

GATS, privatization, health and education in Canada

Theresa Wolfwood

I would like to thank you for inviting me here and I bring greetings from sisters and colleagues in Canada and in movements there. We are here today and we are not alone! Many thanks, Maria and all the workers, for making this important gathering possible. Ellen Diederich's display is excellent; do take time to look at it. And some of these banners were made by my banner teacher, Thalia Campbell of Wales, and it is great to connect with her here.

Back in the 1980's when we were suddenly told we could not afford a government that served society, that we had to be "lean and competitive", there was a panel on the then being negotiated Free Trade Agreement of Canada-USA. The fashionable fallacy, "There is No Alternative" was posed to the panellists. A Nicaraguan said: "For us, Canada is the Alternative. You have an equitable society with structures and services for your people that we seek to achieve."

Alas, Nicaraguans are struggling to just exist, now, after a USA-backed war and economic disasters wrought by USA-backed politicians and global institutions. And in Canada, we are also seeing the loss of our enviable achievements in social justice and services. Only now do we realize that a right gained, must be a right, constantly maintained. The latest assault on our society comes via GATS.

The General Agreement on Trade in Services is a further development of "free trade" as advanced by the World Trade Organization. In its 2000 version, it covers all transactions by governments, going well beyond the free movement of resources, goods and currency under WTO, NAFTA and the proposed FTAA.

It intrudes into the basic services that many of us, particularly Canadians, have believed are the responsibility of government to its electorate, the citizens. All government regulations re services and supply of services are subject to GATS scrutiny. Government services that are part of a range that includes private services are subject to GATS- particularly if they can be seen to be in competition. It is designed to grow and expand its scope.

Even our enthusiastic WTO ambassador admits that it includes many areas previously considered as national only. And it will be difficult for later governments to undo much of GATS commitment by a previous government. This really implies a drastic threat to democracy and citizens' ability to affect policy change through elections and laws at all levels. In Canada international agreements signed by the national government have profound and specific effects on the provincial and municipal levels. In Canada, provinces are responsible for health, education and much environmental legislation.

But the Canadian government is one of the major players in these agreements and is willing to sacrifice national and regional rights for the right of Canadian companies to get in anywhere in the world and let others into Canada – all to make a profit on what we have traditionally believed was the justification for our civil service – in other words to serve the people. I think that belief exists in many countries and we just beginning to realize that governments are willing accomplices in global corporate plunder of our commons – our very air, water, land, wisdom, our hard earned social services and fabric of life, and our freedom of association and community are all up for grabs in trade agreements.

I live in a mountainous land of clear streams and abundant rivers. Canadians are threatened by pressure from the USA to make water into a sell out commodity, along with hydroelectricity, already a big export. We light up Seattle and New York. And once in place, these exports, commoditisation of our commons, are irreversible under trade agreements – we have known this since NAFTA, but the hose pipe is only now snaking across the border and corporate hands are on the tap.

Two years ago, my province, British Columbia (BC), elected a right-wing neoliberal government that is happily embracing privatization, foreign buy-outs of resources etc. It has just sold off 1500 jobs in our public electricity to a multi-national corporation, Accenture, supposedly to cut costs as it eliminates union jobs and opens up other areas for privatization, as BC now encourages private generation of power for the system. This mix will make the whole service vulnerable to total GATS rulings and privation for profit. Accenture operates around the world and claims in airport ads that it has profitably “out-sourced British Petroleum” as well as parts of the government of France.

GATS opens up all our public services for corporate and foreign opportunism – what Fredric Clairmont (TWR Jan/Feb./03) calls “Casino Capitalism” and we know the house always wins! It certainly threatens health, education, utilities and other public services by ruling that governments may not protect public services or private services provided by local companies. Our forty year old universal one-tier health system is being eroded by the greed of corporations, added by governments that implement GATS and other agreements for them. The results in Canada are similar to those described in Germany yesterday: poor service, closures of facilities and long patient waits, shorter hospital stays and privatization of support services.

