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## The Empire Strikes Back: the Return of the WTO

By Polly Jones  
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The last time the World Trade Organisation met was in December 2013. Back then neither the negotiations on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) nor the campaign to stop TTIP had even started.

Trade seemed to be off the agenda and after years of stalled negotiations the WTO was expected to slowly become irrelevant.

The WTO is meeting again this week but this time in Nairobi and for the first time in Africa, and I will be there.

While there are some obvious similarities to previous WTO negotiations – fears that no agreement will be reached and entrenched positions of the global north and south – many other aspects are entirely different.

In the last two years, we have witnessed the rise of mega regional trade deals. TTIP is one such example of a potential trade deal between the US and the EU. But there are a number of other deals under negotiation:

- \* the Comprehensive Economic Trade Agreement (CETA) between Canada and the EU has been finalised and the text is waiting to be agreed by the European Parliament and national parliaments some time in 2016;

- \* the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) between the US and many Pacific rim countries was agreed in October 2015;

- \* the Trade In Services Agreement (TiSA) is in its 15th round of negotiations involving over 50 countries.

### **Profits reducing standards**

These deals have many similarities. They are designed to open up new markets for global corporations and create the conditions for them to be as lucrative as possible. Perceived barriers to trade, such as labour standards, food safety regulations and publicly provided services, are mostly to be reduced or removed.

Additional legal protection to safeguard corporate profits against any non-lucrative effects of government policy – such as raising the minimum wage or introducing plain packaging on tobacco products – will be introduced. And most importantly of course, the negotiations are held in secret and away from parliamentary scrutiny.

The rise of mega-regional trade deals is the direct response of neoliberal governments frustrated with the impasse in negotiations at the WTO.

Unable to secure agreements between the 162 countries which make up the WTO, countries including the UK, EU and US have decided to set their own agenda and begin negotiating the sort of neoliberal trade deals they wanted with other willing countries. Those countries who do not share this agenda can simply be left out of the negotiations, often countries from the global south.

Deals such as TTIP would include such a large proportion of world trade, that many have predicted mega-regional deals to herald the end of the WTO. After all, if most global trade can be managed through regional trade deals, what role is left for the WTO to play?

### **Meg-regional trade partnerships could resuscitate WTO**

What is interesting about next week's WTO ministerial meeting is that the rise of the mega-regional trade deal could breathe new life into the WTO if these deals can be brought into the WTO fold. This would be a tremendous result for the neoliberal governments, the UK included, which took these unpopular negotiations outside of the WTO to begin with.

It is possible this might come to pass if the US and EU successfully argue that issues common to many regional deals, such as investment rules, should be part of the WTO's future approach.

In the past, the WTO has agreed a set agenda of issues to be negotiated in one round of trade talks. Countries focus on these and only these issues until the negotiations are complete. But the current round of trade talks – often referred to as the '*Doha Development Round*' but far from reflecting the priorities of developing countries – has made little progress.

### **One law for the North and another for the South**

Just a few weeks ago, the US threatened to walk away from the WTO unless negotiations on the Doha Round stopped altogether and a new negotiating agenda were drawn up. This new agenda should include new issues, such as investment.

This is a major blow to countries in the global south which have been arguing for new trade rules governing food security and agriculture throughout the Doha Round.

A particular injustice has been the subsidies the EU and US provide to their farmers, while demanding that countries in the global south should not subsidise their farmers in the same way. WTO Director General, Roberto Azevedo, has urged the global south to be "*flexible*" and "*pragmatic*" in their response to this move by the US.

The EU's Trade Commissioner, Cecilia Malmström, believes that "*the Nairobi meeting can also do more to benefit the poorest and most vulnerable countries*" – demonstrating how countries in the global south could be split, with special and differential treatment reserved only for a smaller group of poorest and vulnerable countries.

However, many countries from across the global south have spoken publicly and vociferously about why longstanding trade rules on agriculture must not be set aside.

### **Above democracy? The UK's unelected trade minister**

The UK's delegation to the WTO is being led by new trade minister and Conservative heavyweight Lord Francis Maude. Lord Maude's involvement is a clear signal that the UK is taking the WTO ministerial meeting seriously, and has hopes of securing beneficial outcomes, possibly on TiSA, for the UK.

For the last week we have been asking our supporters to email Lord Maude, in his capacity as Trade Minister, about the WTO. Despite being a Trade Minister since May, he is yet to set up an email address for people to contact him directly and because he is not elected but sits in the House of Lords, he does not have any constituents to answer to.

This lack of accountability and public scrutiny is symptomatic of a fundamental problem with all trade deals.

To date no MP has access to any of the negotiating texts for TTIP. The negotiations on TiSA are shrouded in secrecy with MPs and the public relying on Wikileaks for information. Thus even the UK Parliament has no opportunity to scrutinise and amend the negotiating texts of trade deals which are being negotiated in its name by the EU.

Of course MPs can ask parliamentary questions, call debates and even hold select committee enquiries, such as the BIS inquiry on TTIP which criticised the government for making claims about the benefits of TTIP which could not be substantiated. But this is not good enough.

### **MPS in the dark with hands tied**

As it stands, the UK Parliament will only get a say on TTIP, CETA or any other deal once the negotiations are complete and even then simply the opportunity to say yes or no to the complete deal with no chance of making amendments.

Geraint Davies, MP for Swansea, has been doggedly raising the lack of scrutiny of TTIP and other trade deals in Parliament and secured a backbench debate on this last week. With TTIP dominating MPs' correspondence for many months, several MPs from across the political spectrum participated. It remains to be seen if the Government will act on their concerns.

It is clear that over the last decade trade has never been off the political agenda, it was simply being conducted away from public or parliamentary scrutiny.

It is up to all of us – the tens of thousands of trade activists around the UK, and the millions more around the world – to pull these deals out into the open.

We must expose their neoliberal content and challenge their guiding principle: that trade should put the interests of big business before the needs of people and the planet.