

Interview with Larry Brown on Canada, Trade Deals and the Threat to Our Public Services



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(Wednesday, May 21, 2014) The next 'interviewee' in our series of conversations is Larry Brown, National Secretary-Treasurer of the Canadian National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE), and chair of Public Services International's (PSI) Public Sector Working Group. He is giving Wednesday's keynote speech on trade, so we wanted to pick his brains about the raft of international trade agreements that are currently under negotiation.

But first we started by asking him a little about Canada, which has had a right-wing government over the last eight years that has viciously attacked public services and public-sector employees. Larry explained how NUPGE has used many avenues to resist these attacks, from political pressure and public education, to going as far as legal challenges in the courts. The Canadian government has been pushing the same neo-liberal, austerity agenda as we are facing in Europe, and NUPGE-s

strategy has been to shift focus from solely on collective bargaining and wage agreements to the 'bigger economic picture.' They have run a highly successful education campaign, 'All Together,' which has trained union members to discuss wider economic issues around austerity and cuts. The result is a kind of cascade effect, with members spreading the message that the fault for the crisis doesn't lie with the public sector and that an alternative economic policy is not only possible but necessary.

Canada has been something of a laboratory for this new breed of 'trade agreements.' It was exposed to the ravaging effects of NAFTA, which caused the loss of 650,000 manufacturing jobs in Canada alone, and is now part of a new agreement (CETA) in the late stages of negotiation with the EU. Larry thinks that a better name for them would be 'corporate constitutions,' because these treaties have very little to do with trade and an awful lot to do with the granting of corporate rights at the expense of governments' right to regulate.

The Investor-State Dispute Settlement (ISDS) mechanism, that is widely expected to be in CETA (though we can't be sure because the text is still secret) allows foreign companies to sue states for loss of earnings, in supra-national tribunals, when government regulation might negatively impact the private company. The right of governments to legislate to protect the environment, to expand services or to remunicipalise public utilities is thus severely threatened. There has even been a case in Canada of a Canadian company registering in the US in order to challenge the Quebecois government through NAFTA, despite the fact that this facility is technically only available to US corporations. But ISDS is not the only problem with CETA, or for that matter with the Trans-Atlantic Trade deal (the infamous TTIP) currently under negotiation.

If we succeed in excluding ISDS from CETA it'll still be a bad deal, but it'll be 25% less bad. The problem is the ratchet effect: the level of liberalisation included in these deals only goes one way. The last treaty is the starting point for the negotiations of the next. So if you're worried about TTIP, you should be worried about what's in CETA, because everything in CETA will definitely be included in TTIP.

[You can watch a short interview with Larry on YouTube by clicking here.](#)

Also [watch the interview with Nick Crook from British union, UNISON](#), who gives specific examples of the threats the TTIP and TISA trade deals pose to public

services.

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