Already under existing agreements, accompanied by funding cuts that cause poor service to show that “public healthcare doesn’t work” -- a favourite neoliberal government strategy -- many aspects of health in a broad and public sense have been severely compromised. Patenting laws and the protection of brand drugs curtail access to medications for AIDs and other illnesses for many; There is lack of control of, indeed government enthusiasm for, food irradiation; unregulated industrial toxins; and GM crops with little regard of the environmental health or the effects on life (in Europe you have the precautionary principle). There is corporate pressure to use hormones in beef and dairy cattle; the problem of limiting tobacco and tobacco advertising; the use of additives in car gasoline. And recently in BC, there is a new law allowing the use of sewage on land with little or no testing or monitoring for health hazards. Ever more services and drugs for seniors are removed from healthcare funding: eye examinations, cyst removals, some hernias, and most alternate treatments – naturopathy, traditional Chinese medicine etc.

Canada has universal health care through a government administered insurance fund, with joint provincial-federal administration. It is broad in its coverage, but has never included dentists or home use drug, except for some senior citizens, or all forms of non-traditional medicine. We, along with Cuba, the only other country in the hemisphere to have such an excellent system, have some of the best health statistics in the world. Canada, (but not the USA) ratified the UN Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, which called health a human right and a public resource for community well-being, a part of our precious commons. We have in our Health Act the recognition that many factors contribute to health, including prevention and public health as well as individual health care and work against diseases caused by social, environmental and occupational hazards. Much of the substance of UN accords on health is supposed to take precedent over conflicting content in other agreements, but there is no monitoring or regulation of adherence to this accord.

There is no reference to respecting Human Rights obligations in WTO, NAFTA, or GATS, and dispute settlements do not refer to Human Rights commitments. In fact, they rule against health considerations – as in Canada being forced to extend its patent protection for drug companies for 20 years, for an added cost of millions to Canadians in higher drug prices. Canada challenged and lost its case against a French import ban on asbestos – a singular and rare case of consideration for health. Let's be clear, our Canadian government is the world's biggest booster of these international agreements.

Canada is promoting the export of Canadian health services, yet this position opens Canada to foreign health corporations. Canadians have for many years said that the preservation of our health care is the most important issue of government and our rulers pretend to agree, while cutting funding and complaining that we just cannot afford our "overburdened healthcare system." We can afford, however, to ruin the health of people in Afghanistan and subsidize military industries (the one acceptable form of subsidy under trade agreements). We already have private healthcare – dentistry, drugs, various forms of alternative medicine and some private for-profit services, and private/public care for the infirm elderly; some of this is covered by private insurance schemes by employers etc. Cost cuts have resulted in employee lay-offs and cuts in hospital beds and hospital closures in BC, and the privatizing of many services – from food to laundry to waste disposal. All these measures are possible threats to public health. Poorly paid non-union contract employees are less likely to have good training and on-the-job supervision. These are also areas that can be opened by GATS to foreign corporations; particularly administration services which are computerized can be done anywhere. Already there have been cases of betrayal of confidentiality of patient records in privatized services.

I want to note that not only Canadians feel strongly about accessible universal health care. Health workers in El Salvador have been on strike for eight months. They have successfully halted the privatization process of the public healthcare system. They have received the support of the Salvadoran people, who have come out in the hundreds of thousands for six mass marches against privatization. Over the course of the strike, dozens of doctors and healthcare workers have been fired for strike-related activities, and thousands have gone for seven months without a pay check. The Salvadoran government has used riot police to break up picket lines and raid striking hospitals, and some 60 strikers and supporters have been arrested over the course of the strike. The ARENA party President has vetoed a bill by the parliament, now dominated by FMLN, that would recognize the unions' demands, protect healthcare and compensate the striking health workers, supported by 80% of citizens. The strike and action by a broad coalition of political and social movements will continue until next year's presidential election.

