

# The Poison Trade

**M**aneuvering for advantage in the upcoming campaign against Bob Dole, some officials in the Clinton Administration have been murmuring timidly about "corporate responsibility". The gap between rhetoric and reality here is cruelly illustrated by the Administration's posture towards toxic waste transfers from rich to poor countries.

For the past several years, the vast majority of the countries in the world have been organizing to pass an international ban on all toxic waste exports to the rest of the world from the 24 nations in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. These rich nations generate 98 percent of the 400 million tons of toxic waste produced each year, most of that coming from European and American corporations that eagerly ship their hazardous by-products to Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, thus saving money otherwise spent on treatment and recycling.

#### Editors

KEN SILVERSTEIN  
ALEXANDER COCKBURN

#### Co-writers

EYAL PRESS  
JEFFREY ST. CLAIR

#### Production

TERRY ALLEN

#### Counselor

BEN SONNENBERG

#### Design

DEBORAH THOMAS

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P.O. Box 18675,  
Washington, DC 20036  
202/986-3665 (phone/fax)

Last September, in an historic agreement almost entirely ignored by the US press, representatives of 84 countries gathered at the Basel Convention in Geneva and took a bold step in this direction, ratifying an amendment which gives legal status in the United Nations to a ban on toxic shipments from rich to poor countries. How such a ban will conflict with free trade agreements like

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**The US stands virtually alone in believing that corporations have the right to dump poisons on the poorest countries.**

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CATT remains to be seen. But there is no doubt about the position of the Clinton Administration, which stands virtually alone in the world in believing that corporations should have unfettered freedom to dump their poisons on the poorest countries in the world.

The US is the only OECD country that refuses to be party to the Basel Convention, an international body formed to monitor the disposal of hazardous waste. Even so, the Clinton Administration has sent representatives to Convention meetings in order to lobby against a ban.

Last year in Geneva was no exception. "The US spoke only to industry," Marcelo Furtado, a Greenpeace campaigner, says, "and noticeably annoyed representatives from the other countries, who wondered why a non-party to the Convention was saying so much." While Ritt Bjerregard, Environment Commissioner of the European Union, expressed strong support for the ban, Rafe Pomerance, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, explained that a ban on toxic trade "would discourage recycling".

The ludicrous "recycling" argument is routinely advanced by the scrap metal industry, which argues that Third World countries should be given an "opportunity" to import, process and repackage hazardous waste produced by First World corporations. Pomerance describes such freeloading as "environmentally friendly".

The reality is seen in places like the Bharat Zinc plant in Bhopal, India, the subject of a recent Greenpeace video, "Slow-Motion Bhopal: Toxic Waste Exports to India". There, Dutch and German car batteries, along with zinc ash sent by an American firm, Ruby Metals, are melted down and remolded into metal containers and other products sold to Indian consumers. In the process Bharat Zinc workers, some of them children, wade barefoot without masks or gloves through a toxic dump yard, inhaling lead at 100 times the level tolerated in the West. Tests of soil near the site disclose severe lead contamination and poisons leached into surrounding surface and ground water.

As the Nixon crowd used to say, Watch what we do, not what we say. In 1994, President Clinton issued a rousing statement of support for a ban on hazardous waste exports. Vice President Al Gore repeated this pledge at a dinner for the Global Legislators for a Balanced Environment, a group of parliamentarians from 42 countries which Gore himself helped found and which has long supported a ban.

But the threat of an actual ban provoked roars of protest from industry and the Administration duly shifted course. A May 1994 paper by the US Chamber of Commerce (which weighed in heavily against the ban at last year's Geneva conference) urged that "the US government and affected industries visit with economic and trade ministries of affected non-OECD countries" to pressure them to support free trade in toxins. The State Department was soon lobbying the European Union, India, Malaysia, Indonesia and other countries. It also blackmailed the Basel Convention, swearing that the US would never become a party or pay dues should a ban be adopted.

For intellectual underpinning to this determination to dump poisons on poor people the US government can turn to the No. 2 man at the Treasury Department, the wunderkind Larry Summers. In a notorious memo he wrote in his previous incarnation as chief economist at the World Bank, Summers remarked casually that it was quite sensible to locate toxic operations in the Third World, because a lower life expectancy in those countries kills off the workers before cancers caused by the toxins have time to kick in. ■

# Bill Gates's Chain Gang

In promoting Windows '95, Microsoft mounted one of the most expensive advertising campaigns in American history. Microsoft understandably failed to mention that at least some of the company's new software was packed by prison labor. This news comes to us from Paul Wright and Dan Pens, two inmates from Washington state who edit *Prison Legal News*. It was Wright who last year alerted us to the use of prison labor by Rep. Jack Metcalf, a fierce crime buster whose 1994 campaign telemarketing operations were partly staffed by prisoners.

