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Global issues

The increasing power of multinational corporations and the increasing pervasiveness of the capitalist system around the world is commonly called "globalisation." Properly speaking, this should be called capitalist globalisation, since there can be other types of globalisation, such as of science and nonviolence.

Capitalist globalisation includes increasing trade, rapid movement of investment capital, freely adjustable exchange rates, movement of production to low wage regions of the world, agreements on tariffs and other trade issues, global communication systems, increasing size of multinational corporations, and greater homogeneity in markets. Globalisation involves a shift in power from local communities and small-country governments to multinational corporations and the governments of the most powerful economies.

Global marketing means that local products and tastes are challenged by products and tastes from multinational corporations, such as Coca-Cola, Hollywood movies, synthetic pesticides, Toyota vehicles and professional golf. Along with products comes the attraction of a consumer lifestyle.

Critics of globalisation have argued that it largely benefits the rich while impoverishing the poor within both developing and developed countries, undermines local traditions and reduces cultural diversity, fosters wants that cannot all be satisfied, imposes unsustainable burdens on the environment and reduces public accountability. In short, globalisation intensifies and spreads some of the worst aspects of capitalism without doing much to foster the social infrastructure and habits that mitigate capitalism's excesses. There is globalisation of corporate power but relatively little globalisation of philanthropy, civil liberties, occupational health and safety or humanisation of work.

Opposition to capitalism thus entails opposition to capitalist globalisation. However, stopping, slowing or transforming globalisa-

tion is only part of the struggle. It is not much use opposing the power of multinational corporations if the alternative is supporting exploitative local corporations or a repressive government.

Globalisation is especially damaging for poor people in developing countries.¹ Indeed, it can be seen as the latest manifestation of centuries of exploitation, beginning with imperialism and colonialism—in which political subjugation was the foundation for economic exploitation—and followed, after colonies gained independence, by neocolonialism, in which economic exploitation continued via investment, loans, trade and corruption. The notorious “structural adjustment programs” imposed by the World Bank on debtor countries have forced them to adhere to a neoliberal economic model, subordinating local economies to the markets of rich countries. Loans, unproductive development projects and massive high-level corruption have perpetuated economic subordination. Globalisation is a continuation and more efficient form of this pattern of exploitation. These problems are well documented.² The question is what to do about them.

Although globalisation is presented as a rational process, it contains many contradictions. For example, the ideology of the market is that there should be free movement of all factors involved in production, but labour is not allowed the same country-to-country mobility as capital. Another myth of market economies is that economic failure is punished by bankruptcy, but in numerous cases large corporations in rich countries are propped up by governments rather than allowed to collapse. When governments of small countries cannot pay their debts, they are not allowed to go bankrupt—which would mean that foreign banks and governments would lose their money. Instead, structural adjustment programmes are imposed so that the people of the country are forced to pay the debt.

Nonviolent action against globalisation can occur in all sorts of ways, from protests against McDonald’s in India to setting up of local money systems. To illustrate the potential of global-local campaigning, three issues are examined here: the Multilateral Agreement on Investment, genetically modified organisms and free software.

The Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI)³

The MAI sought to codify a set of investment “rights” for corporations. The idea was that when multinational corporations deemed that regulations in a foreign country interfered with their “freedom” to compete in the marketplace, they could use the MAI to challenge them. Government authority to regulate with regard to environmental, employment, consumer and other issues would be curtailed. In an attempt to remove all barriers to free flow of capital, the agreement would have forced signatory countries to treat foreign competitors and investors as the equals of national companies and investors. This had implications for social welfare, the arts, research, non-profit organisations and much more.

As an exercise in working towards equalising the investment conditions faced by multinational corporations across the globe, the MAI probably would have brought about a “lowest common denominator” in the area of environmental, consumer and labour laws, overriding more protective legislation. While the proposal spelt out more certainty for investors, it meant further uncertainty for marginalised workers and the poor who, in many countries, are reliant on subsidised food, also under threat from the MAI.

In 1995, a draft MAI was prepared by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), representing the 29 wealthiest countries. Most of this work was done in secret.

A wide cross-section of groups opposed the MAI for a variety of reasons.⁴ The opposition included unions, environmental groups and green parties, some other small political parties, church groups, consumer and aid organisations. While there was certainly some right-wing opposition, for instance the One Nation political party in Australia and racist groups in the Netherlands, the bulk of the activism came from left-wing and socially progressive groups who generally saw the MAI as an attack on human rights and state sovereignty. They anticipated that it would further erode environmental and worker protection and indigenous people’s rights, as well as restricting the means for defending them.