In Canada we also face threats to healthcare- but doctors aren't on strike yet;

they rarely show solidarity with other health workers. Ever since we signed free trade agreements with USA, its profiteering medical corporations have looked hungrily at Canada's healthcare

system – while at the same time a minority of USA citizens have looked longingly at it! And GATS officials are looking at rules that call public services unacceptable subsidies.

The General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) has never attracted the profile or attention given by Canadian activists to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA), World Trade Organization (WTO) or the Multilateral Agreement on Investments (MAI). We defeated the MAI in 1998, but many of its planks are being nailed into the provisions of the GATS. Secrecy and obscurity are the friends of corporations and complicit governments and we in the civil society have to reveal and shine the spotlight on the implications of GATS – that is why this conference is such a good action. We need to take it back to our communities. We can stop anything if we inform, unite and act! There is much resistance to privatization and neoliberalism. Even if it is not clear that these privilege power plays are backed by GATS, people know what is wrong! Or as we say in BC, (premier) Campbell's Cuts hurt! We are too busy fighting back on many issues, yet an understanding of GATS is essential to our strategy and we have much work to do.

Many other concerns about public health – including our ability to handle epidemics and major environmental problems, like sewage disposal and water safety, are compromised by lack of support at all government levels. Many services are privatized and lack facilities, will and qualified personnel. Neoliberal governments sell off services and assets in order to have that sacred goal, a balanced budget that corporations demand, along with lower taxes for business.

To cut taxes for the rich means to cut services for all. The universality of our healthcare system, administered by provinces, is threatened. The workers do not get tax relief yet they face higher costs for basic services while social benefits for the poor, jobless, disabled and elderly are cut and cut again.

Sounds familiar? I am sure it does to Germans – did you not recently privatise your postal service? You have the highest postal rates in the world. 10 million South Africans lost their water because of privatization and its exorbitant price – and suffer epidemics of cholera and diarrhoea. They say they did not fight for liberation so that their services and resources could be sold off to highest bidder!

Canada's universal healthcare system is indeed in danger because we have governments that are little more than foot soldiers for the captains of industry. Once Canadian companies start selling health services abroad and we allow foreign companies to profit from Canadian privatized health, no trade agreement, including GATS, will protect the unarmed civilian population in this war on our commons.

Partnership with private companies in building health facilities has saved money for Canadian governments only in the short range. In the end, debt payments have made these projects more expensive than if the governments had borrowed the funds in the first place and owned the project from the beginning. After all, corporations want to make profits; the public service does not need profit to serve people with their own money. That is what taxes are for. When will we start selling our blood and body parts as others are forced to?

The Canadian government quietly supports the biotech industry, to push GM food abroad and to improve its image in Canada with no regard for, or independent research on, the long-range health effects of GM. And there is a persistent lobby to introduce GM wheat to Canada, which would be ruinous to our export markets and to the health of Canadian farms.

In BC the government has refused to negotiate with many unions, including health workers, and has passed a bill allowing legislated back to work, a policy that has been condemned by the International Labour Organization. Some health workers have taken cuts in wages and benefits to keep their jobs. In Alberta and Ontario, private for-profit hospitals are being touted as the answer to healthcare problems. They will open the door of healthcare to domestic and foreign profit-makers under GATS and NAFTA to enter Canada and to claim Canadian health insurance payments for services to Canadians in the USA. In Canada our health care is 9.5% of our GNP while in privatized-forever USA it is 14%, says no less an authority than Canada's health minister, Allan Rock.

We know from the experience of others, such as the results of privatized prisons in Australia, power and water from South Africa to Philippines, that costs will escalate and quality will deteriorate when services become a market commodity. Promoting individualism in the name of privatization and the destruction of universality will only weaken democracy and an equitable basis for all citizens in a cooperative community. If this is what our governments want, we have to stop them! Canada under NAFTA is becoming more and more a supplier for the American project of global domination at any cost, including domestic poverty, world domination of resources and the propagation of a mutant life style based on competition and consumption.

