



News Release

Embargo: 00:01 13th March 2003

Going... Going... Gone! Manchester Public Services Auctioned to Big Business

Members of the public will look on aghast in Manchester City Centre on Thursday 13th March between 11:30am and 12:30pm as the services they know and love will be auctioned off to big-business fat cats whose only interest is making money. Education, water and health will all disappear from public regulation into the international market.

The street theatre, staged by international development and environmental campaigners highlights the threat posed to local basic services by the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). GATS is an international trade agreement currently being negotiated at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in Geneva. The action is part of a European-wide day of protest about the controversial WTO negotiations with actions taking place outside every UK Regional Government Office. In Manchester, the campaigners will hand over a letter to the Director of the Government Office at Sunley Tower, expressing their concerns about the implications of GATS that are:

- GATS puts profit before people's basic needs and rights. It will lever-open basic services to the free market, something that is highly controversial around the world. Recent leaks of key documents show that previous promises that the EU would not "request" opening up basic services like water in the developing world have, disturbingly, not been honoured.
- GATS undermines democracy at regional, national and international levels by being effectively irreversible, locking in future governments to its free market rules.
- Negotiations are taking place in secret with no proper public consultation or parliamentary scrutiny. While the UK Government offers reassurance that basic UK services like health and education will not be "offered", activists will

Page 1 of 2 - Contact Graeme Sherriff 07905 790426 or Michael Bane 07947 606950

Photo Opportunity: 11:30am 13th March Piccadilly Plaza

point out that GATS by nature demands progressively deeper opening up of services, so what is "safe" today may well not be safe tomorrow.

Liz Chater of Manchester Friends of the Earth commented:

"The UK Government is backing this World Trade Organisation agreement that will threaten public services and poor people around the world at the expense of offering a bargain basement deal to big business. We all rely on basic services such as clean water, health, education and public transport. But for people in the poorest countries they make the daily difference between life and death. This agreement could harm these basic services here and abroad because like our auction it is rigged in favour of multinational companies who care more about profits than people and the environment.

"This agreement is undemocratic. We elect councillors and MPs to make decisions about how local public services are provided, not groups of international lawyers and trade negotiators in Switzerland. It is time to put people before profit and call a halt to GATS!"

ENDS

Notes for editors

1/ Photo opportunity: *The Auction will be in full swing at 11:30 at Sunley Tower, Piccadilly Plaza.*

2/ Along with other members of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), Britain signed up to the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) in 1994. Negotiations to extend the agreement restart at the World Trade Organisation in Geneva on 21 March 2001. The agreement applies to all levels of government – local, regional and national, and covers 160 service sectors. It extends the free trade principles of the WTO from trade in goods to include trade in services. GATS will have a profound effect on all governments' ability to regulate their service economy and on the potential of poor countries to receive benefits from foreign investment in their service sectors. GATS has unexplored implications for rich and poor governments' ability to provide affordable and accessible public services. The EC's website describes GATS as "first and foremost an instrument for the benefit of business."

More information on GATS, including a media briefing, is available from the WDM national press office on 020 7274 7630 and 07711 875 345 (mobile) or on the web at www.wdm.org.uk

At Westminster, 262 MPs from all the main parties have signed an Early Day Motion calling for an "independent and thorough assessment" of the impact of this important and far-reaching agreement on key services in the UK and in developing countries. On December 23rd eight UK General Secretaries, including those of Unison, TGWU, CWU and NATFHE wrote a public letter to the Guardian expressing their concern about the impact of GATS on health, education, transport, broadcasting and postal services. They called for a halt to GATS negotiations, describing them as "reckless and undemocratic".

Contact:

Graeme Sherriff 07905 790426, Manchester Friends of the Earth

Michael Bane 07947 606950, Manchester Friends of the Earth

Page 2 of 2 - Contact Graeme Sherriff 07905 790426 or Michael Bane 07947 606950

Photo Opportunity: 11:30am 13th March Piccadilly Plaza