

# A 21st Century Trade Deal For Public Health and Jobs

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You mean you haven't heard about the new 21st century trade agreement being negotiated this week in Chicago? Might be because the federal U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) didn't even announce the 2-week meeting on its website. Or anywhere else.

Trade agreements are increasingly vehicles for bestowing benefits to corporations that even the most beholden national legislatures could not get away with, and that furthermore trump national laws. CPATH's 2009 report of U.S. pressure on Guatemala to accept trade rules that are siphoning cash away from this desperately poor country and into the coffers of multinational drug companies was corroborated last week with a flood of new releases from wikileaks.

According to Georgetown Law Professor Robert Stumberg, tobacco giant Phillip Morris International (PMI) is perfecting the art of tucking arcane bombshells into trade accords between two countries, and then linking them to hop across borders via multi-country agreements. For example, Brazil and other countries have succeeded in encouraging smokers to quit by placing grimly graphic warning labels on cigarette packages. The U.S. is due to start in 2012. Although they save lives, PMI invokes trade provisions to claim that graphic warning labels violate trade agreements that protect the company's trademark rights and related intellectual property rights. (Australia is taking the campaign one step further, and on the verge of implementing plain packaging, without labels or color codes that misleadingly assert they are "light.")

The new Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) could strengthen PMI's hand, and unlike you they've had quite a few opportunities to make their case forcefully to U.S. trade officials. The tobacco and drug industries both have prominent seats on the influential and confidential trade advisory committees that give the USTR their marching orders, and they've also commented publicly on their concerns. You aren't invited to these committees, although after years of campaigning they now include one bona fide tobacco control advocate, an international health consultant, and a representative of the generic drug industry.

Trade agreements remain unpopular with the underemployed public, as well as with public health advocates. So while the U.S. is hosting the talks this week with 8 Pacific Rim partner countries, they just neglected to announce it publicly. But the fact is that of the group, only the U.S. will be pushing hard to undermine tobacco control laws, and to prop up high drug prices. If you're anywhere near Chicago this week, drop by the Hilton to join advocates and see what's up. And in any case, let the USTR know that a 21st century trade agreement advances workers' rights, public health and democracy.

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