

Bangor Daily News article: 'Mainers to gauge free trade effects in El Salvador'

BANGOR - A 16-member delegation from Penobscot and Hancock counties is departing this week for a 10-day visit to El Salvador, where members want to see for themselves the impact that free-trade policies have had on ordinary people in that country. Sponsored by Peace through Interamerican Community Action, or PICA, the delegation represents a range of organizations concerned about the Maine jobs, services and natural resources that have been put at risk by international trade pacts such as the North America Free Trade Agreement and the pending Free Trade Area of the Americas agreement.

According to Dennis Chinoy, one of the trip's organizers, the group is heading to El Salvador because that country has been held up as a showcase for free trade's benefits to third world countries.

"We intend to investigate those claims by meeting with workers from factories such as those to which Maine factories have relocated," he said before the trip.

While advocates of NAFTA and other free trade agreements claim Maine companies benefit from increased exports and Maine consumers benefit from lower prices, detractors point out that the state has lost 22,000 jobs. According to a background paper Chinoy and fellow organizer Bjorn Claeson prepared in anticipation of the visit, many of the state's factories have moved to cheap labor markets.

As Maine workers have been forced to seek lower-paying jobs without benefits, the standard of living for the average citizen of Mexico has fallen. Latin Americans continue to risk illegal immigration because they can't support their families.

Noting that some refer to the FTAA as "NAFTA on steroids," Chinoy and Claeson added that the FTAA, which is still a work in progress, would extend NAFTA's features from the United States, Canada and Mexico into "every country in the Western Hemisphere, except Cuba." In addition, they observed, the FTAA would incorporate elements of the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs, or GATT.

That, they said, could lead to the privatization of all public resources and services, like water supplies and education, to private owners and corporations. It could force local producers to compete with large agribusiness and industrial corporations and cause the deregulation of business practices regarding wages, working conditions and pollution controls.

The group is scheduled to arrive in El Salvador on Wednesday for a 10-day visit. The itinerary includes meetings with economists, development officials and representatives of the El Salvadoran government, the U.S. Embassy and several other organizations representing such areas as labor, healthcare, the media, the environment, education and the free-trade resistance movement.

Delegates also plan to spend time in Carasque, Bangor's Salvadoran sister city for more than a

decade, to see how trade agreements have affected ordinary villagers.

The delegates range from 25 to 75 in age and include a physician, lawyer, academic, United Parcel Service driver, radio host and community organizer. Delegation members are active in a variety of organizations, among them the Maine Fair Trade Coalition, the Maine People's Alliance, Teamsters Local 340, the Maine Association of Interdependent Neighborhoods, the Union River Watershed Coalition and the Bangor-El Salvador Sister Cities Project.

Also participating will be Rachel Sherman, U.S. Rep. Michael Michaud's legislative aide for trade policy.