade deal ever seen. Yet the public continue to be kept in the dark about it. Large corporations have been granted privileged access to officials and have been allowed to shape the talks agenda from the outset. Throughout the process, organisations representing the public and civil society have been sidelined. The public has had to rely on leaks or resort to freedom of

information law and heavily redacted documents to try to understand what is happening behind closed doors.

High-minded platitudes referring to protecting the integrity of industry and the sensitive nature of negotiations have been used in an attempt to prevent public scrutiny and secure the continued crucial influence that big business has held in the talks.

According to a recent report (Friends of the Earth, Corporate Europe Observatory, *War on Want et al*) public services in the EU are under threat from the proposed trade deal, which could endanger citizens' rights to basic services. The study showed how the EU's Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) deal with Canada and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) could lock public utilities into irreversible commercialisation and remove governments' ability to regulate services.

Exposing systemic collusion between big business and European Commission officials in drawing up CETA and TTIP, the report highlights how negotiators are doing the work of the EU's most powerful corporate lobby groups in pushing an aggressive corporate agenda of far-reaching market opening in the public sector.

The consequences include proposals for excessive investor rights, which mean corporations could sue governments for implementing regulations that affect their profits, potentially leading to multi-billion euro taxpayer payouts in compensation. Even the fear of such action could lead governments to shelve plans in the first place. TTIP could eventually make it impossible for national governments to implement decisions for the common good.

Big business has successfully lobbied against the exemption of public services from CETA and TTIP as both agreements apply to virtually all services. This effectively limits the governmental authority exemption to a few core functions, such as law enforcement, the judiciary or the services of a central bank.

There is also the real danger that the EC is following industry demands to lock in present and future liberalisations and privatisations of public services. This could threaten the growing trend of remunicipalisation of water services, energy grids and transport services.

A leaked EU document also shows the EC proposing an EU-US Regulatory Cooperation Council. Existing and future EU regulation would then have to go through a series of investigations, dialogues and negotiations in this body. This would move decisions on regulations into a technocratic sphere, whereby policies could be presented to the public as 'done deals', all worked out behind closed doors between pro-business officials and business leaders. There would also be compulsory impact assessments for proposed regulation, which will be checked for their potential impact on trade.

As if all of this were not bad enough, Deidre Fulton writes on the Common Dreams website that newly obtained heavily redacted documents reveal that EU trade officials gave US oil giant ExxonMobil access to confidential negotiating strategies considered too sensitive to be released to the European public. The documents have been by seen by The Guardian newspaper.

Director of War on Want John Hilary says the documents offer:

“... an extraordinary glimpse into the full degree of collusion between the European Commission and multinational corporations seeking to use TTIP to increase US exports of fossil fuels. The commission is allowing the oil majors to write the proposed energy chapter of TTIP in their favour.”

The Guardian goes on to state that officials asked one oil refinery association for ‘concrete input’ on the text of an energy chapter for the negotiations, as part of the EU’s bid to write unfettered imports of US crude oil and gas into the trade deal.

The documents also show that at a September 2013 meeting, EU trade officials gave a briefing on the state of TTIP talks to two trade groups and 11 oil and gas companies, including Shell, BP and ExxonMobil.

According to The Guardian, the EU is pressing for a guarantee that the US will allow free export of oil and gas to Europe, an undertaking that would require a \$100 billion infrastructure investment.

War on Want campaigner Mark Dearn says:

“A key aim of TTIP has been to destroy regulations that prevent high-polluting tar sand crude oil from entering Europe... [an] agenda that promises a high-carbon future unmasks the spin of rich country promises to phase out fossil fuels by the end of this century, highlighting the corporate nature of the deal and its devastating consequences for climate change.”

Dearn concludes:

“Far from being a simple case of European interests versus US interests, the lines of demarcation in TTIP are between the mutually exclusive interests of transnational big business and people and the planet; if the deal passes, the former wins and the latter lose.”

TTIP is too often presented by officials and sections of the corporate media as constituting a well thought out recipe for job creation and economic growth. This depiction forms part of the neoliberal globalisation paradigm that sanctifies the notion of ‘free trade’. In reality, however, what we actually have is trade and markets that are anything but ‘free’: markets are rigged, commodity manipulated and nations coerced, destabilised or attacked in order that powerful players gain access to resources and markets under the banner of free trade and democratic freedoms.

The TTIP is a mandate for corporate plunder and, given recent revelations, for major polluters. It represents a pro-privatisation agenda that enshrines the privileges of the world’s most powerful corporations at the expense of ordinary people, the environment and the climate.

The ultimate aim of TTIP is to draw Europe closer to the US and divide the European continent by side-lining Russia. If events surrounding Ukraine tell us anything, it is that the US has driven

a wedge between Europe and Russia to prevent closer economic alignment between the two. TTIP is another piece of the global jigsaw that aims to cement US hegemony.

By using TTIP, it is now clear the US is attempting to drive its fossil fuel energy into Europe. At the same time, Washington is attempting to force Russia out from the European energy market. Russia has already had to abandon its South Stream pipeline project to Europe. Furthermore, by pushing for a pipeline to supply dollar-denominated energy from Qatar through Syria and on into Europe, the US can strengthen the dollar while further driving Russia from Europe. In the meantime, to remove Assad who is regarded as a barrier to this project, US-backed war and destabilisation has resulted in 250,000 Syrians being killed.

TTIP is clearly not about improving the lot of ordinary hundreds of millions of Europeans, just like events in Ukraine and Syria are not intended to benefit the mass of ordinary folk in those countries. Ultimately, TTIP must be viewed within the context of the wider geopolitical chess board that serves rich corporate interests.