

Posted on Fri, Oct. 10, 2003

## Steelworkers fight trade pact

'March to Miami' against a proposed free-trade deal reaches the Range today.

BY LEE BLOOMQUIST

Duluth (Minn.) News Tribune

Minnesota's already-shaky taconite industry could disappear if a free-trade agreement among 34 nations in the Americas is approved by Congress by 2005, say United Steelworkers of America officials.

The Free Trade Area of the Americas agreement is an effort to unite the economies of the Americas into a single free-trade area under which barriers to trade and investment would be progressively eliminated, according to the FTAA Web site. The proposal grew out of a 1994 Summit of the Americas meeting in Miami. Trade ministers from participating nations will meet Nov. 17-21 in Miami to continue negotiating the accord.

The proposed agreement calls for better protection of the environment, a higher standard of living and improved working conditions in participating nations.

But critics call the trade agreement "NAFTA (North America Free Trade Agreement) on steroids." They say it would endanger thousands of jobs in many occupations, including the service sector. It could also cause further loss of steelworker jobs or Iron Range taconite plants, said Jerry Fallos, area coordinator of the March to Miami, a nationwide protest against FTAA. The March will hold a rally on the Iron Range today.

"Brazil is the biggest pellet producer in the world," Fallos said. "If they were, without any consequences, able to ship their pellets up here, it would probably wipe out our taconite industry."

Fallos was president of Steelworkers Local 4108 at LTV Steel Mining Co., a taconite plant at Hoyt Lakes that permanently closed in 2001.

"When I worked at LTV, a lot of people talked about NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), but didn't know much about it," Fallos said. "We want people to know about FTAA."

Some of the countries that would be covered under the trade agreement also produce semifinished steel slabs, Fallos said. Because semifinished steel slabs can directly displace taconite

pellets, the trade proposal could increase the flow of semifinished steel into America and decrease pellet needs, he said.

"All it does is give the multinational companies cheaper labor and less environmental standards," said Charlie Olson, a Stand Up for Steel coordinator on the Iron Range. "If we don't have fair trade, they can swamp us."

Of eight taconite plants that operated on the Iron Range in the 1980s, five remain. Employment in the industry has plummeted from 16,132 in 1978 to about 3,200 today. Steelworkers and steelmakers say unfairly traded steel imports are part of the reason for the decline.

The March to Miami -- where trade ministers will meet -- began Sept. 26 in Seattle. Since then, a busload of labor leaders has crossed the country, stopping in 15 cities for anti-FTAA rallies.

Leaders from the Steelworkers; AFL-CIO; Sierra Club; American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees; Coalition of Black Trade Unionists; Alliance for Sustainable Jobs and the Environment; Public Citizens Global Watch; Teamsters; and National Family Farm Coalition are supporting the rallies.

Friday's Iron Range rally -- billed as an old-fashioned populist workers' rally -- includes U.S. Sen. Mark Dayton, USWA District 11 Director David Foster, Larry Weiss of the Minnesota Fair Trade Coalition, Curtis Bush of Witness for Peace and Rev. Kristin Foster of Messiah Lutheran Church in Mountain Iron.