

Confronting the G8 and G20



by Brent Patterson

The pressures of global capitalism and a failed model of world trade that have led to inaction on climate change, the loss of clean, accessible water, and rising corporate power will be confronted as Canada hosts the G8 and the G20 in Ontario June 25 to 27.

The G8 and G20 bring together government representatives from wealthy countries of the global North to discuss economic issues. The G8 includes Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, Japan, and a representative of the European Union. These leaders will be joined for the G20 by representatives of Australia, Brazil, China, India, Mexico, Argentina,

Indonesia, South Africa, South Korea, Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

WHAT WILL BE ON THE AGENDA?

Prime Minister Harper has said, “As hosts, our government will have considerable say over the agenda. It will be a tremendous opportunity to promote Canada’s values and interests; to advocate for open markets and trade opportunities; to assist on global action against global warming; and to champion values like freedom, democracy and human rights and the rule of law.”

However, the Council of Canadians believes the G8 and G20 will promote more “business as usual” rather than what is really needed, namely trade, climate and water justice.

TRADE

The G8, as well as the G5 countries of China, India, Brazil, Mexico and South Africa, have already committed to reaching an “ambitious and balanced” conclusion to the Doha round of World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiations in 2010.

We have been highly critical of the WTO agenda backed by the G8 and G20, and in particular the Doha round of talks. Council of Canadians Chairperson Maude Barlow has stated, “Economic globalization, led by the rich countries and their corporations, and the notion of unlimited growth behind the WTO is killing the world. Policies and institutions that promote endless growth and trade must end. The only way out of the ecological crisis the world faces is a different way of living, where trade and the economy serve communities, not the other way around. Sustainable trade and economic policies must prevail.”

Globe and Mail columnist Doug Saunders has written that Canadian and European officials are hoping for “a major push” at the G8 summit for the Canada-European Union Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement. The Council of Canadians opposes this agreement, which is said to be even bigger in scope than NAFTA. (Read more about this on pages 22 and 23.)

WATER

Prime Minister Harper, who opposes the recognition of water as a human right, has also stated that maternal health and infant mortality should be a top priority of the summits. He said that a solution to the “unacceptable” situation of 500,000 women who die during childbirth and 9 million children who die before the age of five every year wouldn’t be expensive, noting the cost of providing clean water, inoculations, better nutrition and training of health workers “is within the reach” of any of the G8 countries.

The Council of Canadians has been pushing the Harper government to adopt a UN resolution and make water a human right. “Recognizing water as a human right is vital to ensuring that governments address the reality of more than a billion people who are currently without access to clean water,” said Barlow. “A UN covenant on the right to water would serve as a common coherent body of rules for all nations, rich and poor, and clarify that it is the responsibility of the state to provide sufficient, safe, accessible and affordable water to all of its citizens.”

CLIMATE CHANGE

It has been reported by the media that while Canada’s official agenda for the end-of-June summits is not yet finalized, climate change will figure prominently at both meetings. Reports have noted that Environment Minister Jim Prentice “recognizes that the European Union has been advocating for Canada to highlight climate change at the summits to move the Copenhagen accord ahead. And he’s aware that the G20 summit will group the world’s biggest emitters, as well as key drivers of the Copenhagen accord: the United States, China, India, Brazil and South Africa.”

G20 countries have played a major role in contributing to the climate crisis. They need to make real commitments to carbon emission reductions and step up and help pay the bill for climate change. Estimates for helping the global South address climate change impacts range from \$195 billion up to \$400 billion needed yearly. Canada’s share has been projected at three to four per cent of the global total.

We believe the commitments on climate financing suggested in Copenhagen need to be increased and must be in addition to existing development aid funding. These commitments should not be placed in the hands of the World Bank or left to the whims of the market.

ECONOMIC RECOVERY

Economic recovery, banking regulations, global security, the spread of nuclear weapons and other security concerns are also likely to be discussed at these summits.

In terms of economic recovery, the G20 has already sidelined a more meaningful and inclusive discussion on the economy needed at the United Nations. Former UN General Assembly President Miguel d’Escoto Brockmann convened a critical United Nations conference on “The World Financial and Economic Crisis and Its Impact on Development” in June 2009. The president’s website stated, “The aim [of the conference] is to identify emergency and long-term responses to mitigate the impact of the crisis, especially on vulnerable populations, and initiate a needed dialogue on the transformation of the international financial architecture, taking into account the needs and concerns of all Member States.” Diplomats from the G20 called the summit a “joke” and a “waste of time.”

THE TOBIN TAX

It has also been reported in the media that the International Monetary Fund will present concrete proposals for a “Tobin

Tax” — a tax on global financial transactions meant to cushion exchange rate fluctuations — next April to G20 finance ministers before they are submitted to G20 leaders in June. Canada, the United States and the International Monetary Fund have already stated they oppose such a tax.

More than 10 years ago, in an open letter to all Members of Parliament, the Council of Canadians supported the call for a Tobin Tax. In 1999, the House of Commons passed a resolution directing the government to “enact a tax on financial transactions in concert with the international community,” but the government took little action on the matter. Such a fund could now be used to support needed spending on access to clean water and climate debt.

DEMOCRACY

The Council of Canadians questions the exclusivity of the G8 and G20 with their narrow global North focus. Instead we support (despite its various challenges and failings) the broader-based body of the United Nations, also referred to now more often as the G192.

WHAT WILL WE BE DOING?

In Huntsville we will be facing a \$6-million galvanized metal fence stretching 15 kilometres around the summit site. In Toronto, it is expected that the convention centre will be surrounded by a four-metre-high steel and concrete fence, with military helicopters overhead and sharpshooters on rooftops (as was the case with the G7 summit there in 1988). Reporters from around the world will converge to cover the summits from their base at the Congress Centre near Toronto’s international airport.

So far, our plans include holding a protest in Huntsville on the morning of Friday, June 25, and a major public forum with Maude Barlow and other high-profile international speakers including Naomi Klein, Vandana Shiva, Amy Goodman, Clayton Thomas-Mueller and Pablo Solon at Convocation Hall in Toronto that evening. We will take part in a major family-friendly march against the G20 on the afternoon of Saturday, June 26. We will also be participating in workshops and forums at the People’s Summit taking place in Toronto the weekend of June 18-20.

Visit our website at www.canadians.org for regular updates.

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