

## Strategy to Quell CAFTA Before the Vote

By *HOLLI CHMELA*

*WASHINGTON, Jan. 14 (UPI)* – To counter the Bush administration's plan to push the Central American Free Trade Agreement through Congress early this year, Citizens Trade Campaign held a summit in Washington, D.C. Jan. 7-11 to design a clear strategy to defeat CAFTA before it reaches a floor vote.

Leaders from several key state coalitions joined CTC, a national coalition of labor, environmental, faith-based and consumer groups, for the weekend to help its campaign to improve trade policy. In a press teleconference briefing Thursday, they explained their "roadmap to victory."

By targeting members of Congress and individual state legislators, CTC said it hopes to get enough support before CAFTA is put on the agenda for a vote. CAFTA is expected to go to Congress this spring.

"The next step for us is to continue to lock down votes and make sure this thing dies," CTC Director Larry Weiss told United Press International. "The fact that they don't have the votes and no prospects of getting the votes, they won't bring it to a floor vote if they think it won't pass."

U.S. Trade Representative Robert B. Zoellick and trade ministers from the participating Central American countries, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Costa Rica signed CAFTA on May 28, 2004. The Dominican Republic joined in August. Together, the countries form the second-largest free trade agreement between Latin America and the United States.

According to the Office of the United States Trade Representative, CAFTA will create new opportunities for U.S. workers and manufacturers and create expanded markets for U.S. farmers and ranchers. In addition, Central American countries will gain substantial market access for services, including telecommunications, computer services, energy and tourism, the textiles industry will have new opportunities for integration with North America, and sugar production and consumption in the United States will increase.

"Five small countries took a courageous decision last year to seek a free trade agreement with their giant neighbor to the North," Zoellick said of CAFTA last May. "They have placed their faith in free markets, in openness, and in democracy. We have worked with them to produce an agreement that will bring benefits to workers, farmers and consumers in all our countries."

The United States exported nearly \$11 billion in goods to the five Central American countries in 2003, and two-way trade was over \$23 billion. When the Dominican Republic was added to CAFTA, two-way trade increased to \$32 billion.

However, CTC with support from other organizations and members of Congress, including both Democrats and Republicans, oppose the agreement due to CAFTA's "inadequate labor provisions."

In a CTC publication, the group denounced member countries' ability to comply with the International Labor Organization's core standards, and said if such standards are violated, there are no provisions to enforce punishment.

According to CTC, "Human Rights Watch, the International Labor Organization, and even the U.S. State Department have recognized labor law in various CAFTA nations as being inadequate."

"First and foremost, countries have to be required to enforce ILO standards in trade agreements," Weiss said. "And, those provisions have to be equal to the standards of commercial enforcement."

Ginny Yingling, a member of Sierra Club North Star Chapter in Minnesota, represented the environmental perspective on CAFTA at the teleconference.

"A lot of environmental groups put a lot of faith and hope in NAFTA, but none of those worked out," Yingling said. "Now, the environmental community is united against CAFTA and other free trade programs. We're starting to see that the solid Republican unity on CAFTA really isn't there either."

The CTC contends that CAFTA would adversely effect the environment on a number of levels. For example, it would allow foreign investors to challenge environmental laws, leave environmental regulation unenforced, threaten food safety and undermine biodiversity, and undermine environmental regulations on services such as tourism or mining.

"We want to see future trade deals create minimum standards for environmental protection," Yingling said.

The Rev. Warren Clark of the Florida Council of Churches said the members of his organization are against expansion of NAFTA by means of opposing CAFTA from a social justice perspective.

"The churches are worried about basic social and economic justice," Clark said. Clark said the Council is issuing a pastoral letter requesting action from the Christian community. A pastoral letter, he explained, is written by a religious body to promote social justice and request action from community members.

"We are just responding to a call from our brothers and sisters in another part of the world, pleading with us the help them," Clark said.

"Support for CAFTA is down people on both sides," said Director of Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch, Lori Wallach. "It's a wash. Neither the Republicans and neither the Democrats have the numbers to pass the vote."