

Minnesota to have large presence at FTAA mobilization in Miami

*By Barb Kucera, editor, www.workdayminnesota.org — November 13, 2003*

MINNEAPOLIS — When trade ministers convene in Miami next week to negotiate the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), they'll be greeted by thousands of protesters, including more than 300 Minnesotans. The group from the Gopher State will include scores of manufacturing workers who have seen their jobs wiped out by bad trade deals such as NAFTA, but also public sector, construction and postal employees who are concerned about the effects of proposed trade agreements such as the FTAA. They come from all areas of Minnesota.

"They are members of unions that always opposed the free trade agenda, but they did it out of a sense of solidarity with their manufacturing brothers and sisters whom they saw getting slammed," said Larry Weiss, coordinator of the Minnesota Fair Trade Coalition. "All of a sudden, their jobs are on the line with the new generation of trade deals."

The mobilization for global justice and against the FTAA will take place Nov. 19-21 in Miami and is being organized by the national AFL-CIO, the national Citizens Trade Campaign and many other groups. Some 225 Minnesotans will travel there through arrangements made through the Minnesota Fair Trade Coalition. Several dozen others, including large contingents of Steelworkers and students, are traveling separately, so Weiss is confident the total for the Minnesota group will exceed 300.

The major event will be a march Nov. 20 from Bayfront Park to the security fence surrounding the area where the trade ministers will be meeting. As more demonstrations have occurred at trade summits, host cities have erected massive barriers that keep trade negotiators separated from citizens.

"The march will go right down to the (security) fence," Weiss said. "It will be a chance for the marchers to at least symbolically present to the trade ministers the millions of ballots collected throughout the hemisphere against the FTAA."

The FTAA, often called "NAFTA on steroids," would create one free trade zone throughout the hemisphere. But the proposed agreement, while guaranteeing the profit-making ability of transnational corporations, does nothing to address labor, human rights and environmental concerns. In addition, FTAA and other "new generation" trade deals will impose privatization and reduce regulation, posing a serious threat to public, postal and construction workers. Thousands of people are expected at the mobilization from throughout the Americas. The number of foreign visitors is unclear, Weiss said, because of tighter visa restrictions being imposed by the U.S. government.

"We've already seen some examples of people being denied visas on what seems to be strictly a censorship basis," he said. "Nonetheless, there will be a substantial delegation of folks from Latin America."

Other events at the mobilization include a "People's Gala" – a combination concert and rally – on Nov. 19 and an AFL-CIO Workers Forum earlier that day featuring workers from several different countries.

A key goal of the mobilization is to raise public awareness about the FTAA, Weiss said. But the Miami event also will be the kickoff of the campaign to get members of Congress to defeat the trade deal when it comes to them for approval, possibly sometime next year.

Noted Weiss, "We are in favor of a kind of economic integration that protects workers rights and protects the environment . . . If they insist on going ahead with this kind of deal, we're going to do everything we can to stop it."