

Live from Geneva WTO Ministerial, 10 Years to Day of Battle in Seattle

By Lori Wallach, Director, Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch

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It's evening here in Geneva as the 7th ministerial of the WTO is opening - 10 years to the day that the Seattle WTO protests rocked the world.

Ten years after the world's most powerful governments and corporations failed to launch a massive WTO expansion at the 1999 Seattle WTO Ministerial, there still is not WTO expansion. BUT, there also is still no WTO turnaround - and the current rules are causing major damage on many fronts.

In fact, the damaging outcomes of the WTO's radical financial service deregulation requirements, agribiz-written food trade rules and more have resulted in most of the WTO member countries favoring negotiations to fix the existing WTO rules.

Thus, it was not surprising that the 300-plus press and civil society representatives who were just in a briefing presented by WTO Director General Pascal Lamy burst into repeated bouts of laughter when Lamy declared in short order that the WTO and the version of corporate globalization it implements had absolutely NOTHING to do with, respectively, the world financial crisis, the world food crisis or growing unemployment in numerous countries. In fact, the WTO was part of the cure to all of the above - oh, and the climate crisis also.

This after the WTO Director General had been directly contradicted on the financial deregulation the day before at a public event that included Lamy and the trade ministers of various countries, including Brazil and South Africa . Meanwhile, yesterday the G-33 bloc of countries focused on the food crisis also explicitly fingered the current WTO rules as a cause of the crisis, not a solution.

Lamy's comments came in response to questions about HOW the WTO intended to change its current rules to address their untenable outcomes. Instead, we were treated to the bizarre notion that the "Doha Round" - a watered-down-from-the-Seattle-plan-but-nonetheless-dangerous WTO expansion - is the answer to all ills. Yup, MORE WTO financial service dereg as the answer. More corporate control of food production and distribution as the answer.

Meanwhile, the topic of the WTO Doha Round is too toxic to put on the agenda here. Yes, this is a WTO summit at which negotiation is not on the agenda.

The WTO boosters knew that one more collapsed WTO summit, and the WTO expansion idea would certainly be toast. And while many WTO member countries do not want WTO expansion and have rejected the concept starting in Seattle, a small but extremely powerful group of countries has relentlessly pushed the idea - even as their Doha Round agenda has been largely in deadlock for the past 8 years.

In fact, it's been too dangerous to get together for a Doha Round ministerial for the past FOUR years. The WTO Hong Kong ministerial in 2005 - which would also have imploded but for the papering over of the continuing differences with talks punted back to Geneva - was the last full WTO ministerial. This has caused an increasing crisis of legitimacy for WTO, which is supposed to meet biannually in a conference

of minister-level officials who, per WTO mythology, set the organization's agenda and lend it the credibility of their governments. So, here we are.

No country is willing to be blamed for officially pulling the plug on the Doha Round, yet many would be extremely relieved if some other country or bloc of countries did so. The speeches now being given at the opening ceremony are a bit Alice in Wonderland with calls for completion of the Doha Round based on terms and conditions not related to what is on the table. The Bush WTO agenda is still standing in for the U.S. agenda with the rest of the countries waiting to know if Obama will take up the trade reform he promised on the campaign trail or revert to Bush's more-of-the-same.

Indeed, perhaps the most interesting point raised by a trade minister here came yesterday from Brazil's Celso Amorim, who asked why almost a year into the Obama administration, the U.S. WTO representatives were continuing to push the same extreme GOP WTO agenda.

Work to be done.

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