

INTERNATIONAL TRADE: Protest group stops in Drayton

Group on its way to Miami meeting for Free Trade Area of Americas agreement

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DRAYTON, N.D. - A group of seven driving cross-country to protest the Free Trade Area of Americas trade agreement met here Thursday with local union members.

Close to 50 people - mostly workers from the local American Crystal Sugar Co. factory - attended the informal meeting in a Drayton park.

The seven travelers are from the Alliance for Sustainable Jobs and Environments. They're driving the 5,500 miles - from Seattle to Miami - to join protesters of the agreement at a Free Trade Area of Americas ministerial meeting in November.

Along the way, they're stopping to talk with workers in small towns and big communities - from the Iron Range in Minnesota to Chicago.

When constructed, FTAA will include 34 countries in the region, including the United States, Canada and Mexico, all of which already are members of North America Free Trade Agreement. Opponents of free trade say it causes a loss of jobs in the United States.

"If we don't stop this free trade agreement, we are going to lose our government and our democracy," Dan Leahy, executive director of ASJE and a professor of economic and labor issues, said to the gathering. He called free trade "another word for corporate rule" that destroys jobs, environments and communities in the United States.

Union workers here said they are afraid more free trade agreements will take their jobs away when cheap sugar is allowed to be imported from Third World countries.

"We can't compete with wage-earners that make a dollar a day and live in caves," said Lee Christenson, an American Crystal worker. "I'm all for fair trade, but this isn't fair."

Mark Froemke, of East Grand Forks and president of the Northern Valley Central Labor Council, put up 166 small black flags on the slope at the park. Each represents 1,000 Minnesota manufacturing jobs lost because of NAFTA, he said.

Bill Tuttle, who heads the American Crystal union in Drayton, said more than blue collar workers will be affected by FTAA.

"It's going to affect the white collar workers, as well," he said. "It's just a damn shame."

Songs and a skit called "The Race to the Bottom" were performed at Thursday's gathering. At the end, all stood to sing the "FTAA No Way" song, adapted from the song "YMCA."

Letters from U.S. Sens. Kent Conrad and Byron Dorgan, both D-N.D., Rep. Collin Peterson, D-Minn., and Democratic presidential candidate Richard Gephardt, were read. A Conrad aide talked to the gathering.

And people seemed to enjoy Thursday's informal gathering.

"We don't want free trade," said Tammy Bratlie, who said she's lived in Drayton for 10 years and loves the small community. "We want our jobs."

About 25 people from the Red River Valley will go to Miami, Froemke said. Five are from the American Crystal in Drayton.

A search of the Internet found grassroots efforts on staging protests at the FTAA meeting in Miami. In 1999, thousands of people gathered in Seattle at the World Trade Organization meeting. Last month, WTO talks broke down amid protests in Cancun, Mexico.