

NAFTA: Let's get it right

By Maude Barlow



The governments of North America are deep into a process of renegotiating the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) that was signed over 20 years ago. NAFTA has been instrumental, along with a generation of bad policies, in worsening wealth inequality, job insecurity, wage stagnation and the creation of a precarious work force. It has weakened public services and led to lower regulatory standards in areas such as food, pesticides, and health and safety rules. NAFTA has allowed American corporations to challenge higher Canadian environmental regulations.

The Council of Canadians vigorously opposed NAFTA and its predecessor, the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement, when they were being negotiated, and we have exposed the flaws in these agreements and their fall-out closely since. Our opinion of NAFTA has not changed; quite the opposite.

However, in solidarity with the labour movement and other civil society organizations that are hoping to use these renegotiations to insert meaningful chapters and protections for workers, the environment, women and First Nations, we are watching the renegotiation process with a critical eye. We are doubtful that the three parties – Canada, the United States and Mexico – will come to an agreement that rights what is so wrong with NAFTA from when it was written more than 20 years ago. And we are very clear that tinkering with the current NAFTA will not suffice. As the Canadian Union of Public Employees says, “A bad agreement with a good labour chapter is still a bad agreement.”

The Council of Canadians will only support a new trade agreement for North America if it will:

- Remove Chapter 11’s corporate-friendly investor-state dispute settlement provisions.
- Put workers and their rights at the heart of a new agreement.
- Promote and protect public services.
- Include strong provisions to protect the environment and natural resources.
- Maintain the right to regulate in the public interest.
- Remove the energy chapter and cancel the proportional energy sharing provision.
- Remove all references to water.
- Maintain and expand the exemption for culture.
- Protect Canada’s supply management system.
- Protect and enhance Indigenous rights.

There is a great deal at stake in these talks and Canada should be prepared to walk away if a new agreement does not protect the rights of Canadians and the environment. A study by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives found that if NAFTA is terminated and Canadian exporters were forced to revert to the World Trade Organization rules and tariff rates, the impact would be “disruptive, but by no means catastrophic.” The report finds that for 96 per cent of total Canadian exports – the effective cost of losing the “NAFTA advantage” – would amount to only 1.5 per cent of the value of Canadian exports.

A September 2017 EKOS Research poll commissioned by the Council of Canadians found that most Canadians say the government should walk away from

NAFTA if it’s a “bad deal.” Eighty per cent agreed that water should not be treated as a commodity under NAFTA as it is now; 70 per cent said measures requiring Canada to maintain energy export quotas to the U.S. should be removed; and 63 per cent agreed that Chapter 11 should be removed from the deal.

There has never been a better time to reign in the power of transnational capital and transnational corporations. There has never been a better time to recognize the sacred democratic authority of people, communities and their elected governments to protect human and workers’ rights and the environment upon which we all depend for life.

Let’s get it right.

This is an excerpt of Maude Barlow’s new report, Getting it Right: A people’s guide to renegotiating NAFTA. Read the full report online at canadians.org/nafta-guide.

Council of Canadians supporters like you have been instrumental in driving public pressure on the federal government **to get NAFTA right – or walk away**. Thanks to your generous donations we have mobilized more than 30,000 people to participate in the public consultations and get their concerns formally on the record, run television ads on CBC’s *The National*, produced information videos, commissioned public opinion polls, reached almost 1 million people through social media, and published hard-hitting reports and materials. We will keep the pressure on the federal government to get NAFTA right – or walk away!