

The Growing Power of the Fair Trade Uprising

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LOUISVILLE, KY - I spent yesterday in Ohio's three biggest cities - Cleveland, Columbus and Cincinnati. With the Buckeye State among the hardest hit by lobbyist-written trade policies, it wasn't surprising that NAFTA was at the center of discussion at events for THE UPRISING in Ohio (you can listen to my Ohio NPR interview from yesterday [here](#) for a taste).

Over the last few years, polls show the public has moved to something of a consensus position on trade: full-on opposition to NAFTA-style pacts. That's for good reason as [this Associated Press report shows](#). Tearing down tariffs and protections without regard for the consequences is not only a dangerous departure from the policies that built America's economy, but also a deliberate way to force American and foreign workers into a wage-cutting, environment-destroying, union-busting race to the bottom.

The AP story shows the destructive domino effect of NAFTA and the subsequent NAFTA-style agreements like China PNTR. When multinational corporations shift jobs to Mexico, right-wing trade fundamentalists in Washington offer up a "let them eat cake message" telling workers in Ohio that the shift at least helps impoverished workers south of the border. Then, of course, those workers in Mexico are forced to slash their own wages to compete with desperate workers in China. When the jobs inevitably shift to China, Mexico is left in shambles, and then Chinese workers are forced to slash their own wages to make sure jobs don't go to Vietnam or [North Korea](#), where corporations are angling to employ enslaved labor.

Meanwhile, many of these trade fundamentalists like Tom Friedman and Fareed Zakaria flaunt their supposed environmentalism and humanitarianism by publicly worrying about issues like global warming and the erosion of human rights in the developing world - even though the domino effect they cheer on creates pressure on governments to reduce their pollution controls and human rights in order to retain foreign investment.

The problem, of course, is that it's hard to argue with NAFTA backers because they aren't interested in facts. It was none other than Friedman who admitted he vigorously backed a recent NAFTA-style trade deal [without even bothering to read it](#). He, like every other reporter and commentator in Washington, calls NAFTA-style pacts "free trade" - despite the fact that they include thousands of pages of protectionist provisions for corporate profits, despite the fact that even the original architects of NAFTA have long admitted that these agreements aren't free, but instead create "managed" trade. That's the big problem - these deals are managed to enrich the elite at the expense of the rest of us.

Just like it's impossible to argue about reality with deranged religious fundamentalist terrorists, it's impossible to argue with deranged trade fundamentalists who cloak economic terrorism in the language of enlightenment. It gets to the point where [Limousine Libertarians in wealthy enclaves](#) like Boulder take to the websites of major newspapers to cite charts showing the decimation of Americans' wages as proof that NAFTA works for Americans.

Left for dead, of course, is a place like Ohio.

Wealthy pundits from New York and Washington drop into the Buckeye State every four years to berate the occasional Democratic presidential candidate who dares to question NAFTA at the quadrennial photo-op at an abandoned manufacturing plant. In the general election, those Democratic presidential candidates then inevitably hire [teams of Wall Street insiders](#) who back NAFTA as their top economic advisers, and then [scurry to business publications](#) to reassure corporate lobbyists that no, they aren't really serious about reforming our trade policy. Their Republican opponents, meanwhile, [head to places like Colombia](#) to tell the right-wing regime there that America - that purported beacon of freedom to the world's masses - will be helping murderous developing-world governments continue to brutalize workers.

But this quadrennial cycle of deception may finally be changing - and not because of the benevolence of any presidential candidate, but because the political tectonics of trade have shifted so dramatically thanks to those who are doing the unglamorous - but critical - work of leveraging real power.

Groups like Public Citizen and the Citizens Trade Campaign have ignored the [Partisan War Syndrome](#) that plagues parts of the blogosphere and the progressive left, and used this election as an instrument of the uprising - rather than seeing the election as an objective unto itself. They have, for instance, used the hard-fought Democratic primary to [elicit concrete commitments](#) on trade policy from the candidates - including nominee Barack Obama. Those efforts have been supported by a group of industrial state lawmakers, who have similarly [leveraged the election](#) as a way to force a conversation about trade into the national political debate. That conversation has been so intense it even wedged its way into the Republican presidential nomination through the [candidacy of Mike Huckabee](#) - a candidacy that won Republican primaries in some of the most conservative states based, in part, on his fair trade message.

These moves around trade suggest the emergence of true movement thinking out of the tumult of the uprising [I describe in my book](#). This fair trade movement may continue to be ignored by the media (and, frankly, much of the blogosphere), but it represents one of the most encouraging transpartisan developments of the last few years. Out of the shadows of the crumbling factories that I have driven by here in Ohio may indeed come real change - if this movement continues to coalesce.