

Turning the CAFTA Loss to a Win

Independent Media Institute

By John Cavanagh

July 28, 2005

Just after midnight this morning, the Bush administration pulled off a major hijack of democracy by purchasing the final votes of House Republicans to pass the Central America Free Trade Agreement, 217-215.

This free trade deal consists of breaks for large corporations at the expense of working people and the environment in Central America, the Dominican Republic and the United States. As a result the accord has encountered broad opposition in all the countries involved the accord, as illustrated by the dozens of demonstrations summarized in a report earlier this year by the Alliance for Responsible Trade.

Until last night's last-minute deal-making, as many as three dozen Republicans planned to vote against CAFTA as they stood to lose textile and sugar jobs in their districts. In the end, 27 Republicans broke ranks, siding with the vast majority of House Democrats and lone Independent Bernie Sanders. Unfortunately, 15 Democrats sided with the Republican majority, handing the Bush administration its narrow victory.

The administration had plenty of pork to purchase members who might well have voted differently with huge transportation and energy bills on the verge of completion.

Indeed, had voting initially closed as scheduled, the pact would have been defeated 180-175. But Majority Whip Tom DeLay kept the vote open another 47 minutes, buying time to squeeze out enough Republican votes. (The final roll call is available online.)

By finishing the vote after midnight, the administration had hoped that this mockery of democracy would miss the news cycle.

It is the job of citizen groups to make sure the story is told.

Twelve years ago, the Clinton administration purchased Democrat votes in the final minutes of debate in order to pass the North American Free Trade Agreement, despite public opposition in all three countries. Then, as this time, citizen groups had carried out widespread public education about the pitfalls of this approach to corporate globalization. Then, as this time, millions of people were outraged at the purchase of democracy for corporate interests.

Twelve years ago, citizen groups came back together after the vote and turned defeat into victory. Organizing and education spread on the dangers of corporate-led globalization. Opposition to such deals grew, in good part because NAFTA turned out to be a disaster for working people and the environment in all three countries. This opposition led to the defeat of "fast track" trade legislation in 1997 and 1998, the defeat of a global investment pact in 1998, and the infamous "Battle of Seattle" in 1999 during a World Trade Organization meeting that failed to launch a long-planned new round of international trade negotiations.

We face the same challenge today. The American people don't like to see their democracy bought and sold to the highest bidder. Details of the last-minute vote purchases are just emerging and need to be widely publicized. There are huge battles looming over the expansion of NAFTA and CAFTA into a trade deal for the entire hemisphere, and another bruising fight over the World Trade Organization meeting in Hong Kong in December.

The agreement has yet to be approved in the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua or Costa Rica, where opposition runs deepest.

As with the NAFTA fight, the blatant subversion of democracy can be turned into the outrage that fuels the movements that reverse corporate globalization to build the healthy economies that we all need to flourish.

Mourn. But organize.

John Cavanagh is director of the Institute for Policy Studies and co-author of "Field Guide to the Global Economy" (New Press, 2005) and "Alternatives to Economic Globalization" (Berrett-Koehler, 2004)."