

Trade talks activists meet in Lake Worth to craft message

By Prashant Gopal
Staff Writer

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Lake Worth * The warehouse shelves were stocked with glue, paint, cardboard, bicycle parts, cloth and other donated supplies. The walls were plastered with paint and signs: "People before profits," "Rise Up" and "Welcome to Lake Worth: an Anti-War City."

It's here that artists, anti-globalization activists and other volunteers are coming to make masks, costumes, giant puppets and other props to protest the Free Trade Area of the Americas talks Nov. 19-21 in Miami.

A group of young Lake Worth activists held a kick-off party Thursday night at the warehouse, hosting about 70 guests, who were treated to performances by a political pep squad of radical cheerleaders, a woman on stilts, a dance troupe and a folk singer.

Organizers call the rented warehouse near the city's downtown the Free Carnival Area of the Americas. The group has spent the past two weeks preparing for the opening by collecting salvaged and donated supplies and securing grants to pay the bills, which they estimate at about \$7,000.

They've even found homes, food and bicycles for out-of-town volunteers to help with the puppet making.

"I think it's important that the revolution is aesthetically pleasing," said Martina Mafalda, a 20-year-old puppeteer from Argentina who is spending the next month in Lake Worth. "If it's very solemn or morose, I don't think people are likely to listen to us."

Mafalda is part of a loose network of political puppeteers, who call themselves puppetistas. They build 10- and 20-foot-tall papier-mache effigies that have been popular since the 1999 protests in Seattle against the World Trade Organization.

The puppet makers use their art to question free trade, which they say threatens the environment and hurts workers in America and overseas. They say free trade encourages corporations to move jobs overseas where labor is cheap and regulations are less stringent.

Mafalda said she plans to build a puppet of President Bush. He'll be wearing a crown, sitting on top of a circus tent. Hands from the bottom of the tent will be holding different South American countries.

Rich Hersh, 56, of Boca Raton, said he hopes the puppets draw attention to the problems of free trade.

"At least people are going to say, 'What is this all about?' and might at least research it," Hersh said.

Barry Sacharow, 48, of Hollywood, said he was 13 when he spoke at his first

protest. He remembers seeing protesters carrying giant pictures of President Johnson.

"Puppets aren't new at protests," Sacharow said. "But they are new to this generation."

Veronica Robleto, one of the group's organizers, said about 20 volunteers have signed up to help with the puppet making. She expects the list to grow.

The group also will offer workshops to teach people how to fix bicycles and build puppets, she said.

"There's as much work here as people want to do," Robleto said. "We have the resources for people to make whatever is in their minds."

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