

Subvert - A podcast by Corporate Accountability

Title Episode 1: A field trip to (virtual) shareholders' meetings

Description

In the first ever episode of Corporate Accountability's podcast, Subvert, we'll go to two virtual press conferences that we held in advance of annual shareholder meetings for Coca-Cola and Philip Morris International. At these virtual events, organizers and public health advocates spoke from their experience organizing against Big Food and Big Tobacco on five continents.

Show notes

This episode features the work and voices of:

Dr. Yolandra Hancock

Dr. Melissa Mialon

Brianna Harrington

Dr. Ulysses Dorotheo

Dr. Eduardo Bianco

Adriana Carvalho

Philip Jakpor

Transcript

Lena: Hello, and welcome to the first episode of Corporate Accountability's podcast, Subvert, holding corporate power to account. I'm Lena Greenberg, your host, and the press officer at Corporate Accountability. I'm excited to bring you stories from our organizing and allies around the world working to expose corporate abuse.

First, a little bit about us for those just joining. Corporate Accountability is a 40 plus year old organization powered by people. We wage strategic campaigns to stop corporate abuse against human rights and democracy. Currently, we have four main campaign areas: Food, water, climate, and tobacco. In each of these campaigns, we target specific corporations by researching and exposing their abuses, securing media coverage, and organizing people to take action. This can shift the cost benefit ratio for corporations, thus making it less profitable to engage in harmful practices.

One way we do that is by engaging in shareholder activism, a strategic tactic to apply direct pressure to corporations. Every year, corporations hold shareholder meetings where investors themselves, or people who stand in for them, can defend resolutions to change something about how those corporations operate.

At Corporate Accountability, we work with our members, socially responsible investment partners, and allied advocates to present resolutions and challenge the amoral actions that may pass as business as usual for corporations, if not repeatedly exposed.

This year, alongside our organizing partners, we attended shareholder meetings for Coca-Cola and Philip Morris International. Big Soda and Big Tobacco have a lot in common. Both industries have a long history of funding junk science, selling harmful products, and engaging in political interference. Due to the COVID-19 crisis, many shareholder meetings were held virtually, thus limiting access to already hard-to-access spaces. In addition to speaking at these virtual meetings, we held virtual press conferences with some of the people best-equipped to speak to the abuses of these corporations.

Today, we're bringing you some powerful words from public health experts, organizers, lawyers, and researchers at press conferences in advance of shareholder meetings for Coca-Cola, the world's largest beverage company, and Philip Morris International, one of the world's largest tobacco companies. First, a little background on what successful corporate campaigning looks like to us.

A big part of our climate campaign, which targets big polluters, including fossil fuel corporations, is centered around advancing the demand to kick those big polluters out of climate policy, to hold those polluters accountable and liable for their past and present abuses, and to make them pay for knowingly fueling the climate crisis.

The shorthand we often use to summarize these campaign strategies is: Kick them out and make them pay. The idea of kicking them out and making them pay doesn't only apply to the fossil fuel industry. Abusive corporations from the food and beverage industry to Big Tobacco are actively seeking to undermine policies that are meant to regulate them and trying to externalize the cost of their abuses.

Today, we're starting with a corporation infamous for its political interference: Coca-Cola. Doctors, public health experts, and advocates gathered the day before Coke's annual meeting in late April to celebrate the release of a report produced by Corporate Accountability: "Partnership for an Unhealthy Planet," which investigates Coke's ties to the International Life Sciences Institute, or ILSI.

The report makes it clear that while ILSI tries to maintain its image as an objective scientific institution, it's really a puppet of Big Food and Big Soda corporations. Here's Ashka Naik, our research director at Corporate Accountability, with some more background on ILSI.

Ashka: No doubt, you have read the reporting regarding how Coke signs these policy efforts to reign in the crisis of diet-related disease; about the shadowy industry group, as dubbed by some, that Coke deploys to sell junk science. You'll see its 16 affiliates globally, 400 corporate members, more than hundred paid staff, a nearly \$17 million annual budget. In 2019 alone, it boasted more than 150 workshops and 70 scientific publications.

This is to say, it would be hard to overstate ILSI's global reach, and no single entity may have more sway over national food and nutrition policy in the United States. Every five years, the U.S. Federal Government issues the nation's go-to source for nutrition advice, the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, the DGA. They help direct what more than 13 million school children eat each school day. They are used to inform the food and nutritional education about half of all new mothers and infants receive, and they also instruct the types of meals

and nutrition advice the federal government provides to seniors, veterans, and a host of other beneficiaries.

