

The medicine show

By **Lisa Sorg** 07/22/2004
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In a visit to SA, trade ministers celebrate 10 years of NAFTA

When U.S. Trade Representative Robert Zoellick, Mexican Secretary of Economy Fernando Canales, and Canadian Minister of International Trade James Scott Peterson walked into the Jefferson Manor Room at the St. Anthony Hotel last week, it was clear that these three men are not like most of us.

They carried themselves with the aura of those who circulate in the rarified air of multi-national corporations and heads of state. As they jet from Chile to Montreal to San Antonio for trade tête-à-têtes, their suits never wrinkle and their brows never sweat, not even when protesters yell outside the hotel where they're boasting of NAFTA's accomplishments.

The cheat sheet provided to the media was filled with dazzling figures and percentages designed to make believers out of doubters: In the past 10 years, Mexican exports have grown by 246 percent, productivity has risen 28 percent in the U.S., and in Canada, merchandise exports to the U.S. are up 250 percent. "The simple truth is that NAFTA works," said Zoellick.

"These statistics are true," said Lesley Ramsey of the Texas Fair Trade Coalition, which held a counter press conference a block away at the Sheraton Gunter. "But they tell only half of the story."

The other half of the story and the difficult truths are told from the viewpoint of those on the bottom looking up: the 1 million workers who lost their \$20-an-hour factory job because of NAFTA; the 1.3 million Mexican farmers whose crops are worthless because U.S. crops are so cheap and heavily subsidized, or the maquila workers whose water is contaminated with industrial waste, or the U.S. workers whose productivity has increased because fewer employees are doing the jobs of several people. [See "Rough trade, May 13-19, 2004].

"I led the fight for labor when NAFTA was initialed here in San Antonio," said Jaime Martinez, president of the Cesar Chavez LULAC Council 4626. "We were very concerned there were no labor standards, that NAFTA only protected intellectual property rights, investors, and multi-national corporations."

In the mid-'90s, the promise of NAFTA prompted the League of United Latin American Citizens to support the free trade agreement, but after 10 years of what the organization sees as a failure to address workers' rights and environmental protections, it is demanding a reworking of the 900-page document and a halt to CAFTA, a similar agreement that would encompass much of Central America.

The agreement, which due to a fast-track provision has already been signed by President Bush,

will likely come before Congress during the lame-duck session after the election. Congress can't amend trade agreements and must either approve or kill them.

"The switch indicates that LULAC realizes NAFTA is a failure," said Ramsey. "In Mexico, maquilas pay 40 percent less than other industrial jobs, and in the U.S., Latinos are disproportionately affected."

Forty-seven percent of jobs that were documented as being lost due to NAFTA were held by Latinos. In San Antonio, Levi Strauss, which employed primarily Latinas, closed both its plants, displacing more than 1,000 workers.

While critics contend NAFTA hurts workers, the agreement also contains inequities in regards to the Canadian and Mexican governments. An article in the January-March 2004 edition of *Foreign Affairs en Español*, "NAFTA's Second Decade" described how the U.S.' dominance in the trade agreement has resulted in the neglect of Mexico's developing areas, particularly in the south, where roads are subpar and residents lack basic necessities such as running water and electricity.

During the meeting, the ministers tweaked the agreement to allow Mexican trucks on U.S. highways, which was part of the original NAFTA agreement, but was never permitted until the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against U.S. interests that favored banning the trucks. The ministers also addressed beef exports in the light of Mad Cow disease; when Canada had an outbreak, the U.S. stopped importing its beef, but when a U.S. cow was infected, American beef farmers were up in arms that no country wanted to import U.S. meat.

The Canadian beef farmer. The Mexican truck driver. The American auto worker. These are the people that are invisible to NAFTA, which quantifies its progress in percentages and dollars, rather than in human terms.

"NAFTA takes a very macroeconomic perspective," added Ramsey. "It doesn't take into account the impact of the agreement on a personal level." ?

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