

MEDIA RELEASE

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Community organisations protest against US Australia Free Trade Agreement

Diverse community organisations protested today at the American Club, 131 Macquarie St, Sydney as Minister Mark Vaile promoted the Australia US Free Trade Agreement at a business breakfast meeting

"The US claims that the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme, the regulation of essential public services and the labelling of genetically engineered food are barriers to trade," Dr Patricia Ranald, of the Australian Fair Trade and Investment Network (AFTINET) said today. "These are vital social policies for Australians, and should not be on the table in trade negotiations," she added. AFTINET is a network of 67 community organisations concerned that social and environmental policy could be sacrificed in trade agreements.

Dr Peter Sainsbury, President of the Australian Public Health Association, explained: "Australia has one of the cheapest medicine bills in the industrialised world because the government uses the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme to control prices. US drug companies want higher prices. This would mean that sick people, mostly poorer and older people, will have to pay 2-3 times more every time they get a prescription filled – just like happens in the USA now."

The Rev Dr Ann Wansbrough from UnitingCare NSW.ACT added, "Essential services like health, education and water need to be publicly regulated and often provided by government to ensure they are accessible to all Australians. These are issues of social justice, and should not be treated as barriers to trade."

Greens Senator Kerry Nettle said " Surveys show that over 90% of Australian consumers want to know whether their food is genetically engineered. The US government wants Australia to remove our labelling requirements so American companies can sell GE food in Australia. This is outrageous."

Doug Cameron, National Secretary of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, said "Manufacturing jobs will be put at risk if Australia enters into a Free Trade Agreement with the US. The Australian economy is so small compared to the US that we have very little negotiating power, and this will result in many of our industries being threatened."

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