

In Ohio primary, campaign hinges on NAFTA

In a state that has lost 225,000 jobs since 2001, voters blame economic woes on free trade and globalization.

By Amanda Paulson
The Christian Science Monitor
February 28, 2008

<http://www.csmonitor.com/2008/0228/p01s05-uspo.html>

Dayton, Ohio

In Ohio, it feels like 1993 again.

The coming Democratic presidential vote here has revived a debate over the merits of globalization and free trade – as epitomized by the long-reviled North American Free Trade Agreement.

In Ohio, which has lost nearly 225,000 manufacturing jobs since 2001, NAFTA is an easy target. For many working-class Ohioans – and the voters Sens. Barack Obama and Hillary Rodham Clinton hope to win in Tuesday's critical primary – it stands as a symbol for much that troubles their state. Against that backdrop, say experts, it's not surprising it's become a political piñata.

"It's nice to blame the bogeyman, rather than the failed business strategies of Ford, GM, or Chrysler," says Ned Hill, an economist at Cleveland State University. "And middle-class anxiety is a real issue." The bickering isn't so much over the candidates' current positions on NAFTA – both are eager to tell Ohioans just how much they dislike the pact and how quickly they would renegotiate a better deal – but how consistent they've been in that stance in the past.

Senator Obama never loses an opportunity to remind voters that Senator Clinton's husband was the one who pushed NAFTA through, or of certain pro-NAFTA comments she's made in the past decade. Senator Clinton, meanwhile, cites a 2004 speech to Illinois farmers in which Obama also praised trade agreements.

"It's clear that both senators have learned the Sherrod Brown playbook," says Professor Hill, referring to the Ohio senator who was elected in 2006 largely on the basis of an antitrade platform.

Hill says Ohio's economic woes are due to far more complex causes than globalization or a trade agreement, but the general hatred of NAFTA in the state makes it an easy target for politicians.

Here in Dayton, where some 15,000 manufacturing jobs have been lost over the past five years, the effects of globalization are seen in sharp relief. It's not all negative. The changes have forced certain businesses to shift their focus, become better managed, and target new sorts of value-added manufacturing.

Better business through free trade

Globalization "made us make better business decisions," says Dave Dysinger, whose family-owned tooling and machining company in Dayton almost went out of business at the end of the 1990s, dropping from 116 people down to 12, until he shifted away from the traditional commodity-based clients and local markets he used to serve.

Today, his company employs 42 people, is thriving, and designs tools for more specialized energy, agricultural, and appliance companies around the country.

Still, Mr. Dysinger acknowledges that the transition was painful. And for the thousands of people who lost good-paying union jobs as large factories such as Delphi shut their doors to move overseas, it's hard to see anything positive in a more global marketplace.

"The Dayton area is a classic example of what's happening in the changes in the world economy," says Joe Tuss, the Montgomery County economic development director, noting that the city hung on to traditional manufacturing jobs longer than many places in the state. "We're at the end of the line in Ohio in terms of production jobs."

The future, he says, is moving away from the classic assembly-line work that has employed so many people for so long. Any manufacturing that replaces it is focused on high-skill, value-added niches that employ far fewer people. "It's not commodities, not producing widgets, anymore," says Mr. Tuss.

For Earl Conley, recently laid off from his \$19-per-hour job making car seats at a GM supplier, that's not much comfort. Mr. Conley has a high-school education and few marketable skills.

He goes every day to the county's Job Transition Center, set up to help people laid off because of factory closings, where he learned to use a computer – he'd never turned one on before – and applies for every job he can find online, including janitorial positions and jobs making barely more than minimum wage. So far, he's had no success. "Everyone wants skilled labor," he says sadly. "I'm 54 years old – it'd be hard to retrain me."

Conley's wife, Jill, is on disability, and both of them had operations last year. Watching bills stack up is terrifying, they both say, and they worry about losing their home.

"The manufacturing jobs are changing," Conley says. "I guess people are obsolete anymore and not needed."

US export: jobs

The Conleys are skeptical that any politician can help them much, but others are listening to what Obama and Clinton are saying about jobs and trade, and in some cases holding Clinton's own history with NAFTA – via her husband – against her.

"Clinton – there's that name again. I heard on the radio that she'll fight hard for unions," says Brian Rader, a forklift operator for Delphi for 21 years until he took their buyout package last April. "But you didn't do it. You didn't say anything to Bill back then. Now it's too late. The only thing we're good at exporting anymore is jobs."

Mr. Rader, who has a wife and three children, made \$27 an hour at his old job. He says he's happy to take something that pays less than half that now, but is finding that many places don't want to hire a former union worker. Back when he started at Delphi out of high school, he remembers, "those were the jobs everyone wanted.... You were told, 'You have a job for life.' "

That story is hardly unusual in Dayton, where Delphi and GM have both had large layoffs in the past year, and even more jobs are seen as at risk.

It's people such as Rader and Conley and the many others who have either lost work or are feeling the pinch of rising mortgages or falling wages that Clinton and Obama are trying to reach as they offer plans for new jobs in green technology, renewable energy, or information technology. Both also propose renegotiating NAFTA to improve – and enforce – labor and environmental standards. "I would have a 'trade timeout'" until NAFTA is fixed, Clinton promised voters in the debate in Cleveland Tuesday night, in which she and Obama traded sharp words over how consistently anti-NAFTA each had been.

"I'd give an edge to Obama on this only because his last name isn't Clinton," says Bill Burges, a Democratic political consultant in Cleveland who worked on Senator Brown's campaign.

He adds that he expects voters in the end will be more swayed by personality – especially if Obama begins to seem more familiar – than by the trade issue. But focusing on NAFTA makes sense, he says, and isn't just about looking to mistakes in the past.

"These are major issues, and the people are blaming their government for not only the loss of their job but also their inability to pay their mortgage and the loss of their homes." Says Mr. Burges: "NAFTA matters."