

WTO to Rule on World's Food

BY NADÈGE ADAM

In mid-May, the Canadian government announced that it would join the United States in a legal challenge against the European Union through the World Trade Organization (WTO). At issue is the current EU restriction on genetically engineered (GE) food exports.

In 1998, the EU instituted a moratorium on all GE crops because of significant consumer concern. Owing to the lack of scientific testing that would prove GE food safe for human consumption and for the environment, Europeans firmly rejected GE products. Europe's relationship with its food is deeply intertwined with its culture – a culture vastly different from North America's corporate-driven fast food culture.

But this moratorium has had severe repercussions for the countries that have heavily invested in genetic engineering. Canada is one of four countries that grow GE crops on a commercial scale. The European moratorium has resulted in a significant loss of market for Canadian canola, which has been genetically engineered since 1996. With Canadian governmental agencies considering introducing GE wheat into Canada, an even bigger market loss is looming on the horizon for agricultural products from Canada.

Rejecting the notion that GE food must first be proven safe, Canada and the U.S. are arguing that this moratorium is an illegal trade tactic. What's really at stake though is a multi-billion-dollar investment by the biotechnology companies over the last decade to develop GE crops. But the stakes are even higher for all of us who believe in the fundamental right to choose what we eat and seek to protect the integrity of our food supply.

At the last G8 meeting, which took place in Evian, France, Prime Minister Chrétien applied pressure on the Europeans; a Canadian official even said their moratorium was based on "phony science." U.S. President George W. Bush took this trade dispute a step further and

accused Europe of standing in the way of the "great cause of ending hunger" by banning GE crops, arguing that genetic engineering is a technology that could save millions of lives.

Yet several African countries enduring severe famine have rejected shipments of food aid because they contained GE products. This stand may be even more problematic for the biotechnology companies than the European moratorium because they have used the marketing strategy of GE food as a solution to world hunger

in order to combat vocal critics of this new science.

Countries like Zambia refused U.S. shipments of GE corn seed because of the myriad of unanswered questions regarding public health safety. They also do not want to jeopardize their access to European markets by exposing their crops to the likelihood of GE contamination. The reluctance of countries to risk their Euro-

pean market share is what many suspect motivated the U.S. to launch this WTO challenge against the EU.

But the truth is that GE food won't solve world hunger. Hunger is not due to food shortages, but rather to a lack of access to food. With 80 percent of malnourished children located in developing countries with food surpluses, the biotechnology industry's promise of increased food production rings hollow. Striking down the EU ban through the WTO will not help the hungry; rather, it will help the corporations to reap billions of dollars by forcing GE foods on the whole world.

Worldwide opposition to GE food remains firm. A ruling in favour of Canada and the U.S. would not change the determination of European consumers, farmers and grocers to avoid GE food. A WTO ruling profiting the biotech industry would serve to strengthen global opinion against not only GE food, but also the WTO itself.

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A recent anti-globalization protest against the G-8 in France.