# Instructions for building a pan-European movement

*Interview with Pia Eberhardt, Corporate Europe Observatory*[1]

The negotiations on the proposed Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) between the European Commission and the US government led to massive protests both in the US and in Europe over the last few years. While supporters argue that an increase in free trade would result in economic growth and more jobs, critics claim that TTIP endangers environmental and consumer standards and that it is an assault on democracy itself. Pia Eberhardt, works for the Corporate Europe Observatory and is one of the spokespersons of the anti-TTIP movement.

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*Would you say the anti-TTIP movement has been successful? And if so, in what way exactly?*

Yes, absolutely. It has been successful in many ways: First, we have managed to put a highly complex issue on the public agenda in many EU countries. In countries where TTIP has been publicly debated for a while now – like Germany or Austria – the majority of the population is now opposed to TTIP according to polls. Second, this has put enormous pressure on policymakers and made the TTIP negotiations much more complicated, to the extent that they may never be concluded. Third, we have managed to build a relatively stable – and broad – pan-European network. That did not exist in Europe before.

**1** | This interview took place in October 2016. The last two questions were added in January 2017.

*The street protests were among the most successful in a long time (at least in some countries, such as Germany). Why do you think people were mobilised over what is actually a very complicated and technical international trade treaty?*

I think the most important reason is TTIP itself, and the fact that it will have an impact on so many issues that people care about – from the environment to labour rights and democracy as a whole. Because of its scope, nearly every component of Europe's organised civil society – trade unions, environmental and consumer groups, digital rights activists and so on – has a reason to worry about TTIP. And they all campaigned on it. I cannot think of any other issue where this has been the case.

*Was it different to other protests, like for example Heiligendamm 2007? If so, what was the difference?*

First, I would say that the threats that TTIP poses are much more concrete: this will be a treaty that binds our societies indefinitely and has a very concrete impact for example on how much competition small farmers face and which standards prevail in the food sector. The threats of a G8 summit are far more diffuse. It may be clear to us activists what the problem is with the G8 and why it is an important link in the network of institutions that has driven neoliberal globalisation, but for ordinary people the implications are very abstract. Second, I think that the anti-TTIP movement is much broader – and allows for many more different ways of people getting involved than, for example, the anti-G8 protests. During the "TTIP Game Over" action days in Brussels, for example, we saw the kind of direct actions and civil disobedience that played a key role in Heiligendamm. But at the same time people have also spent a lot of time discussing the issue with local politicians and working on anti-TTIP and CETA resolutions, which have now been passed by over 2000 cities and regions in Europe. And you also have the small and medium-sized businesses against TTIP. This context allows a topic to become an issue for groups far beyond the usual suspects and small left-wing circles.

*What were the difficulties in building up a transnational protest?*

I would say it wasn't very difficult, but obviously you face the usual challenges: language barriers and resources are always an issue. It simply takes a lot of resources to translate studies and other information sources so that people can work with them on the ground in their countries. And obviously we do not have the means to translate our EU-wide meetings into lots of different languages, so effectively only people who speak English can attend. Another challenge is that you need some form of coordination of such a movement – but at the same time you need a lot of space and flexibility so that all the national campaigns can work in a way that makes most sense for their own countries. So, for example, deciding on European-wide action days is never easy because a day or week that might make perfect sense in the Spanish context might be completely out of context in Austria.

*What role did social media play? Do you see a conflict between "clicktivism" and protest on the streets or long- term engagement?*

Social media plays a very big role. If you have a new analysis on TTIP, it can reach people everywhere in no time. You can use it to build up pressure on policymakers, for example during twitter storms. But online campaign groups like Campact in Germany do much more than clicktivism. Thanks to Campact, for example, thousands of people have visited the offices of their MPs. They have put "door hangers" informing about the different party positions on TTIP on people's doors ahead of important elections. And research has shown that around a third of the people who attended the big demos against TTIP in Germany did so because they had learned about TTIP from Campact. So no, I do not see a conflict between these different forms of engagement – as long as we do not put out different messages.

*Have you cooperated with organisations from the US? Do you see potential for transatlantic solidarity rather than the transatlantic spectatorship we see, for example, with the US presidential election?*

Yes, of course. US (and Canadian) groups were involved in the struggle against TTIP and CETA right from the start. All the working groups we have on the different TTIP issues – for example on agriculture or regulatory cooperation – are transatlantic, so there are regular calls on

these issues between people on both sides of the Atlantic. Email lists, too, are transatlantic. Anything else would not make sense because with TTIP the key line of conflict is not the US vs. the EU or the other way round – it is corporations and their profit interests vs. other societal interests.

