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LETTERS TO THE TIMES

## **Free Trade Agreement With Central America**

On Nov. 18, The Times editorialized ("Trading Up") in favor of President Bush's proposed free trade agreement with Central America just 13 days after an American labor organizer was assassinated in El Salvador.

Jose Gilberto Soto is not the first labor leader or American to die or "disappear" in Central America, but his killing does test The Times' notion of "principled free trade." Bush negotiated a deal with the Central American governments that merely requires them to "enforce their own laws" when it comes to worker rights and environmental protection. That is of little comfort to Soto's family, the women in Guatemala who can be fired if they become pregnant or the thousands of Honduran families dependent on the waters of Lake Yojoa, polluted with heavy metals from mining.

Would we let Enron and its cheats off the hook if they agreed to "enforce their own rules"? There is nothing "principled" or "free" about trade that feasts on child or slave labor or discrimination in the workplace. Nor is it "disingenuous" to expect countries asking for our most generous trade benefits to abide by the basic internationally recognized principles on labor and the environment.

If we can compel the Central Americans to respect and protect our intellectual property (as we should and did), should we treat our or any country's most precious asset, its workers, any differently?

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