



Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s CFO

**For the labor rights and all human
rights of the maquiladora workers**



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Trade Activist Host Forum

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By John Hanron

While many corporations tout the benefits of the North American Free Trade Agreement, many working class people and environmentally concerned citizens call the 1994 treaty a disaster.

NAFTA has, they claim, led to an increase in power of multinational corporations over individual nations' rights to set their own standards for public health and safety, workers' rights and environmental regulations. NAFTA, critics argue, has been responsible for the loss of more than 400,000 American jobs and has worsened poverty and pollution problems in Mexico.

Since late 1994, trade ministers from the United States and 33 Central and South American countries have been negotiating to complete the Free Trade Area of the Americas, which will expand NAFTA's policies throughout the hemisphere.

"This is NAFTA on steroids," said James Donaldson, an FTAA opponent from Twisp. "NAFTA has been responsible for oppressing wages, oppressing the environment and destroying the connection between humans and nature."

Donaldson said situations like the recent closure of the Vaagen Brothers' mill in Republic—and the accompanying loss of jobs in that isolated community—will become more common if the NAFTA principals are expanded to include all of South and Central America.

"The bottom line is not health or public safety, but profits for the few," he said. As the trade ministers from 34 countries—representing 800 million people—negotiate the final stages of the FTAA, opponents are concerned that regular people are not being informed.

In an effort to raise public awareness of the FTAA negotiations, a series of public hearings have been scheduled in select towns and cities in the Northwest: Medford, Ashland, Eugene, Portland, Salem, Hood River, Wenatchee, Spokane and Twisp.

"The U.S. trade representative's office has set up a process to solicit citizens' views, but there is no real mechanism to incorporate the public's concerns into the actual negotiations," writes Jessica Marquez, a grassroots coordinator of the Mexico Solidarity Network, which is sponsoring the forums. "The public has been given nothing more than a suggestion box. At the same time, however, hundreds of corporate representatives are advising the U.S. negotiators and have advance access to the negotiating texts."

Scheduled to speak at the Twisp forum is Teresita de Jesus Polo Ramos, an organizer with the Border Worker's Committee in Laredo, Tex. Ramos is a former maquiladora who worked in border factories for more than 10 years. Ramos was involved in a years-long fight against unfair severance pay after being laid off, eventually winning 35 times the \$100 the company had initially offered.

Also sharing some insights at the Twisp forum will be Luis Alberto Lara Ballina, secretary general of the National Union of Public Health Workers of Guatemala. Ballina was one of the signers of the AFL-CIO and Central American Union joint declaration against the proposed Central American Free Trade Agreement. CAFTA negotiations are happening in conjunction with FTAA negotiations.

Also attending the forum will be Marquez, who is based out of the Mexico Solidarity Network's San Francisco office. MSN works to bring democracy, economic justice and human rights to people on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border.

The Twisp public forum on FTAA is scheduled for Tuesday (Feb. 11) from 7 to 9 p.m. at the Methow Valley Community Center gym. For more information, contact Donaldson at 997-0115.

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