

February 17th, 2015

Dear Representative/Senator:

As religious bodies and faith-based organizations, we write today to ask you to oppose fast track trade promotion authority for any trade agreement currently being negotiated. Now is the time for Congress to ensure that our trade policies reflect the highest moral values and promote the common good. We ask that you oppose fast track so that trade agreements receive a fair hearing in the public square, protect people living in poverty, promote the dignity of all workers and responsibly protect God's Creation.

Trade must be mutually beneficial to all countries and peoples, particularly those living in marginalized communities, not just the wealthy. We are living in a time of significant global inequality, and trade policy must be aimed at promoting the wellbeing of all. Given the world's wealth, it burdens our collective conscience that hundreds of millions of people in our global community lack adequate food, clean water, shelter, healthcare and education. Many of our partners throughout the world witness the impact of harmful trade agreements on the people we serve. We see children who can't receive life-saving medicines because they are too costly and rural farmers who lose their livelihoods because their corn can't compete with imports from industrialized countries.

Our faith traditions call for community participation in the democratic process because we believe this is the only way to ensure all people have a meaningful opportunity to participate in the creation of good policies. "Fast track" is a broken and undemocratic process because it privileges the views of powerful global corporations in defining the terms of trade agreements, while excluding voices of those adversely impacted. This impedes progress towards a more just world.

Unlike trade agreements of the past aimed primarily at tariff reductions, the scope of trade discussions today is unprecedented. Trade agreements of the past two decades, and policies proposed in current trade negotiations, negatively affect public health, including access to lifesaving medicines, and environmental and financial regulatory policies.

Trade agreements include non-transparent trade tribunals outside of ordinary and publicly accountable judicial systems that allow multinational companies to sue governments for enforcing their own domestic laws on public health and the environment for alleged lost profits. Trade policy should not allow big companies an ability to avoid responsibility for environmental degradation and public health violations such as contamination of drinking water, lead poisoning, and denying access to life saving medicines. This is not progress. It contradicts fundamental moral principles.

As people of faith, we call on all nations and governments to uphold the dignity of all people. Yet modern trade agreements have harmed people, especially the most vulnerable in the United States and globally. Twenty years later, we have witnessed the impact of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on communities in Mexico. An estimated two million farmers and agricultural workers were displaced from their farming livelihoods in Mexico. While some manufacturing jobs were created after NAFTA, many of these were short-lived as companies later left in search of even lower wages. The loss of jobs in the agrarian sector is one factor linked to the increase in Mexican migration to the United States in the decade following NAFTA and, more recently, from Central America following the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA).

We should learn from the consequences of NAFTA and CAFTA and not just simply repeat the mistakes of the past. Traditional fast track authority is not consistent with democratic values of our country and the moral values of our faith communities.

Having a full discussion of trade agreements will allow all voices of those affected to be heard. Any new grant of authority should allow for an open Congressional process, ensure broad consultation, transparency, meaningful public participation, and require that Congress certify that negotiating objectives for labor and the environment have been met before the President signs any agreement.

Trade, like the rest of the economy, must be a means of lifting people out of poverty and ensure a country's ability to protect the health, safety and wellbeing of their citizens and the planet. In recognition of your sacred task of stewardship over people and policies, we ask you to oppose fast track trade promotion authority for any trade agreement currently being negotiated.

Sincerely,

American Friends Service Committee
American Jewish World Service
Catholics in the Alliance for the Common Good
Center of Concern
Church of the Brethren, Office of Public Witness
Church World Service
Columban Center for Advocacy and Outreach
Society of the Divine Word, Chicago Province, Justice and Peace Committee.
Holy Cross International Justice Office
Conference of Major Superiors of Men (CMSM)
Faith in Public Life
Franciscan Action Network
Friends Committee National Legislation
Leadership Conference of Women Religious
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns

Medical Mission Sisters Alliance for Justice
Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate - Justice, Peace & Integrity of Creation office
Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity
National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd
NETWORK, a National Catholic Social Justice Lobby
Pax Christi USA
Presbyterian Church USA
Presbyterian Peace Fellowship
Provincial Council of the Cleric of St. Viator (Viatorians)
Provincial Council, Priests of the Sacred Heart, US Province
Sisters of Charity of New York Office of Peace, Justice and Integrity of Creation
Sisters of the Holy Cross - Congregation Justice Committee
Sisters of Mercy of the Americas - Institute Leadership Team
Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur
United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries
United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society
Western Province, Congregation of the Mission
Xaverian Brothers Generalate

*The Interfaith Working Group on Trade and Investment is a group committed to asserting a stronger presence of communities of faith in public policy discussions on trade and investment.
Contact Chloe Schwabe (Chair) at 202-841-1780 or cschwabe@maryknoll.org*