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President Obama Needs to Replace Doha Round Agenda With WTO Turnaround Plan

Statement of Lori Wallach, Director, Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch Division

Listening to government statements at this World Trade Organization (WTO) ministerial, it is clear that the WTO is seen as a cause of the current financial, food and climate crises rather than a cure and requires significant change, but it also is clear that no country wants to be blamed for ending the Doha Round and demanding a new WTO review-and-repair agenda.

As a result, there has been a schizophrenic theme at this summit of developing countries issuing the required I-am-not-to-blame-for-ending-the-Doha-Round defensive announcement that they, of course, want a quick completion of the Doha Round while then proceeding to announce the deep problems with the current agenda and how it must be fundamentally changed. One of the more dramatic examples of this conflicted approach is represented by the statement of the G-23 bloc of countries – those hardest hit by the world food price crisis.

At this week's ministerial, the WTO Doha Round was too toxic to be put on the agenda. In other words, this has been a WTO summit at which negotiation is not on the agenda. The WTO boosters knew that one more collapsed WTO summit and the WTO expansion idea would certainly be derailed. However, it's been too dangerous to get together for four years and this has caused an increasing crisis of legitimacy for the WTO.

Ten years after the world's most powerful governments and corporations failed to launch a massive WTO expansion at the 1999 Seattle WTO Ministerial, there still is no WTO expansion. BUT, there also is still no WTO turnaround – and the current rules are causing major damage on many fronts.

At stake now is whether the Obama administration will lead an effort to modernize the rules of the global economy or continue the Bush/Clinton/Bush agenda, which has fostered devastating economic, food and climate crises. The current WTO Doha Round agenda – set before the economic crisis – would impose more financial deregulation, curtail countries' control of their energy and other policies needed to redress the climate crisis and further concentrate corporate control of food production. If Bush's 2001 Doha Round WTO expansion agenda is not replaced, the fate of WTO negotiations will be the same sort of slow death by disagreement that felled the Free Trade Area of the Americas.

The Obama administration's default position here has been to support the Doha Round's conclusion with the old Bush policy still standing in as the U.S. position. However, Bush's 2001 Doha Round agenda fundamentally conflicts with the Obama administration's domestic priorities. Existing WTO rules must be altered for Obama to deliver on the goals that will determine his success as a president. This includes eliminating WTO limits on how tax dollars may be spent to create U.S. jobs and stimulate the economy, and removing existing financial deregulation requirements that conflict with key proposals now before Congress to stabilize the economy.

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