

Tampa Tribune  
August 12, 2004, Thursday

## **Coalition protests U.S.-Panama talks on trade in Tampa, Fla.**

By Dave Simanoff

TAMPA, Fla. -- While U.S. and Panamanian negotiators met behind closed doors at a ritzy downtown Tampa hotel to forge a free trade agreement, opponents of the proposed pact met next door in a small room at the Tampa Convention Center to lambaste both the deal and the secrecy in which the negotiations are conducted.

"We're all for trade; we all believe in trade," said Eric Rubin, state coordinator for the Florida Fair Trade Coalition, the group that organized Wednesday's protest. A fair trade agreement protects workers and industries in all of the participating countries, while the concept of free trade "is neither free nor trade when you get down to it," he said.

The coalition wants talks open "to all of the people affected by these trade policies," and a level playing field between the United States, an economic powerhouse, and its much smaller trading partners, Rubin said.

Richard Mills, spokesman for the Office of the Trade Representative, said free trade agreements benefit the countries involved by removing trade barriers and boosting business. One of the goals of a free trade agreement is to reduce duties and restrictions that prevent U.S. companies from doing business in those countries, he said.

"We're creating a more robust economic relation with that country that will promote exports and imports," he said.

Mills answers critics by pointing out that the United States is the only country in the world that writes environmental and labor provisions into its free trade agreements with other countries.

After Wednesday's meeting, Florida Fair Trade Coalition members met with U.S. Rep. Jim Davis, D-Tampa. Davis said the group had some "legitimate concerns" and that he would look carefully at any proposed trade agreement between the United States and Panama before supporting it.

"The devil's in the details," he said. "I look at these deals one at a time, and that's exactly what I'm starting to do with this agreement."

Davis said he's not expecting Congress to take up any trade deals soon, as lawmakers are more preoccupied these days with the federal budget, the recommendations made by the Sept. 11 commission and the coming presidential election.

Davis was one of the speakers at a lunch Monday welcoming negotiators to Tampa.

At the Florida Fair Trade Coalition meeting, representatives of six groups belonging to the coalition voiced their opposition to free trade agreements for a handful of reasons: job losses in

both countries, environmental concerns, the effects on minorities, and religion.

Anita de Palma, state director for the League of United Latin American Citizens, said the 10-year-old North American Free Trade Agreement has taken a toll on Hispanic workers in the United States and also has hurt those workers' dependents in Mexico. Recent trade agreements, such as the coming Central American Free Trade Agreement and the proposed U.S.-Panama deal, "are a disaster in every which way," she said.

Darden Rice, national field coordinator for the Sierra Club, said NAFTA undermined environmental laws in the United States, including some meant to protect Americans from pesticides and food-borne illnesses. She said NAFTA should serve as proof that free trade agreements such as CAFTA and the proposed U.S.-Panamanian deal are dangerous for public health and the environment.

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