

Canada-EU trade accord could erode health care, say unions John Zarocostas

British Medical Journal article Published 10 May 2010, doi:10.1136/bmj.c2490 Cite this as: BMJ 2010;340:c2490 News Free trade talks currently under way between Canada and the European Union risk eroding the role of the public sector in the provision of health care on both sides of the Atlantic, say public service unions. The unions aired their concerns after they reviewed a leaked "secret" draft text of a proposed comprehensive economic and trade agreement between the EU and Canada, which has since been posted on the internet. "Although free trade may sound promising, such deals largely benefit huge multinational corporations which have identified public services such as health care, education, and public security as the next frontier for making profit," said Peter Waldorff, general secretary of Public Services International, an umbrella group representing more than 20 million civil servants belonging to 693 unions in 156 countries. "This agreement's draft text outlines an agenda focused on privatisation, deregulation, and domestic restructuring. Public procurement policies and the right to regulate in the public interest are under threat," he said. Carola Fischbach-Pyttel, general secretary of the European Federation of Public Service Unions, said, "We believe there is no need for a deal that allows corporations to challenge local government policies on purchasing or regulation." The unions note that provisions of the draft would prevent municipal governments from applying local or ethical procurement strategies. They also point out that a controversial dispute resolution mechanism is proposed, similar to the one used under the North American Free Trade Agreement between Canada, Mexico, and the United States that has permitted corporations to sue governments for compensation over public health and environmental policies that limit the role of corporations. A spokesman for the EU's trade commissioner declined to comment on the criticisms, saying that as a rule the commission does not comment on leaked documents. Canada's minister of international trade, Peter Van Loan, said in a keynote speech on 30 April: "We also need to remind Canadians that, like all our trade agreements, an agreement with the European Union would exclude public services such as health, education, and social services." He added, "It would also have no effect on the ability of governments at all levels to regulate in the public interest." However, public service unions want to see such agreements including airtight guarantees that public services in health and education will not be

challenged. "Provisions for health and education should be exempted from clauses on public procurement or fair competition," said Jorge Mancillas, health services officer for Public Services International. He said that such an exemption clause was needed to prevent private companies using fair competition clauses to challenge the right of public entities to provide healthcare services or to challenge the procurement of public services. Dr Mancillas said that provisions in the proposed agreement concerning intellectual property were also of concern and that moves by corporations to extend patent rights could limit the availability of cheaper generic drugs. So far negotiators at the talks, launched in 2009, have held three rounds of discussions, and new rounds are due to take place in July and October, with a goal to reach a final agreement in 2011, senior transatlantic diplomats said. Spokesmen for the Canadian government and the EU say that an economic and trade agreement would seek to maximise new opportunities for economic growth. Both Brussels and Ottawa have debriefed interested groups after each round, but public service representatives say they have not been fully engaged or consulted. "Ottawa is very vague about the negotiations," said Blair Redlin, a researcher with the Canadian Union of Public Employees. "In the debriefings they don't tell us much. The whole process is not very transparent. There should be public debate-they are not really dealing with us." Cite this as: BMJ 2010;340:c2490

The leaked draft text of the comprehensive economic and trade agreement is available at [www.tradejustice.ca-><http://www.tradejustice.ca>].

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