

Free Trade Agreements Have Hurt Mid-Willamette Region, Residents Say

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Laid-Off Workers, Elected Officials to Discuss the Impacts of Trade Pacts at Thursday's "Mid-Willamette Assembly on Free Trade and Job Loss"

SALEM, OR -- Laid-off workers, elected officials, immigrant rights advocates and others from throughout the greater Salem area will gather at the Salem Public Library, Central Branch on Thursday evening to discuss the widespread negative impacts free trade agreements have had in the region.

The Mid-Willamette Assembly on Free Trade and Job Loss will feature testimony by displaced workers who say trade policies like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) cost them their jobs and that a new model for international trade is needed to improve the economy.

"I just barely escaped losing my job of 21 years at the Halsey Pulp Mill this spring, but other people haven't been so lucky. Tens of thousands of Oregonians have seen their jobs shipped to Mexico, China or elsewhere as a result of trade deals that make it easier for large employers to shift jobs around the globe to wherever labor is the most exploited and regulations are the weakest," said Jim Gourley, a member of the United Steelworkers and former employee of Pope & Talbot.

"Bad trade policies are destroying the U.S. economy, and we're seeing the results in our own backyard."

"As mayor, I fought to attract and keep good jobs in Salem, and I can tell you from experience that it's very hard when companies are able to move jobs overseas," said Mike Swaim, former mayor of Salem from 1997 to 2002.

Speakers will argue that free trade agreements have also been harmful to workers abroad, and that by increasing poverty in Mexico and other developing nations, these trade policies are a major driving force behind the increase in immigration to the United States.

"A lot of recent immigrants came to the United States only after being forced out of work in their home countries due to unfair trade practices," said Rusa Fischer, organizer for the Oregon Fair Trade Campaign, a statewide coalition of labor, environmental and human rights organizations. "The severe damage caused by NAFTA left millions of Mexicans with little choice but to migrate or go hungry. NAFTA-style trade deals benefit the rich,

but are extremely harmful for working people around the world. A lot of Oregonians recognize that, and are demanding a change.”

On June 4th, a comprehensive trade reform bill called “The TRADE Act” was introduced in Congress with the support of many national labor, environmental, family farm and faith organizations. The TRADE Act sets new labor, environmental, consumer safety and other criteria for future trade agreements, and establishes a process for reviewing and renegotiating existing trade pacts that do not meet those standards. Fair trade advocates at the event will argue that the TRADE Act should be supported.

“It is abundantly clear that the business-as-usual trade agenda has not been working for ordinary Oregonians,” said Fischer. “Existing trade pacts are written in ways that hurt working people, consumers and the environment, but it doesn’t have to be that way. Legislation like the TRADE Act could transform global trade into a means of improving living standards in Oregon and throughout the world.”

Thursday’s event is sponsored by the Oregon Fair Trade Campaign and Mid-Willamette Jobs with Justice.

“This forum is an opportunity for communities to come together to discuss the harm that free trade agreements have created in the region, and what we can do together to start improving the economy,” said Timothy Welp, a member of Mid-Willamette Jobs with Justice. “As long as people are willing to stand up and demand a change, we really can turn this economy around for working people.”