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Pacific Trade Pact misses APEC deadline as community groups slam US proposals on medicines and corporate rights

“The APEC meeting in Hawaii was meant to conclude the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement, a new free trade deal between the US, Australia, New Zealand, Chile, Peru, Brunei, Singapore, Malaysia and Vietnam. But the deal has been delayed because of controversial proposals tabled by the US, and negotiations will continue into 2012,” Dr Patricia Ranald, Convener of the Australian Fair Trade and Investment Network of 60 community groups (AFTINET), said today.

“These US proposals seek to increase the intellectual property rights of pharmaceutical companies to charge higher prices for medicines, and to reduce the rights of governments to regulate the price of medicines. These companies want the same rights to charge high prices for medicines as they have in the US, where the wholesale prices of prescription medicines are three to ten times higher than in Australia. These proposals would undermine Australia’s Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme and similar schemes in other countries which keep medicines affordable,” explained Dr Ranald.

“The US is also proposing an investor-state dispute process, which would allow a single company like Philip Morris tobacco company to sue governments for damages over tobacco regulation or other public interest regulation. Philip Morris is currently attempting to sue the Australian government for its plain packaging tobacco legislation under an obscure 1993 Australia-Hong Kong investment agreement. Community campaigning kept this provision out of the US-Australia Free Trade Agreement in 2004, but the US is still pushing it in the Trans-Pacific trade deal.

“The Australian Government is resisting these proposals. Resistance to them from health and community organisations in the United States and other countries, and from some other governments, has slowed the negotiations,” said Dr Ranald.

For links to critical statements by the Public Health Association of Australia and US health groups see

http://aftinet.org.au/cms/sites/default/files/111025_United_States_undermines_access_to_medicines_in_Australia_and_Pacific.pdf

“Health and other social policies should be determined democratically, not secretly decided in trade negotiations,” said Dr Ranald. “Despite early promises, the deal does not include commitments to enforceable labour standards or environmental protections. We support the calls of unions, health and community groups gathered in Hawaii for a “Fair Deal or No Deal” on the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement. We welcome the fact that the resistance to unfair proposals means there is now more time for public debate. We call on governments to release the secret texts for full public and Parliamentary scrutiny,” said Dr Ranald.

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