

TTIP must not 'wipe out' social and health rights in Europe

Written by Emma Woodford, Conny Reuter, Pierre Baussand and Jan Willem Goudriaan on 25 June 2014 in News

News

An EU-US trade agreement 'may seriously weaken' vital public services.



Next month the European commission will host a sixth round of EU-US trade talks on the transatlantic trade and investment partnership (TTIP): a free trade agreement that will eventually affect around 40 per cent of global trade by bringing together the world's two largest trading blocs.

At first glance, the enormity of this deal should be good news for people living in Europe given that further integration of transatlantic businesses could bring job opportunities and better consumer choices. Yet, without a swift change of direction in the way this deal is being negotiated, TTIP could wipe out hard-fought milestones in social protection at the stroke of a pen.

The partnership's possible impacts on social and health services could be dramatic. Despite the European commission's promises that there will be no 'race-to-the-bottom' to lower standards, there have been contradictory messages about whether public services - including social and health services - are excluded from the ongoing negotiations.

Reckless liberalisation of the EU-US trade, services and investments market may seriously weaken the provision of vital public services. The EU seems to be aware of the need to provide protection to social and health services, but it seems that a considerable number of member states are seeking to remove rules that underpin universal access to quality services.

Particularly worrying is the inclusion of an investor-state-dispute settlement (ISDS) mechanism - a highly technical component of this agreement that can leave EU member states at the mercy of international firms as corporations become empowered to sue governments outside the legal system for regulations that may impinge on future profits.

The ISDS may also cause a regulatory freeze across Europe as public authorities become reluctant to pass regulations that might affect transatlantic trade.

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The evident lack of transparency that characterises the TTIP talks is casting a long shadow over these negotiations. Without adequate civil society monitoring, the final version of the TTIP will resemble a pact among big corporations with little regard for public interest. As a starting point, the commission should publish the negotiating texts so that Europeans know what is being decided on our behalf.

We are not alone in thinking this. Article 14 of the EU treaty, the EU charter on fundamental rights and the overarching EU objective to reach a "social market economy" were established precisely to prevent the kind of blow to people's rights that TTIP is threatening to strike. Indeed, there has been little, if any, formal investigation into the social and health impacts of the agreement.

For decades the European Union has worked shoulder to shoulder with its Member states to establish the world's highest safeguards in terms of consumer protection and people's social and labour rights. This includes quality standards in public procurement which are now under threat as they could be regarded as non-tariff barriers to trade and risk removal.

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The TTIP is setting a precedent on how future trade negotiations are dealt with, making it all the more important that the commission and member states understand that health and social services cannot be run as a business.

Economic growth and job creation should not and will not be achieved at the expense of social rights and the undermining of the EU's welfare state model, in which solidarity and services in the general interest play a key role.

As Europeans signalled in last month's elections, a Europe that does not put people's rights and interests in the driving seat of policy making is a Europe that very few citizens will support.

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