Lena: Next, we'll hear from Dr. Yolandra Hancock. She's a pediatrician and adjunct professor at the Milliken Institute School of Public Health at George Washington University and will tell us about how she became an advocate against Big Soda and the risks posed by Coke-funded ILSI.

Yolanda: Not only am I a professor of public health, I'm also a pediatrician and an obesity specialist.

About 10 years ago, I diagnosed one of my first pediatric patients with type two diabetes, and I'll never forget one moment in that visit. I sat with her chart and her labs in one hand, readying myself to diagnose this little girl with type two diabetes. And right as I got ready to do that, she pulls out a soda. From that moment on, I wasn't just a doctor. I became an advocate. When a company like Coca-Cola estimates that 86% of its growth through 2020 will come from multicultural youth, someone must fight and protect them. In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, where hypertension, diabetes, heart disease, and obesity, all chronic conditions directly linked to the overconsumption of sugary drinks; and one in five patients dying due to poor diets; African-Americans and Latinx communities are significantly higher risk, as we see playing out in cities across the country. And I can't help but wonder about the role that sugary drinks are playing in this heartbreaking disparity, knowing that sugary drinks are the leading source of added sugar. With Blacks having over 75% higher risk of developing diabetes and over 50% higher chance of developing heart disease, I would like to hear how an industry can justify its role in influencing policy that determines whether or not someone lives or dies.

It's time to take action. Communities of color have disproportionately paid the price for the deceptive tactics played out by Coca-Cola, the American beverage industry, and other key players in the food and beverage industry. I call on each and every company within this industry, with Coca-Cola being the leader, to stop funding distorted research, to stop creating misleading educational campaigns, and to stop attempting to influence local state and federal policy that further perpetuates the health disparities that I'm committed to fight. Stop putting profits over people.

Lena: Here's Melissa Mialon, a food engineer and researcher from France. She's published in-depth investigations about ILSI and will elaborate on the role of junk science in policymaking.

Melissa: What has happened for Coca-Cola and other corporations in the food, but also other industries, they understood that science was very, very important if you want to win a political battle. So, policy is important, but if you could have science and the credibility of science on your side, then you will be an even more legitimate actor in these policy discussions.

Lena: And finally, Brianna Harrington, a leader in socially responsible investing, who wrote and introduced a resolution calling for an independent assessment of Coca-Cola's public

health liabilities. Her organization has also presented similar resolutions at shareholder meetings of other funders of ILSI, including PepsiCo and McDonald's.

Brianna: Not only does Coke's funding of ILSI and like institutions denigrate public health and policymaking, it constitutes a liability for investors. The fact that the corporation's viability depends on political interference and junk science signal that its brand products and business model may lack viability if not for such influence peddling and manipulation.

Thus, we hope that with this resolution Coke will do the honest due diligence it should have done some time ago and reconsider its longstanding manipulation of science and public health policy.

Lena: Our report and these public health advocates make the demand to kick Coke out of food policy pretty clear. Next, we'll turn to Big Tobacco for a press conference we held on May 5th in advance of the Phillip Morris International, or PMI, shareholder meeting, which happened the following day. But first, here's Michél Legendre, who directs our tobacco campaign. He'll give us some context on the work Corporate Accountability does to kick abusive corporations out of tobacco control policy and make them pay for their abuses.

Michél: Thanks, Lena. Corporate Accountability's tobacco campaign is our longest running, about 25 years. We monitor, expose, and challenge directly Big Tobacco's abuses. From sowing doubt about health implications of tobacco use, to the corporations rebranding as smoke-free, to going to extreme lengths to block, weaken, and delay implementation of the global tobacco treaty; at the root of all of this is the tobacco industry's attempts to addict new, lifelong customers and to interfere in public policy. Thankfully, there's the global tobacco treaty, and this treaty is the gold standard of public health policy.

Also known as the FCTC, it's the first treaty negotiated by the World Health Organization and is in response directly to the role that the tobacco industry plays in the global epidemic that kills 8 million people every year. It was adopted in 2003 and came into force in 2005. Since, it's been ratified by over 180 countries. The FCTC includes a number of important and precedent-setting public health protections.

We focus on Article 5.3, which protects public health policy from tobacco industry interference, and Article 19, which equips governments that have ratified the treaty to hold tobacco corporations liable for their abuses. Basically, we're saying kick them out, and make them pay. This is the kind of policy and liability that should be instituted across all of our campaigns.

Lena: Our first speaker at the press conference was Yul Dorotheo. He's a physician based in the Philippines and has firsthand experience with Philip Morris' damaging business practices and exploitation of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Yul: My name is Yul Dorotheo. I'm a Filipino physician living in Manila, and I represent the Southeast Asia Tobacco Control Alliance.

