

Michigan News

Union members celebrate at LaborFest as contract talks continue

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DETROIT (AP) -- Thousands of union workers jostled for precious room to maneuver through Ford Field's concourses, slurping sodas and chomping on hot dogs, nachos and pizza as area workers paid tribute to themselves and the country's labor heritage at LaborFest.

The event, organized by the AFL-CIO in lieu of a Labor Day parade, was held in the shadow of ongoing contract talks between Detroit's Big Three automakers and the United Auto Workers.

And the speakers, who included UAW President Ron Gettelfinger, Democratic Sen. Debbie Stabenow and U.S. Rep. John Conyers, D-Detroit, seized on the opportunity to assail President Bush and his handling of the economy.

"We are fed up and angry at the direction this administration is taking the country," said Gettelfinger, speaking to union members and their families gathered on the field as their children played on inflatable climbing toys.

Gettelfinger, like other speakers, harangued Bush over the number of manufacturing jobs lost since he took office.

Hammering home a key issue for the majority of those gathered, Gettelfinger said in a country as well off as the United States, the "national health care crisis is a disgrace."

Gettelfinger also took aim at free trade agreements, saying treaties such as the North American Free Trade Agreement and the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas do little but inflate the trade deficit and cost Americans valuable manufacturing jobs.

His words rang true for Mark Partore, 38, a member of UAW Local 869.

"Am I supposed to leave my manufacturing job and get a \$10 per hour service job with no benefits? People think we (in the manufacture sector) are living high on the hog. But we're not," said Partore, who is a dock worker.

"This isn't about my being against workers in China or Mexico. I want them to also earn a wage they can live on. But what we have going on now is a corporation-induced cycle of poverty," said Partore.

While a large number of those attending were UAW members, other unions found footing in these shared concerns.

Greg Powell, chairman of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers' Michigan Legislative Board, said all who stopped by his booth said worker solidarity is the key to job security even though his particular issue -- banning remote controlled locomotives -- is fairly unique.

Near Powell's booth, the representatives of the Paper Allied Chemical Energy Workers of America, or PACE, had set up a 60-foot long "postcard" calling

for a halt to the creation of the FTAA, that would group 34 countries in the West.

The banner, covered in signatures, would eventually be sent to trade ministers scheduled to meet in Miami in November.

Others saw LaborFest as a way to jockey support for nonunion related causes. Anti-abortion activists shared the sidewalk outside the stadium with proponents of medical marijuana.

Inside, Conyers, in a brief speech, said the \$87 billion Bush said was needed for the war on terror and rebuilding Iraq should stay in the country for education, health care and job creation.

Roby'n Allan Cloyd agrees. But the homeless man said he wasn't too impressed with the need to stage such a large celebration when there were hundreds like him in Detroit struggling to find a home and work.

"How about sending some of that cash my way," said Cloyd as he tinkered with a Yo-Yo outside the stadium.