Defending state sovereignty against corporate domination has its down side: governments, after all, frequently act against the interests of citizens and the environment, including when supporting local capitalist interests. Most social justice activists involved in the anti-MAI campaign opposed both national and global oppression, but felt

amply justified in targeting the MAI because it would have undermined socially beneficial national legislation while doing little to reduce state-level oppression.

In 1997, a photocopy of the MAI draft was leaked to Global Tradewatch, a citizens' organisation based in the USA. Using electronic mail and the World Wide Web, Global Tradewatch disseminated the information to numerous organisations, commencing a chain reaction that involved more than 600 groups worldwide.

There were public meetings, campaign meetings, ringing up radio stations, writing to newspapers, fundraising, placing newspaper advertisements, rallies and much more. Thus global networking through the Internet worked synergistically with local actions. Eventually action was significant enough to generate attention in the mainstream media and alert a wider public to the issues. The result was that the MAI was stopped, though versions of it are still on the global corporate agenda.

1. Does the campaign help to

- undermine the violent underpinnings of capitalism, or
- undermine the legitimacy of capitalism, or
- build a nonviolent alternative to capitalism?

The MAI would have involved powerful international enforcement of its trade provisions, including strong trade and other sanctions against violators. Underlying this enforcement is the power of the wealthiest states, especially the US government. So in essence the MAI would have internationalised the use of coercive power—backed ultimately by the military and police—to maintain a globalised capitalism. The anti-MAI campaign thus helped oppose an expansion of the violent underpinnings of capitalism.

The MAI would have given much greater legitimacy to the exercise of power by global capital. The anti-MAI campaign's success helped prevent this greater legitimacy, while the campaign itself challenged the legitimacy of globalisation. On the other hand, it did not seriously question national capital.

2. Is the campaign participatory?

Based on global networking and local organising, involving hundreds of organisations without a "central command," the campaign was

highly participatory. Just about anyone who could tap into the networking process could choose to be involved. The contrast with the highly secretive and centralised process involved in promoting the MAI was stark.

3. Are the campaign's goals built in to its methods?

Among opponents, the only obvious common goal was stopping the MAI. Since the opponents did not use investment agreements as a technique, at this trivial level the goals were built into the methods. As for other goals, opponents had enormous differences: some wanted to protect national cultural industries, others to build alternatives to capitalism and yet others to stop immigration and investment from certain foreign countries. A separate assessment of methods and goals would be needed for different groups within the anti-MAI coalition.

4. Is the campaign resistant to cooption?

This question is not easy to answer. The MAI became the symbol of globalisation that needed to be opposed, so it is unlikely to be resurrected under that name, since it would again become the target for a global campaign. Because it was promoted in secret and was a discrete, named proposal, it provided an ideal target for opposition. So in this sense the campaign was resistant to cooption.

But other, more incremental processes of globalisation may eventually give the same outcome as the MAI, such as transnational corporate mergers, global marketing strategies and the transfer of production to regions with cheaper labour. Campaigns against these are more open to cooption, though the bigger problem is not cooption but that these processes have a lower profile, operate gradually and do not seem to be so obviously unacceptable. Creeping corporate domination is more difficult to oppose than identifiable initiatives such as the MAI. The existence of the name "globalisation", in as much as it has become shorthand for increasing global corporate domination, helps in mobilising opposition.

The anti-MAI campaign pitted two types of globalisation: that based on large hierarchical organisations operating in secrecy and the other based on a variety of community groups promoting public education and citizen action. The campaign had the great strength

that, through a participatory process, it forestalled a great expansion in the coercive backing for international capital. However, to duplicate this success by stopping more gradual processes of globalisation is much more challenging. Many of the goals of the MAI are being achieved, more gradually, through individual cases brought before the World Trade Organisation, a process that is not so easily susceptible to activist intervention.

