

Fair Trade Advocates not Terrorists

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Miranda Devine's attempt to smear critics of the international trade regime as terrorists (SMH 14/11/01) reads like a parody of cold war rhetoric.

More importantly it reveals an ignorance of the real problems in the international trade regime which have prompted criticism from a wide range of churches, unions, human rights groups and environmental organisations around the world. Far from being advocates of "holy war" these organisations support the need for trade and for international regulation of trade. But they want different and fairer trade rules.

In the lead up to the recent meeting World Trade Organisation (WTO) in Doha, Qatar, community organisations sought changes to WTO structures, and questioned the impact of its one-size-fits-all policies on very different societies. These concerns were shared with many developing country governments, which objected to the domination of WTO structures by the most powerful economies.

The WTO has agreements on services, agriculture, intellectual property and environment and health regulation. These can affect many areas of national policy. The WTO disputes panel can authorise trade sanctions. Panel decisions have challenged Australian policies on industry policy and quarantine rules.

One of the biggest debates at the Doha meeting was over the right of governments to obtain access to affordable medicines to treat epidemics like AIDS. Pharmaceutical companies had used the WTO agreement on Intellectual Property Rights to argue against this right. They took legal action against the South African government and persuaded the US government to complain against Brazil under WTO rules. These cases were only withdrawn after a global campaign by community organisations. At the Doha meeting developing country governments barely succeeded in getting agreement that government should have this right against strong opposition from the US government, which was heavily lobbied by pharmaceutical companies.

Community organisations want trade decision-making meetings to be open, democratic and to give more voice to developing countries. They want trade rules to be consistent with United Nations environmental, human rights and labour rights agreements. They want public goods like cultural activities, water services, public health and education to remain excluded from trade agreements so that governments can regulate in the public interest.

The Doha meeting did not address many of these issues, which are all areas of ongoing public policy debate. The fair trade movement will continue to campaign, lobby governments and conduct peaceful protests on these issues, like the rally attended by thousands of people in Sydney on November 13, also reported by the SMH on 14/11/01.

It will not be intimidated or stifled by attempts at smear tactics which have no basis in fact .