

Squeezed: a film about the cost of free trade in the Asia-Pacific region

review by GRAIN

The message is simple: free trade is increasing poverty. In Asia, we know this, for we see it every day. Free trade is generating not only more poverty, but the violence that goes with it. The virtue of *Squeezed*, a 20-minute film from Global Trade Watch in Australia, is that by focusing on this one simple message, it confronts the viewer with reality.

Squeezed was shot over seven days in July 2007 in the Philippines and Thailand, and launched two months later during a summit of Asia-Pacific leaders in Sydney. The film looks at how trade liberalisation – through the global dictates of the World Trade Organisation, and now increasingly through the bilateral free trade agreements (FTAs) that governments are signing in a frenzy – is affecting ordinary people in Asia. It captures the havoc that poverty wreaks on more and more people each day, from farmers to slum dwellers, from small dairy operators to the region's tens of millions of children.

The first half of the film looks at the Philippines, where most of the people's problems are laid at the feet of the WTO. Under its agreement on agricultural trade, the Philippines had to lower tariffs and quotas and open its market to subsidised or dumped products from abroad. Farmers got squeezed between ever-increasing costs of production and ever-declining prices for their crops. Overwhelmed by debt, many had to abandon their land and seek new livelihoods. To drive the

message home, the film spotlights maize and rice farmers in Isabela and the plight of a Payatas scavenger, a woman who, driven off her land, now has to scratch a living on Manila's largest garbage dump.

A few odd messages slip through. For instance, we are told that the Philippines did not import rice before 1994 (presumably referring to the year the WTO agreements were signed). In reality, the country has been importing rice for the last half century, apart from two or three occasions when it managed to export a small surplus. We are also told that imports of cheap agricultural products from the European Union are displacing Filipino peasants. Yet the EU is not a major source of the Philippines' top agricultural imports.

The second half of the film, focusing on Thailand, takes a closer look at people's struggles against free trade. Recent Thai governments – the failed Thaksin regime and now the military junta – have been gung-ho on signing bilateral FTAs with nearby countries. These bilateral deals are supposed to gain increased market access for Thai exports, which the governments see as particularly important since trade talks at the WTO have been blocked for several years. However, what is happening – as the film vividly shows – is that under the FTAs Thai farmers and small businesses are getting badly hurt by competition from abroad. Only a few big corporate Thai interests,

such as Charoen Pokphand and Thaksin's own companies, have made any money from these agreements. Garlic, onion and fruit producers are in dire straits, as they cannot compete with the flood of imports from China that has resulted from the China-Thailand FTA; and the dairy sector has been virtually wiped out by the Australia-Thailand agreement, which has permitted unfettered imports from the huge Australian dairy industry. Several of the farmers interviewed in the film feel sure that, once their colleagues really understand what the FTAs are about, they will all be out in the streets protesting.

As farmers are driven off the land, so dies a whole way of life with its own culture, biodiversity and communities. The film comes to an important conclusion: ultimately, only mass movements will stop this crisis created by trade and investment liberalisation. Fortunately people's movements to stop free trade agreements in Asia are growing in strength by the day. But they need to get their message out, and films like *Squeezed* help them in that all-important task.

Squeezed can be purchased online for A\$10

<http://www.squeezedthefilm.com/>
Or write to:

Global Trade Watch, PO Box 6014,
Collingwood North, Victoria 3066,
Australia
email: info@tradewatch.org.au

Two short films about fisherfolk in Canada

review by GRAIN

Martha Stiegman, a Canadian film-maker with a background in community activism, has recently produced two short films on the struggles of fisherfolk on the east coast of Canada. Not long ago, this area had arguably the most abundant fish stocks in the world. But over the past few decades the fish have all but disappeared, owing to overfishing by large corporate fleets and negligent management by government. Stiegman's films look at how both indigenous and non-indigenous fisherfolk in the area are dealing with this situation – working against all odds to retain their traditional fishing practices and assert their own forms of community control over the fisheries.

In *The End of the Line*, Stiegman follows Terry Farnsworth, one of the few fishermen in the province of Nova Scotia to continue to use the traditional "handlining" technique. He talks about how the government introduced a quota system that privatised the fisheries and thus set the stage for the corporate take-over and ensuing destruction of fish stocks and small-scale fishing. The film also looks at the difficulties the community had in implementing its own form of community-based management in the face of declining stocks and hostility from the government.

The other film, *In Defense of Our Treaties*, looks at how an indigenous Mi'kmaq

community in Nova Scotia has refused to cede its sovereign right to manage its fishery resources, and how it built alliances with small-scale non-indigenous fisherfolk in the area, and with fisherfolk around the world, to safeguard the community's livelihoods.

The local people tell their own stories, giving a vivid sense of the struggles they face. These valuable stories, full of insight and inspiration, will be of use to people around the world.

Martha Stiegman
The End of the Line
In Defense of Our Treaties
(Approximately 20 minutes each)