Even during this ongoing coronavirus pandemic, Philip Morris continues to make and sell cigarettes, completely disregarding warnings by health authorities, such as the World Health

Organization and our own Philippine Department of Health, both of which have warned that smokers are more vulnerable to being infected by the COVID-19 virus and have an increased risk of severe COVID disease and death.

At the same time, Philip Morris is donating face masks and other equipment in an attempt to cover up the millions of tobacco diseases and deaths instead of doing the one thing that really matters, which is stopping selling cigarettes. So we challenge Philip Morris here in Asia to stop the duplicity, stop marketing and selling cigarettes, accept liability, pay damages to tobacco victims, compensate governments for medical costs, and clearly specify a date to completely phase out all tobacco products.

Lena: Now we'll hear from Eduardo Bianco. He's the regional coordinator for the Americas at the Framework Convention Alliance for Tobacco Control, which supports the implementation of the landmark treaty known as the FCTC, which Michél introduced a moment ago.

Eduardo: My name is Eduardo Bianco. I'm a cardiologist based in Uruguay working on tobacco control for over 20 years and serving as the Convention Alliance for Tobacco Control coordinator for the Americas. Before 2005, when the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, the FCTC, was ratified, very few Latin American countries had implemented significant tobacco control policies, despite that the tobacco epidemic was a huge problem for the region. After 2005, since changing, and progressively, countries have implemented FCTC measures, and smoking prevalence dropped from 22% to 17% in 10 years.

But tobacco is still a problem. The region is far from the full FCTC implementation, and that implementation is uneven.

Michél: Uneven implementation means that some governments are using more of the tools in the global tobacco treaty toolbox than others. Back to Eduardo.

Eduardo: What is the main obstacle for the countries to reach the full FCTC implementation? The tobacco industry's interference.

Up to now, many countries have been targeted with legal action by the tobacco industry for market dispense. I believe it's time for all the parties to put in practice FCTC Article 19, which is about liability. It is time for parties to be on the fence and follow the example of South Korea and Brazil that are suing multinational tobacco companies to recover their costs due to tobacco. It is time for applying to beat tobacco, the polluters pays principle.

Lena: And here's Adriana Carvalho, the legal director at Act Health Promotion in Brazil, who will continue to build the case for tobacco industry liability.

Adriana: PMI's business is the manufacture, sale, and promotion of a highly addictive product that causes more than 50 diseases, which has been owned by the company since the sixties.

However, the company continues to invest in the business and profit, placing a burden on the health system of countries due to the cost of tobacco-related disease treatment. It's past time that PMI must be held responsible for the negative externalities that its business causes

to health systems worldwide. In compliance with the FCTC, an international public health treaty, which states that countries should promote Big Tobacco civil liability. The right to profit must come alongside the duty to fully repair the negative externalities that the business causes to the country's health system.

Lena: For some concluding words, we'll turn to Philip Jakpor, the program director for Corporate Accountability and Public Participation Africa, or CAPPA.

During the press conference, he spoke about the tobacco industry's abuses in Nigeria. Even though the case is specific, his demands are universal.

Philip: We want PMI to stop circumvention of tobacco control laws. We want PMI to stop hiding behind projects to compromise all sectors of the Nigerian economy. And PMI must take full responsibility for the harms of this product.

Lena: We've now heard from our partners and staff members on five continents, who have made it clear that Big Food and Big Tobacco corporations have no place in the writing or implementation of policies that regulate their industries. But ceasing to interfere in politics is not enough. These experts have outlined concrete ways in which these abusive corporations can and must be held liable for the harm they have caused to people across the world.

Many thanks to everyone who brought their stories of the urgent need to kick them out and make them pay. And thanks so much for listening to Subvert. Subscribe, and stay tuned for our next episode.

This episode was hosted by me, Lena Greenberg. Eric Johnson and I co-produced. Matthew Peiffer edited and mixed the show. We heard from Corporate Accountability organizers Ashka Naik and Michél Legendre, as well as our partners and public health experts Dr. Yolandra Hancock, Dr. Mélissa Mialon, Brianna Harrington, Dr. Ulysses Dorotheo, Dr. Eduardo Bianco, Adrianna Carvalho, and Philip Jakpor. Many thanks to you all for sharing your powerful words. Thanks also to Taylor Billings, Jesse Brag and Heshan Berents-Weeramuni for your support. Once again, thank you so much for listening and join the movement by visiting us at corporateaccountability.org.