

Protests against free trade agreements

NAPOLEÓN GÓMEZ URRUTIA

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A few days ago the Canadian Labour Congress, which has 3.3 million members, issued a joint statement of behalf of all its member unions in protest against the EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), demanding that the Canadian government should not to sign or ratify the CETA as planned on 21 October. The decision of the union leaders is in solidarity with serious questions being asked in Europe about the many aspects that have not been clarified and doubts surrounding the expected benefits.

The main aspects of this highly controversial trade agreement are very similar to those of its twin trade agreement, the Trans-Pacific Partnership or TPP. There are fundamental questions about the very flexible rules on investor rights contained in the agreement, as well as and the lack of protection for public services and the environment. Canadian union leaders are particularly concerned about health care and employment systems, noting that the CETA contains “fundamental weaknesses that favour corporate interests above the interests of Canadians,” in the words of Ken Neumann, National Director of United Steelworkers (USW) in Canada.

In Mexico there are similar and perhaps more complex concerns given the negative effects on the national economy and the welfare of the population. We have, however, lost the notion of the seriousness or our awareness of the critical and objective analysis of the effects of trade agreements that have been signed to satisfy the vanity of governments or the ambitions and interests of business groups. But we rarely hear serious, documented views in defence of the rights of our country and people to sovereignty, progress, real welfare and more and better opportunities for the majority of Mexicans, not just a few.

There are scarce or almost no objective and critical opinions voiced about the effects of these trade agreements on the part of public officials, business or even trade union leaders, the media and civil and social organizations, such that the results are obtained in practice, when the economic system is already more dependent or vulnerable, or when millions of jobs have been lost and poverty has soared to alarming levels.

Only some academic and research centres, or some intellectuals, occasionally analyse the origins and causes of exploitation, marginalization, inequality and the links between free trade policies and full openness to increasing investment and penetration by large international corporations and consortia of Mexico's business elite.

It is important to pause and really ask ourselves, as Canadian, European and other leaders are doing, so that we know and can report publicly on the likely effects of signing agreements such as NAFTA or TPP, or those concluded with other countries. We must specifically strengthen our capacity for



analysis and decision-making on how to anticipate, or correct, if our governments carry on signing these agreements, as well as how to put in order and streamline all the rules on the rights of investors, and how we should protect ourselves from the hidden privatization of public services, or investigate how to stop and regulate the abusive extension of pharmaceutical patents. Also how to control the power of public procurement of any service or government sector, including cases of states and municipalities that generally seek to promote the rights and local services against outside interests. It is also essential to include in such agreements a real mechanism to always respect and enforce labour rights.

The criticisms and fears in Canada, which should also be present in Mexico, are about what the job losses will be in the sectors of industry and manufacturing processes. As pointed out by Jerry Dias, president of UNIFOR (the Union for Canada) and Paul Meinema, Canadian national president of UFCW (the United Food and Commercial Workers Union): “CETA is a bad deal that will compromise the jobs of Canadian workers. We should not sign trade agreements such as CETA that are imbalanced and only serve the agendas of multinational corporations. Instead, we need balanced trade agreements that benefit all workers and the sectors in which they work.” Or as the Canadian leaders rightly put it, CETA is simply TPP through the back door.

If Mexico and those responsible for making these decisions do not stop, change, correct or cancel these agreements, then we will regret it, as we do today 22 years after the disastrous result of NAFTA. We all need to pay more attention, read between the lines of what politicians or businessmen tell us, use our critical analysis and speak our opinions considering the future, thinking like statesmen or women and not mere managers or employees of outside interests.