Corporate ownership of life forms

Scientists can now replace components of the genetic structure of plants and animals, creating new organisms that could not have been bred through conventional means. For example, a gene from a fish can be spliced into the genetic sequence for a cow or genes from bacteria can be put into corn. By careful choice and through experimentation, new types of organisms can be created with desired characteristics, such as cows with less fat in their milk or corn that grows well in acidic soils. The new organisms are described as genetically modified and the enterprise is called genetic engineering or biotechnology.⁵

Biotechnology has the potential for enormous human benefit, for example by cheaply producing life-saving drugs and creating crops that are more nutritious. However, many of the actual uses of biotechnology are designed to primarily serve vested interests. Three factors are important in this.

First, biotechnology, though initially funded by governments, is now largely a corporate endeavour and is oriented to corporate imperatives. Instead of focussing on producing crops that are more nutritious or can readily be cultivated by poor farmers, corporations such as Monsanto have designed crops that are highly resistant to pesticides. That means more sales of pesticides. Another innovation is crops whose seeds are not fertile. That means that farmers cannot set aside seed from the crop to sow the next season's crop, but must buy new seed from the corporation.

Second, biotechnology is highly reliant on experts and sophisticated technology. It is not a "people's technology" that can be used by ordinary farmers or community groups. The dependence of biotechnology on expertise makes it easily recruited for corporate and government agendas.

Third, there are serious potential risks in biotechnology. Plants have been created that produce the naturally occurring pesticide Bt. However, this could well accelerate the development of Bt-resistant pests, which would be devastating for organic farming, which relies on judicious spraying of Bt. Even more seriously, a new genetically modified organism could become a deadly disease. The risk may be small but the consequences could be enormous. This suggests that biotechnology, in its present form at least, is intrinsically unsuited to being a people's technology.

There has been concern about biotechnology from its beginnings. In early years, some scientists had serious reservations and this led to a period of tight controls. However, government regulations gradually became laxer in the 1970s and 1980s. In the 1990s, popular opposition began to develop in many countries. In countries like India, farmers' organisations have opposed the genetic exploitation of collective resources. Pharmaceutical companies have searched through the natural genetic resources of developing countries and, when finding something that can be commercialised, have sought patents on the genetic sequences. The companies are then in a position to sell the organism back to the country, sometimes with minimal transformation. In this way, the centuries of community wisdom that went into selecting and developing a certain species are appropriated by corporations, a process that has been called "biopiracy."⁶

In developed countries, critics have raised the alarm about genetically modified organisms and there is increasing concern among consumers. Corporate promoters oppose the labelling of genetically modified food, since this would allow consumers to reject it more easily. Activists and most consumers favour labelling, which would open genetically modified food to boycott. Some activist groups have engaged in sabotage, for example by destroying genetically modified crops, including experimental plots.

These campaigns combine concerns in two related areas. One is about genetic engineering, with its potential risks and corporate agenda. The other is about corporate takeover of genetic resources through patenting. Patenting gives an exclusive right to market an invention for a period of time, and is a type of "intellectual property." Biotechnology as a corporate enterprise depends on patenting.

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Patenting of life forms and the development of new life forms that are controlled by corporations can be considered to be an expansion of the capitalist system to a new domain. The property system is extended to cover genetics. If this became established, it would be a wider scope for the violent underpinnings of capitalism—which are essential to protect corporate property—and a broader legitimacy to capitalism as the appropriate framework for handling the new realm of genetic modification. Therefore, campaigns against corporatisation of life forms can be considered a challenge to both the violent foundation and the legitimacy of capitalism, in the sense that they seek to prevent these becoming wider and deeper than before.

2. Is the campaign participatory?

Participation is low in some forms of opposition, such as lobbying of governments and working through international agencies and professional associations. It is potentially very high in farmers' protests—rallies in India against multinational takeovers in agriculture have attracted up to half a million people—and consumer boycotts.

3. Are the campaign's goals built in to its methods?

Opponents of genetically modified organisms do not use such organisms as part of their campaigning, so methods and goals are compatible in a trivial sense. On the other hand, some opponents of the corporate appropriation of the products of indigenous communities have argued for collective intellectual property rights for indigenous cultures, a clear case of fighting fire with fire rather than water.⁷ While such an approach may achieve the goal of protecting indigenous culture, it may also give greater legitimacy to intellectual property generally.

4. Is the campaign resistant to cooption?

A campaign to oppose all genetically modified food is hard to coopt, but a campaign to label such food could readily be coopted by corporations agreeing to labelling, but then winning over consumers by low prices, advertising, special deals or attractive packaging.

