

Unions Blast CAFTA

**By Elliot Smilowitz
United Press International
May 11, 2005**

Union leaders have teamed with Democratic congressmen to rail against the proposed Central American Free Trade Agreement in the same week that President Bush and leaders of Central American nations are promoting the pact.

Six Democratic House members were joined by leaders from the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations and United Steelworkers at a rally against the proposed agreement Tuesday. About 1,000 union workers stood behind the podium in solidarity with the speakers, clad in union shirts and stickers and waving bilingual anti-CAFTA placards.

"American workers don't need more bad trade deals," said Richard Trumka, secretary treasurer of AFL-CIO, who emceed the event. "Mega-corporations will get all the breaks by breaking the backs of workers on both sides of the continent."

CAFTA, which is modeled after NAFTA, is a trade agreement between the United States and El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras, Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic.

Leo Gerard, president of United Steelworkers of America, said that CAFTA is "nothing more than NAFTA on steroids."

"It entrenches the rights of international corporations," he said. "It would lower labor, environmental and living standards internationally."

The news conference took place with the dome of the Capitol in the background, just across the street. Under that dome, Congress may soon put CAFTA to a vote. Bush first proposed the agreement last spring, and planned to meet with leaders of the Central American nations in Washington on Thursday.

The leaders are also scheduled to meet Wednesday with Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, R-Tenn., and House Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Ill.

Rep. Mike Michaud, D-Maine, who was a union worker in Maine for more than 30 years, said he hoped that the vote will defeat CAFTA.

"I will do everything I can as a member of Congress to point out to my colleagues the reasons why CAFTA is not good," Michaud said. "This administration's trade policy has left workers with nothing but pink slips. I'm sick and tired of it."

On Monday, the National Council of Textile Organizations became the first major textile group to come out in support of CAFTA. In a statement, NCTO Chairman Allen Gant said that the agreement was necessary "to ensure that the U.S. textile industry can remain competitive against China."

U.S. Trade Representative Rob Portman released a statement Monday commending NCTO for their support of CAFTA.

"It is vital to our textile industry that we strengthen ties with apparel producers in our hemisphere," the statement read. "NCTO has taken a bold step in seizing the opportunity that this agreement provides to an industry that needs a boost."

Leaders of the six Central American nations have been traveling the United States recently, promoting CAFTA to American constituents.

Rep. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, said of the Central American leaders, "What they won't say is that their workers, like our workers, do not support CAFTA."

Bruce Raynor, general president of UNITE HERE, a union of textile workers and hotel and restaurant employees, added, "Every single union in Central America opposes CAFTA. The only ones who support it are corporations that stand to profit."

Rep. Stephen Lynch, D-Mass., said he worked for 18 years in a General Motors plant in Framingham, Mass., that was moved to Mexico. "I've seen the damage it causes when plants close," he said. "I've seen what it does to our country."

Lynch said he was frustrated that some politicians don't consider the real people involved when in labor issues. "They talk about job loss like they talk about the weather," he said.

Trumka agreed, saying he felt CAFTA was essentially a "corporate bill of rights" for international corporations.

"American manufacturers can't compete because the deck is stacked against them," he said.

Two union leaders from the Dominican Republic also spoke against CAFTA at the news conference. Ignacio Hernandez, secretary general of the Dominican Federation of Free Trade Zone Workers, said that CAFTA "will help transnational corporations but will increase poverty in my country."

Hernandez told a story of corporate union-busters assaulting and imprisoning a Dominican worker that tried to start a union, and expressed concern that CAFTA would give corporations more of a chance to bully employees.

Rafael Abreu of the Dominican Republic's General Workers Center said that CAFTA was "neither free nor trade."

"The way CAFTA is set up will not lead to development," he said.

"This is a message that we need to get across to the president," Rep. Linda Sanchez, D-Calif., said. "Like with many other things, he isn't listening yet."