Welcome to a new edition of the bilaterals.org podcast where we discuss the most recent developments around free trade and investment agreements.

Last year, bilaterals.org celebrated its 20th anniversary. Twenty years of supporting struggles against free trade and investment agreements around the world through communication and information dissemination, giving visibility and connectedness to social struggles on the ground, and promoting values of solidarity and cooperation between movements.

To mark the occasion, we gathered in October in Bandung, Indonesia, to reflect on our journey, the changes over these two decades and the challenges we face both politically and in our communications.

During the meeting, we analysed the evolution of trade issues in different regions, current challenges and how to improve bilaterals.org to make it an even more useful tool for movements. We also shared insights and experiences with allied organisations from Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines and Sri Lanka, who enriched the discussions with their contributions.

Throughout the year, we published a series of articles written by the movements and activists at the heart of the campaigns against these agreements. The articles aim to take stock of what has happened over the past 20 years and look ahead to the resistance to free trade agreements in the years to come. You can find the links in the description.

As Trump returns, the EU is back to its far-reaching free trade agenda.

After more than 25 years of closed-door negotiations, the EU-Mercosur Free Trade Agreement was announced last December, but its future is far from certain. Opposition from countries like Ireland, France and Poland, coupled with growing pressure from social and farmers' movements, points to a tough road ahead for ratification.

The agreement will see the EU increase imports of products such as beef, poultry, soya and sugar, while exporting cars, plastics and pesticides - some of which are banned in Europe because of their environmental and health risks. This raises alarms for Mercosur countries like Brazil and Argentina, which are already among the world's biggest users of pesticides.

Overshadowed in the debate is the strategic importance of lithium, a critical raw material for Europe's green transition. Argentina, Bolivia and Brazil hold vast reserves of the mineral, which is essential for electric vehicles, smartphones and renewable energy storage. As Western powers race to secure supplies, the extraction and processing of lithium come with severe environmental and social costs, disproportionately affecting local communities in the global south.

Many critics warn that the deal perpetuates colonial trade structures, where Latin America's raw materials are extracted and processed into high-value products in Europe, leaving behind environmental devastation and reduced economic benefits for the region as a whole.

Moreover, the inclusion of a controversial 'rebalancing mechanism' could stifle environmental and social policies in both blocs by allowing trade disputes over measures that restrict exports. This could create a "regulatory chill" that would discourage the implementation of new public policies.

The EU is making progress on several fronts. On 17th January it announced that it had concluded negotiations with Mexico on an updated trade agreement, nine years after they began.

According to the limited information released by the European Commission, a number of sectors stand out as particular winners: dairy and wine, financial services, telecommunications and digital trade. The agreement also opens up access to Mexican public procurement markets and to the exploitation of the country's mining resources.

Attac France slammed the agreement for failing to take into account the current climate, social and geopolitical crises, and for being stuck in an outdated free trade model from the 1990s that has only served to increase inequalities.

The EU is also pursuing free trade deals with some ASEAN countries.

The agreement with Indonesia has reportedly entered the final stage of negotiations, but civil society groups say that significant concerns about the potential social, environmental, biodiversity and human rights impacts, particularly on indigenous peoples, remain unaddressed.

After resuming FTA talks with Thailand two years ago, the EU has also reopened negotiations with the Philippines, with a second round of talks scheduled for February, and more recently with Malaysia.

Civil society groups from Southeast Asia remain critical of the agreements, with some particularly concerned about the intellectual property provisions typically included in EU trade deals, which undermine access to affordable medicines for millions of people.

Colombia has signed a new agreement with the US to rebalance their free trade agreement. The idea is to curb investor abuse through ISDS arbitration and ensure that foreign investment respects Colombia's national laws and public interests.

The Investor-State Dispute Settlement (ISDS) system allows foreign investors - mostly large corporations - to sue governments if they feel their profits are threatened.

But Colombian civil society group Cedetrabajo said the revision of the agreement would have no practical impact. Over the past decade, 23 cases have been filed against Colombia, many by mining companies, for implementing policies to protect the environment and indigenous communities, but none of the cases have come from US companies.

The real issues surrounding this agreement, including the rigid intellectual property rules, the restrictions on promoting public development policies, the requirements that public purchases

be put out to international tender, or the arrival of subsidised agricultural products, have not been addressed.

However, in a bid to tackle some of the most damaging aspects of other FTAs, Colombia's president is also planning to renegotiate the investment provisions of agreements with the European Union and the United Kingdom, seeking to prioritise social and environmental justice over corporate greed.

In Africa, three new ISDS cases related to the mining sector have emerged. The Italian company Minerali Industriali is suing Tunisia over its sand mining and processing activities. Morocco is facing international arbitration from British mining company Emmerson over a potash project. And the Australia-based Sarama Resources has filed an arbitration request against Burkina Faso over the alleged expropriation of a gold mining project.

And that’s it for today. I’m Nicolas Roux, bilaterals.org. If you’d like more information about today’s podcast, you can check out the links provided in the description. More trade news coming up soon. In the meantime, you can visit bilaterals.org.