For women, the results of all these bureaucratic and international machinations are clear, personal and often devastating. Women are most dependent on health services, are the majority of health workers, and are the caregivers at home when public service fails. We are most vulnerable to commoditisation of health service, we will not only lose health and income, but our independence and place in society.

Health and education both suffer from decreases in funding. At the university level, little independent research can be done on areas of health concern. We see more and more corporate research funding, including military money, and the results and their availability are owned by funders; a severe compromise of academic freedom.

The privatization of knowledge including the patenting of everything from life forms to public university research is a threat to the global commons of shared life, experience and wisdom. The cyber net, a commons of communication and knowledge for social movements and public education is under global scrutiny because it works too well. Canada is considering charging for Email because the postal corporation sees it as a threat to its profit-making ability.

We know that when we go to a university campus, one of the first things to note is: is it a Pepsi or Coke campus? Both the Cologne universities I have spoken at, including this one, are Coke campuses. Our universities have made monopoly deals with these companies, for a payment and a contract; the company gets exclusive sales of its drinks, including bottled water – Dasini or Aqua Fina – and soon Coke's new "milk drinks". That's how desperate for money universities are! The University of Victoria now sells advertising space – in the toilets, ending years of an ad-free environment. Rooms and whole buildings in some universities are being named after corporate donors, who usually get an honorary degree thrown in for the CEO, free of charge! The sudden and steep increase in student fees, (30% at ***UVIC (spell out) in 2003) another source of replacing cuts in government funding, will soon mean that only students of privilege can go to university or others who accept a debt load for years after graduation. Women in Canada who earn 72% of men's wages for the same work will have an added burden of debt repayment and even less opportunity to attend university.

My friend who has a child in elementary school was horrified to learn that a special class on traffic safety would be conducted by – Ronald MacDonald! She was even more horrified when she spoke to other parents about her concern and they thought it was just fine! So the corporate ideology and façade of goodwill in our education is visible and acceptable – a dangerous perception that leads to greater influence.

Canada has a tradition of having public schools side by side with private schools – ranging from religious to Anglophile elite establishments that continue to produce the leaders of industry and government to alternate schools, like Waldorf and Montessori. We do not yet have the “for profit” schools that are being promoted in the USA, or what their proponents call “independent” schools vs. “government” schools. The Edison Corporation runs over 100 schools in the USA. When they fail due to the enormous salaries paid to their executives, the public sector has to pick up both the loss and the school. A private USA company has just been awarded the contract to run Iraqi education (Creative International Association Inc.), “fast food” schools for the land where writing, science and literature began. They will get \$62M USA from USAID whose stated purpose is to expand democracy and free markets. We can see war, globalization and philanthropy are in one neat package!

Corporate interest in Canada for lower education costs and tax breaks for the rich have an ideological influence. Schools are forced to stick to “basics” while “frills” like music, art, health and life skills classes are cut. We are all inured to children selling (corporate) chocolate bars in order to fund music or other “frills”. Corporate donations of electronic equipment and biased and dishonest teaching materials are compromising student ability to think critically and create a tolerance for corporate advertising disguised as charity. The corporate ideology of producing willing consumers and a flexible work force is replacing the educational aims of good citizenship and participation in a democratic society. The world’s largest retailer, Wal-Mart, is heavily into school funding – can the University of Wal-Mart with departments of union busting, sweatshop labour and community destruction be far behind?

Class sizes have increased in BC and Ontario, while budgets continue to shrink. Ontario, Canada’s largest and richest province had \$2.3 billion less for education in 2002 than in 1995! In the USA, where schools have commercial TV shopping programming in return for equipment, fast food chains and monopoly colas the process of a “creeping coup d’état” on public education, as Ralph Nader calls it, is more widespread. But Canada is usually only 5 years behind the USA in changes, and we have the same, mainly USA based, corporations and lack of adequate funds. Already one BC school district is putting advertisements on report cards, while teachers in Canada spend between \$500-1000 (highest in BC) of their own money for basic equipment that the schools cannot provide.