According to people incarcerated at the Twin Rivers Correctional Center in Monroe, Washington, Microsoft hired a packaging company, Exmark to ship Windows '95. Exmark used prisoners for at least part of the job and also had inmates package tens of thousands of units of Microsoft Office, another software program, as well as hundreds of thousands of Microsoft mice. Other companies mak-

ing use of inmate labor in Washington state include telecommunications giant US West and Redwood Outdoors, Inc., which produces clothing for Eddie Bauer.

Washington is a pioneer in the use of prison labor, a true boom industry in the US. In 1993, the state legislature passed a bill to increase the number of prison laborers by 300 per year until the year 2000. The next year the state built a 56,000-square-foot factory near the Monroe prison.

Companies employing prisoners pay \$4.90 an hour, the minimum wage in Washington, of which somewhere between \$1.80 and \$2.80 ends up in the prisoners' pocket. The rest is deducted for the "cost of corrections", a victims' compensation fund, and to pay state and federal taxes. The companies don't offer benefits to the inmate/workers — though Pens, who has written about the story in *Prison Legal News*, notes that Washington is one of many states that offers what he calls the "Three Strikes retirement plan" — and pay little or nothing for factory and office space. ■

# Unwonted Stiffness in President's Spine

Given his usual hasty capitulation before the forces of darkness, President Clinton caused much surprise with his promise to veto the products liability bill that Congress passed earlier this month. We discussed in our last issue how the bill — secretly crafted and lobbied for by APCO Associates, a beltway public relations company that represents a host of Fortune 500 firms — seeks to prevent people from suing corporations marketing products that maim and kill (much of the material we revealed about APCO was turned into a front-page story in *The New York Times* on March 19).

The veto pledge should not be interpreted as a sign of populist inflammation on the part of the Man from Hope. The Association of Trial Lawyers of America is the foremost opponent of the products liability bill. It is also one of the biggest contributors to the Democratic Party.

In promoting "reform", APCO and its funders have loudly exclaimed about the role of trial lawyers in opposing the measure. Trial lawyers do indeed make a juicy target. Just a few weeks ago US District Judge John Nangle reduced from \$33 million to \$10 million the fees of the attorneys who sued on behalf of the victims of Pfizer's Bjork-Shiley Heart Valve.

None the less, the real enemy of the corporate campaign is the public. APCO would prefer that people forget about the heart valve itself, which was introduced by Pfizer in 1979 and taken off the market in 1986, but not before killing 750 people. Pfizer found the valve had problems not long after it went on the market but sought to keep its defects hidden. It even wrote to the Food and Drug Administration to urge the agency "not to notify the public". By the time the FDA ordered the company to halt sales, Pfizer had racked up \$100 million in profits. ■

# Turkey Moot

As it tortures prisoners and Abombs Kurds, the Turkish state has never lacked for friends in Washington. To celebrate the harmonious ties between the two countries, the American-Turkish Council held a two-day conference in Washington earlier this month, where participants gathered to hear academics, think tank experts and government officials hold forth. The Turkey moot certainly wasn't worth the price of admission — \$395 — but we have been studying the conference schedule.

- The "Chairman's Lecture", featuring Secretary of Defense William Perry, was sponsored by Sikorsky Aircraft; a seminar on "Current Defense and Technology Priorities" by Loral Vought Systems; and a foreign affairs panel which discussed "regional security issues" by Lockheed Martin.
- The "President's Reception", to which Commerce Secretary Ron Brown was the invited speaker, was paid for by the FMC corporation. It was FMC which in 1995 turned to Brown when several Commerce Department underlings raised pesky questions about the company's plans to drench the upper reaches of the Salmon River with cyanide, part of its operations at the Beartrack Mine. After some pleasant exchanges with company executives, Brown quickly and illegally gave the green light to FMC's program.
- The "Cultural Symposium" was sponsored by Fleishman-Hillard, which has made millions flacking for Ankara. The pro-Turkey materials the firm distribute are on file at the Justice Department and include, in addition to the pr firm's own bogus reports, several columns by *The New York Times's* Thomas Friedman. So faithfully does Friedman recite the official line — Turkey is a mighty bulwark shoring up NATO's southern flank, etc. — that Fleishman-Hillard quite sensibly uses him as an unpaid propagandist in Ankara's cause. ■