Tobacco companies opposed having health warnings on cigarettes packets but were able to maintain sales after warnings were required by law. Similarly, biotechnology companies may be able to overcome consumer resistance, though that remains to be seen.

Cooptation might also be possible through public participation in systems for evaluating genetically modified products. For example, farmer representatives might be brought onto government agriculture policy committees. However, these forms of cooptation currently seem both unlikely to occur and unlikely to work.

In summary, opposition to corporatisation of life forms is a challenge to the expansion of the capitalist system to a new realm. There are many ways to oppose this expansion, including distributing information, lobbying, organising rallies and destroying genetically modified crops. Depending on the methods used and the ways campaigns are run, there can be greater or lesser degrees of participation, means-ends compatibility and risk of cooptation.

Corporatisation of life forms is just one of the areas where capitalism is expanding on the basis of monopolies over the use of information: so-called intellectual property, which might be better described as monopoly privilege. The major industries dependent on this include pharmaceuticals, filmed entertainment (especially Hollywood), software and publishing. Property rights in the use of intellectual material are especially hard to justify since, once produced, it is cheap and easy to make copies. This situation is normally a justification for making such products public goods. Ownership is not needed to benefit from reading a poem. Even if a million other people have copies, the original version is not diminished. This is quite unlike shoes or houses, where making multiple copies requires considerable labour and resources.

In an economy based on cooperative use of resources, intellectual products would be freely available. This is far more efficient than the capitalist system of buying and selling rights to intellectual products, which creates an artificial scarcity and hinders both use and innovation. The public systems of everyday language and scientific knowledge work extremely well. Private ownership of words and formulas would reduce their use value, dynamism and flexibility.

However, the belief that intellectual producers deserve royalties and other benefits from their creative work is deep seated, especially among intellectuals, and allows corporate expropriation of intellectual work to occur without much organised opposition. The development of campaigns against a range of types of intellectual property is an important task for anticapitalist struggle.⁸

Free software

One of the most highly developed challenges to capitalist-owned intellectual property is the free software movement.⁹ Companies develop software for sale, and their efforts are characterised by secrecy, competition and high cost to consumers. Members of the free software movement develop software to give away. They make the code openly available, allowing others to scrutinise it and propose improvements. To prevent corporations copyrighting or otherwise controlling the software, it is protected by so-called “copyleft,” which allows others to use and adapt it freely but not to claim any exclusive rights to it.

The free software movement has been amazingly effective. Through voluntary contributions from programmers around the world, a vast library of free software has been produced. The most widely known is the operating system Linux, which has become a serious challenge to commercial software—primarily because it is so much more reliable—but there is much else available.

Considering its great achievements, free software has low visibility. A reader of the computer pages of newspapers—where the advertising comes from computer companies—would hardly know free software exists, much less that there is as much of it available as proprietary software.

Free software can be conceptualised as a campaign, though many of its participants are involved simply because they enjoy programming challenges.

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Free software is a potent challenge to the legitimacy of capitalism because it shows that voluntary, cooperative work can produce better

products than some of the wealthiest corporations in the world. Free software is also part of a nonviolent alternative to capitalism, especially by challenging the expansion of the intellectual property system to cover software.

2. Is the campaign participatory?

Participation in development of free software is on the basis of competent contributions: programmers can be involved if they have something useful to contribute. Others can be involved by using and promoting free software.

3. Are the campaign's goals built in to its methods?

The methods are much the same as the goals: development and use of free software. The main contradictory element is the use of copyright law to create "copyleft" in order to protect free software from commercial interlopers.

4. Is the campaign resistant to cooption?

The concept of free software is often confused with "shareware" which, though it sounds like a communal product, is actually commercial software that is available on a trial basis. Computers often are sold with software provided "free" (allegedly at no extra cost), but usually this is commercial software. In these ways the concept of free software is confused and appropriated by commercial software options.

Computer companies can adopt some free software as part of their own software packages, thus embedding the "free" elements in a commercial environment and obscuring the possibility of a more complete package of free software.

Much free software is written by programmers in their spare time who in their "day job" produce commercial software in a far more alienated environment. If computer firms could make programming more participatory and stimulating, programmers might not be so attracted to the opportunity to be involved with free software. However, since there are thousands of programmers contributing to free software worldwide, this form of cooption would need to be widespread to be effective in slowing the free software movement.