In Canada we see the closing of many rural schools. In BC the sale of alcohol is privatized and made available in shops in small communities. Six year old children must ride in a school bus for 50 km. daily, but our government, led by a convicted drunk driver, believes “that a man should not have to drive 20 km to buy a bottle of whiskey!”

So far, GATS itself has not intruded much on our education, but the provisions of GATS and our government’s enthusiasm for exporting educational services and its corporate love of budget cuts for services and tax cuts for the rich make us vulnerable. Already the services within education – from office work to cleaning- have been separated from the education definition and can be easily

privatized locally, making them open to GATS challenges. In BC some school districts have become corporations under new BC laws; they can make a profit and export schooling, as they already do to Asia. They can copyright materials and information – and then sell, rather than share it as in the past: an assault on our knowledge commons and another opening for GATS challenges.

And a word about our other NAFTA partner – Mexico - where poverty levels have doubled since NAFTA. Forty-two percent of Mexicans now live in poverty.. Seven hundred and fifty thousand farm workers lost their jobs in 2003 because of dumping of USA food – can they afford books, fees and equipment of schools for their children? Education has suffered with three cuts in already meagre spending by Fox's government and the doors are open for privatization and corporate penetration. It is a sad contrast to Cuba with the highest levels of literacy and achievement in schools in Latin America.

The particular role of women in the work force against an increasingly aggressive, corporate world is a very important one. We need to recognize the global force of the USA is imposing global domination by a willing coalition of complicit governments and corporations. Henry Kissinger said: Globalization is just another word for USA domination. Globalization via WTO- GATS and military oppression must be seen as a threat to the commons of wisdom, resources, and cooperation that we women, as ecofeminists, community workers and justice and peace activists, must resist. The burden placed on women who will provide the domestic labour of health care as our health systems cut hospital care and long terms stays of the infirm and disabled will be an added layer of work. Women's jobs in clerical, administration, school teaching and service support work – cleaning and cooking etc. become privatized, subject to lower pay or lay-off. Women generally have less seniority because of family life and are the first to be fired. In education we will have to support our young people to learn the value of common values of community, peace-building and ecological sustainability to counteract the corporate influence in schools that will emphasize individualism, consumerism and competition.

We have seen a civil service replaced by servile governments. What happened? We need to look back to understand global forces in recent history. At the end of the "Cold War", after we recovered from our naiveté that things were fine now, we were confronted by the power of the USA, the world's only superpower, a corporate-run government. As Ralph Nader says that is the permanent USA government, the provisional government is the one USAns think they elect. The Soviet Union was in tatters and ripe for plucking. But after that there were no new frontiers for the expansion imperative of capitalism, no new continents to conquer. (Except outer space - that is another speech about the so-called Ballistic Missile Defence). So they decided to invade our commons – nature, history, shared wisdom and communication, our community and society structures or how we share our resources and help one another.

The corporate agenda calls for more profit production from this new wealth; this requires complicit governments, be they democracies or dictatorships. They pay to elect their chosen collaborators, who in turn reduce corporate taxes and negotiate the conditions for global pillage – known as trade agreements and international fiscal institutions. Governments get less tax income, so they sell off public assets to their buddies; curtail services to make them less attractive and ripe for privatization. The corporations buy them up cheap with the money they made on their tax cuts and we lose our commons. Smart, eh?

Our daily tasks of community and family care-giving will increase as governments shift to a corporate model that leaves only the power of militarization to governments after the ruling elites have stripped us of our public assets. The corporate agenda wants governments to have only the power to maintain internal order and support the military. Trade agreements protect that power and through military agreements like NATO and a constant state of war mania they help military industries to grow and reap massive profits. Trade agreements deliberately ignore and excuse – and encourage, some would say, much of the world's trade.

It is necessary to see what trade is excluded from agreements. The arms trade is explicitly exempt from regulation in trade agreements, in fact, leaving only the military industry as a recipient of government subsidy and support. So it is to the advantage of governments to foment war and help the arms industry - a major source of election funds - often disguised as civilian industry. It is easier to get a gun than a water pump in much of the world.