*What are the most important things other movements can learn from all this?*

I would say two things: First, confront any differences between the different actors in the movement head on – but do not get lost in them; focus on your commonalities. For example, at the very first European meeting we had on TTIP it was clear that there were people who opposed free trade while others were in favour of free trade but were still critical of many parts of the TTIP, for example regulatory cooperation and investment protection. So we made these positions very clear from the outset, but then said: let us not lecture each other on our respective positions but rather focus on what we have in common, for example that we see TTIP as a threat to democracy and to regulation in the public interest. The same goes for different forms of activities – we have a coalition that brings together people who regularly lobby policymakers and people who consider this a waste of time and prefer to do direct actions. But both are respected; it is clear to everyone that our broad base is our strength.

The second lesson is related to this: you have to be able to get out of your comfort zone. To stop TTIP it is not enough to get grassroots groups, trade unions and left and Green parties on your side. You also need to convince significant sections of the conservative middle class and more centre-right parties and conservative media. So you need people and organisations that know how to speak to, say, conservative farmers in Bavaria, to judges, to medium-sized enterprises, and to regulators. That has an impact on your messaging and the way you act.

*How do you deal with the increasing appropriation of traditional left-wing causes by nationalist groups?*

It is a challenge, and I do not think we have a satisfying answer to that yet. In the German context, for example, nearly every speech at the big demos we staged made it clear that there was no space for racist, anti-Semitic or anti-American positions in these marches. People bearing big banners with messages to this effect marched in front of the rest. And we had

anti-fascist monitoring groups at the demos to kick out people with racist messages. These initiatives are very important and must continue. But I am not sure that that will be enough.

For example, we face the concrete problem that the Social Democrats in the European Parliament do not want to vote with the far right. I can totally understand that. And for the Greens in the European Parliament it must be horrible to be constantly lumped together with UKIP, for example, which is also voting against TTIP in the Parliament. But the response of the democratic parties cannot be to start approving all kinds of neoliberal projects simply because nationalists are opposing them. However, I honestly have no idea how to deal with that situation. It is pretty disastrous.

*Wallonia, a French-speaking region of Belgium with a population of about 3.5 million people, grabbed the world's attention when it vetoed CETA. How do you evaluate what happened in Wallonia?*

What happened in Belgium was on the one hand very encouraging. The Walloon Parliament organised 70 hours of public consultation on CETA. So, it scrutinised the agreement vigorously. And it identified serious concerns – and did have the backbone to at least temporarily block the CETA ratification when it was clear that its concerns had not been addressed. So, what we saw was a rare glorious democratic moment, where a Parliament actually did its job, scrutinised a complicated agreement with serious consequences and stood up to defend the interests of the people who elected it.

But the episode was also disillusioning. In the end, the pressure on Wallonia was too strong and it had to clear the path for the Belgian federal government to sign CETA – even though none of CETA's flaws were fixed. Nonetheless, Wallonia achieved two important things: it forced the Belgian government to send CETA's investment chapter to the European Court of Justice so that the court can check if the chapter is in line with EU law. And Wallonia – and the three other sub-federal entities which shared its opposition to CETA – put down in writing that they will not ratify CETA in its current form when CETA reaches the third stage of ratification, in which all regional Belgian Parliaments will have to vote on CETA again. So, it is clear that CETA will have to be changed – or Belgium will not be able to fully ratify CETA.

*As TTIP has been put off the political agenda, CETA is still in negotiations. Do you foresee the future of the movement working against CETA?*

CETA will face a long and difficult battle to get ratified in all EU member states. Because in the third phase of the ratification, around 40 Parliaments in all 28 EU member states will have to ratify the agreement. This is likely to happen quickly in some countries like the Nordic states where CETA is not really an issue. But in others like Belgium, France, Austria and Germany, it might take years until CETA will be put to an actual vote. And that will mean that the agreement will only partially enter into force – and the controversial investment protection chapter, for example, will not. That in itself is already a major civil society victory – even if we might not manage to kill CETA for good in these votes.

For TTIP, we will have to see what the Trump administration will really do. At the moment, we do not know its position on TTIP. It could be that the US government buries the agreement. But I think it is likely that the TTIP negotiations will be picked up again in the second half of 2017. Many of the TTIP chapters – for example, on regulatory cooperation or financial deregulation – fit quite well with Trump's deregulatory big business agenda. So, we will definitely remain vigilant.