

BY DAVE GUTKNECHT

# Participation and Democracy Deterred



The cover section of this issue offers much on building democratic participation, a struggle with many manifestations—including the civil rights move-

ment, forming new co-ops, and articulating a new framework for cooperative governance. Participation and democracy are necessary and mutually supportive.

In that light, illustrating the theme on an international level, it is clear what is wrong with a proposed trade agreement. Its contents and negotiations have been shielded from public participation because its essence is corporate advantage that undermines sovereignty and democratic participation. The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) threatens any public policy or law that imposes environmental or other protections—for example, a “buy local” requirement could be ruled a restraint of trade by a TPP international tribunal.

Global Trade Watch, an excellent research and policy group sponsored by Public Citizen, calls the TPP “a corporate coup d’etat”: [www.citizen.org/TPP](http://www.citizen.org/TPP). Jim Hightower echoed the alarm last fall in his “Hightower Lowdown”—quoted here:

*One of the deal’s chapters creates a monstrous monkey wrench called the “Investor-State Dispute Resolution” system. In this private, supra-legal “court,” corporations are empowered to sue TPP governments over environmental, health, consumer, zoning, or any other public policies that the corporations claim are either undermining their TPP “rights” or diminishing—get this—their “expected future profits.”*

*This elevates thousands of private, profit-seeking entities to the legal status of sovereign nations. Under the investor-state system, a smaller version of which was included in NAFTA and other free-trade schemes, the deck is stacked for corporate interests. Cases are decided behind closed doors by three-person international tribunals of private attorneys who often have a glaring corporate bias. The same lawyers who represent corporations in these cases routinely switch over in other cases to serve as “judges.” Holy revolving door!*

*Obama—who pledged in 2008 to avoid sneaky, NAFTA-style, corporate sell-outs—promptly surrendered to the global schemers once in office. Team Obama goosed up the TPP negotiating process and has gone to extremes to make it more furtive than Bush did. In 2010, all nations involved even signed a formal pledge to keep details of their deliberations from the public—and to keep documents related to the deal under cover until four years after the process is completed.*

*Last year, Obama’s top trade rep, Ron Kirk, declared that locking out the people is necessary, because the deal’s details would outrage Americans and spook Congress from rubber stamping it....*

*Where, you might ask, is Congress? In the dark... Congressional approval will be required, however. How will he get them to do that? As Clinton and Bush did in previous free-trade hustles, he’ll try to use a rush-rush legislative procedure called “fast track,” while TPP’s boosters simultaneously envelop the public debate in a disorienting fog of corporate PR....*

*Under this procedure, Obama is allowed to sign TPP before Congress votes. Then he writes an “implementing bill” to make U.S. laws conform to the hundreds of pages of TPP dictates. That’s what he sends to Congress, where no amendments will be allowed and debate will be strictly limited.*

*The idea is to force members to swallow the whole deal in one, hurried, up-or-down vote. However, Congress first has to authorize the White House’s use of the fast track ploy—and that’s very iffy...*

*There is also a broad, well-organized, knowledgeable, and politically experienced coalition of grassroots groups already at work to prevent this perversion of America’s fundamental governing principles. Still, many pundits will tell us that it’s impossible to stop them, because the public can’t understand these complex deals.*

*Baloney. First, this one is not at all complex; it’s a plain old power grab by the world’s moneyed elites, and people today have no interest in giving more money and power to the world’s 1-percenters. Second, populist forces now opposing TPP have won many of these brawls in the past... ■*

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