In summary, the free software movement is quite a challenge to capitalism, especially to the expansion of the property system to software. It combines means and ends effectively. As a practical alternative, it is participatory for programmers and software users while ensuring the highest quality products.

Global-local campaigning

Capitalism has operated in a national mode for a long time, with rival governments defending the interests of national capital. Internationalism—for example, the fostering of free trade—is usually only in the interest of the most powerful capitalist countries. That continues to be the case today, with corporate globalisation being promoted most vigorously by the governments of the US and other wealthy countries.

The socialist movement, in contrast, was internationalist from its start in the 1800s. The idea was that workers had common interests and would unite against their common oppressors, the capitalists. In practice, nationalism was often a stronger force, especially in the case of war. Prior to World War I, working class organisations were pledged to oppose war between states, but after the outbreak of war, internationalist ideals were forgotten as workers volunteered to fight against their counterparts in enemy countries.

As corporate globalisation proceeds, the need for globalisation of opposition increases, but this inevitably involves action in local situations. Campaigns against the MAI and against corporate control over life forms are two examples of campaigns that can be described as both global and local. Trade agreements and patents on life forms have global implications and the proponents of these initiatives plan on a global scale. Therefore opponents need to operate globally as well. This includes targeting international forums, coordinating actions in different parts of the world and trying to meld together participants from a range of countries and constituencies. To achieve this, a local dimension is vital. The impacts of corporate globalisation are felt most acutely in local communities, and it is in such communities that global campaigns must be built. Without local participation and initiative, campaigners operating at the level of international meetings and media can easily lose touch with grass-roots concerns and become more susceptible to cooption.

There is nothing all that new about global-local campaigning. Colonialism was a process of international exploitation, and independence movements were commonly aided by sympathisers and support groups within the colonial power. Many workers' struggles have had international dimensions, and the struggle against nuclear power has involved national movements with international networking. But with corporate globalisation, global impacts are becoming more significant in many areas.

In between the global and the local are a host of intermediate scales, including national and regional and all sorts of networks. This means that there is increasing organisational complexity in campaigning. Making campaigns participatory is an extra challenge when groups from around the world and from different cultures are involved.

Notes

1 John Madeley, *Big Business, Poor Peoples: The Impact of Transnational Corporations on the World's Poor* (London: Zed Books, 1999).

2 Richard J. Barnet and John Cavanagh, *Global Dreams: Imperial Corporations and the New World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994); William Greider, *One World, Ready or Not: The Manic Logic of Global Capitalism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997); David C. Korten, *When Corporations Rule the World* (London: Earthscan, 1995); Jerry Mander and Edward Goldsmith (eds.), *The Case Against the Global Economy and for a Turn toward the Local* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1996).

3 Portions of this section are adapted from Wendy Varney and Brian Martin, "Net resistance, net benefits: opposing MAI," *Social Alternatives*, Vol. 19, No. 1, January 2000, pp. 47-52.

4 David Wood, "The international campaign against the Multilateral Agreement on Investment: a test case for the future of globalization?," *Ethics, Place and Environment*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2000, pp. 25-45.

5 For critical views, see for example Kristin Dawkins, *Gene Wars: The Politics of Biotechnology* (New York: Seven Stories, 1997); Michael W. Fox, *Beyond Evolution: The Genetically Altered Future of Plants, Animals, the Earth—and Humans* (New York: Lyons Press, 1999); Brewster Kneen, *Farmageddon: Food and the Culture of Biotechnology* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 1999); Vandana Shiva, *Stolen*

Harvest: The Hijacking of the Global Food Supply (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000); Martin Teitel and Kimberley A. Wilson, *Changing the Nature of Nature: Genetically Engineered Food* (London: Vision, 2000).

6 Vandana Shiva, *Biopiracy: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge* (Totnes, Devon: Green Books, 1998).

7 Tom Greaves (ed.), *Intellectual Property Rights for Indigenous Peoples: A Sourcebook* (Oklahoma City: Society for Applied Anthropology, 1994).

8 For some ideas about campaigning against intellectual property, see Brian Martin, "Against intellectual property," in *Information Liberation* (London: Freedom Press, 1998), pp. 29-56.

9 Free Software Foundation, 59 Temple Place, Suite 330, Boston MA 02111-1307, USA; gnu@gnu.org; <http://www.gnu.org/>.