



Special Bulletin COVID 19 Pandemic

March 2020

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1. Farewell to AFTINET analyst and campaigner Sophie Hardefeldt

After almost a year with AFTINET, Sophie has been offered a more long-term position with ActionAid, one of our member organisations. We thank her for her work and wish her well in her new job.

2. AFTINET working arrangements for the pandemic: some events postponed but other work continues

Like many other organisations, we will be working from home for the foreseeable future. We will continue with all our work including items for the website, Facebook and Twitter, work on submissions to government and regular bulletins for our members and for politicians.

The AFTINET submission to the Joint Foreign Affairs and Trade Parliamentary committee previously circulated for comment to members has been submitted and is on our website [here](#).

Restricted access to Parliament meant we had to postpone our planned parliamentary forum on March 24, but we are continuing to meet with individual parliamentarians by teleconference.

3. AFTINET 20th anniversary celebrations postponed but not cancelled

The AFTINET 20th anniversary dinner planned for May 20 will also be postponed because of the restrictions on meetings of 100 or more.

We are continuing with the production of an anniversary video and memorabilia which will be launched when we have a new date for the dinner.

4. COVID-19 pandemic exposes neoliberal myths

The debate is already raging about the deeper lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Richard Denniss in *The Saturday Paper* (March 21, 2020) argues powerfully that the idea that the “small state” and deregulation makes for a “richer country” is totally demolished. He condemns the arbitrary consensus between the Coalition and Labor that the federal public sector should never be greater than 23.9 per cent of Gross Domestic Product. And he celebrates that the Morrison government has had to abandon its budget surplus fetish and start to spend really big. He calls for a much larger public sector in health and in the transition to a carbon-neutral economy.

Because the COVID-19 pandemic is triggering a global recession and possibly a depression it will change public consciousness. All sides of politics are challenged to modify both their ideological messaging and the economic, social and environmental programs they propose.

The pandemic also challenges the neoliberal approach to the world trading system. This has been shaped by the 1990s “Washington Consensus” for rules that meet the needs of global corporations but ignore the needs of workers, communities and the environment. These rules include low or zero tariffs, no local industry policies to support diverse economies, deregulation of the labour market, privatisation of public services, longer medicine monopolies and corporate rights to sue governments (ISDS).

The debate is only just beginning about the failure of global supply chains based on narrow specialisations that prevent local industry policies for a more diverse economy equipped to address a global pandemic.

Using national emergency powers, governments have begun to order corporations to convert production to health equipment like [sanitiser](#), [facemasks](#) and [ventilators](#) urgently required to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic

AFTINET and other social movements have fought against resistance from pharmaceutical and other corporate interests to ensure that health emergencies allow governments to suspend parts of trade agreements. Governments will need to use these exceptions to suspend medicine monopolies and equipment patent rules in trade agreements to allow urgent access to affordable treatments for the virus.

International air travel is regulated by specific treaties, outside the agreements set up by the World Trade Organisation and bilateral and regional trade agreements. So the abrupt closure of airports to international flights is not a direct break with neo-liberal trade policy, but will contribute to the reassessment of the idea of deregulation of national and international transport markets that then fail in times of crisis. Italy has [announced](#) the re-nationalisation of Alitalia to prevent its collapse and other governments may do so after 30 years of airline privatisation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has already required the state to regulate in the public interest. The emerging economic crash will sharpen this reversal in the short term. But there is nothing inevitable about a long-term shift back toward more democratic control of our future, as the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis of 2008-09 demonstrated.

AFTINET and other social movements have criticised both the neoliberal corporate-dominated global trade system and Trump’s America First policies based on high tariffs, narrow nationalism and racism. This crisis requires us to advocate more strongly than ever for open and democratic international trade rules that contribute to full employment and higher living standards in a more diverse and environmentally sustainable economy with access to essential services for all.

Trade deals should not prevent governments from regulating in the public interest, and should not give more legal rights to global corporations that already have enormous market power. They should instead be based on internationally agreed and enforceable human rights, labour rights and environmental standards.