Also ignored in trade agreements is the massive global trade in many illicit substances and products, from drugs, like cocaine and heroin, which funds wars in Afghanistan to Vietnam to Colombia, and the movement in endangered flora and fauna that enriches chemical and drug companies.

For women, a major concern is the unregulated, rarely acknowledged trade in human life. Women in the sex trade, by dire necessity or fraudulent coercion, domestic workers, bonded serfs really, go to richer countries, peasants lose their land, women leave rural areas to slave in sweatshops producing luxury items for the minority world. These women have no trade agreements to protect them. As a result of poverty and oppression in one country, often linked to the drug and arms trade, there is massive movement of people around the world. Those who enter other countries outside the law are extremely vulnerable to abuse and violence. Unprotected migrant labour, mainly of women, is encouraged by governments where the home countries depend on their returned wages for foreign currency, while the women remain poor and vulnerable. Globalization favours the lowest possible pay for labour in an increasingly polarized world. Capital moves with elaborate protection; people move with none. Some say that globalization and its institutions not only create the global trade in people, but need it for cheap, disposable and movable labour. The spoils of war include sex slaves and slave labour and soldiers, mainly women and children. And rich societies benefit from illegal workers and sweatshop production. Militarization, drug production and use and human exploitation break down families and societies, even countries, making cohesive social action and political organization impossible in the areas of greatest impact – another benefit for the ruling elite. The German historian, Clausewitz, said: War is just business by other means.

There is a direct connection from the power of globalization – domination driven by the lust for power – which causes the violence of poverty, poor health, lack of water, education and community security to, if deemed necessary for the recalcitrant, (especially those sitting on oil, mineral or other wealth), the use of war as the ultimate expression of power. War and economic instability and increasing poverty under globalization contribute to increasing women's poverty first. They are also responsible for increased murder and abuse of women and girl children. Sexual violence is indeed a weapon of war and civil breakdown. Women everywhere, including in Canada, are paid less for the same work, are the first to be fired and in many cultures easier than men to exploit on the job. 70% of the world's poor – and ever increasing- are women and children. It is the fate of women to have to rebuild lives, families, food production and community after wars – and

we live in a state of perpetual war. We in the minority world struggle to save our local commons and communities while trying to work in solidarity with our sisters of the majority world

Many of us are exhausted from months of opposing a war for the fuel of globalization. We carried the heavy stone of inevitability in our guts, knowing that we in our millions would not stop this plunder and conquest. But we did create a greater deeper global movement in which women are the leaders and most of the workers. We have learned that we cannot have a 'one war' peace movement, a 'one river' environmental movement or a 'one trade agreement' democracy movement. We know that war is the ultimate action of the globalizers and that war preparations rob the world of resources, destroy the environment and society, and that women in the end are left with the job of rebuilding and restoring what is left of the commons and society. We see that all our struggles are one, even as in different places we must focus on different concerns. We build solidarity, strength and communication in our shared work.

Now is the time to see the connections as clearly as Colonel Peters of the USA military when he wrote: "There will be no peace. At any given moment for the rest of our lifetime, there will be multiple conflicts in mutating forms around the globe. Violent conflict will dominate the headlines, but cultural and economic struggles will be steadier and ultimately more decisive. The de facto role of the US armed forces will be to keep the world safe for our economy and open to our cultural assault. To those ends, we will do a fair amount of killing." I think we can prove him wrong if we build on our connections and shared wisdom.

I have presented the problems and the issues today from my Canadian perspective; I know it is a gloomy picture, but tomorrow we will discuss our vision, our dreams, and our work in the panel on "Resistance and Alternatives Perspectives". We can rejoice in our shared joys and take time to enjoy the gifts of life.

In the words of my friend, the Malaysian activist, Irene Fernandez:
WHO TAKES CHARGE? WOMEN TAKE CHARGE!

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