

Autoworkers protest free trade agreements

By JAZMINE ULLOA
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Autoworkers from Michigan stopped traffic for a few minutes Tuesday afternoon at one of Brownsville's ports of entry in protest of U.S. free trade agreements, which they said were unfair and exploitative.

About 20 members from the Local 174 branch of the United Auto Workers union in Romulus, Michigan began marching back and forth at about 3 p.m. in front of Veteran's International Bridge. Under a sweltering sun, they waved picket signs and chanted for fair trade.

"We are losing our [jobs](#) on this side, and (American corporations) are paying workers low wages on the other," Local 174 UAW President John Zimmick said at the protest, wiping a sweaty brow. "Why can't they pay workers what they are worth?"

Near 5 p.m. the demonstrators walked in a circle at the end of Expressway 77/83, blocking three lanes of cars and tractor-trailer trucks coming into the country from Mexico. Vehicles began to honk as traffic backed up, but a Brownsville police officer soon escorted the protestors to the side of the road.

"I am not sure what they are shouting about," truck driver David Uresti said, sitting in an 18-wheeler carrying steering wheels to Michigan. "They are keeping me from delivering my product, but what can I do?"

This was the second demonstration staged by the group, which took to marching in front of the Hidalgo-Reynosa International Bridge Monday afternoon. At that time, workers also gathered at a street corner on the Mexican side of the bridge to protest what they said were unfair layoffs at a TRW Automotive maquiladora in Reynosa. TRW Automotive is a supplier for Ford Motor Co. and Chrysler.

"We want trade, but we want it to be just," said Martha Ojeda, executive director of the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras, adding that the 600 TRW Automotive workers dismissed from their jobs did not receive severance pay or unemployment benefits as they would in the United States.

TRW declined comment Tuesday.

In South Texas, the autoworkers specifically targeted the North American Free Trade Agreement, which since 1994 has relaxed trade regulations between Mexico and the United States.

The trade agreement has spurred tremendous economic growth in the Valley area in the last 15 years.

But it has also caused thousands of U.S. jobs to be shipped south of the border and kept Mexican workers in dire straits, protestors said.

Coming from Romulus, a stone's throw away from Detroit, the autoworkers local union has seen the effect of massive job losses, foreclosures and plant downsizing linked to the [state's](#) auto manufacturing crisis.

"People are just walking away from their homes," Zimmick said. "People are sleeping under bridges."

Michigan's unemployment rate stood at 15.2 percent in August — the highest any state has ever reported since 1984, according to the U.S. Department of Labor.

The state also had a total of 19,359 property foreclosure filings in August, ranking it the third state with the highest foreclosure filings and the fifth with the highest foreclosure rate nationwide, according to the latest U.S. Foreclosure Market Report released last month by RealtyTrac, a California-based marketplace that tracks foreclosures.

But "NAFTA is only a minor aspect of the auto crisis that has battered the state," said Sidney Weintraub, an economist for the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.

In fact, Michigan's economic woes predate the free trade agreement, said Anthony Knopp, professor emeritus at the University of Texas and Brownsville and Texas Southmost College.

"The state has been suffering at the hands of foreign competition for quite some time now," Knopp said. "The most recent downturn has exacerbated the problem, but the problem was there earlier."

As long as labor costs remain significantly higher in the U.S., jobs will be shipped to foreign countries, where production is cheaper, Knopp said. And the only way fair trade will ever be established between Mexico and the United States is if Mexico raises its standard of living, thus closing the wage gap between the two countries — but that is a long time coming, he said.

Local 174 members said their labor battle stretches beyond Michigan. Although they will drive the 28 hours back to Romulus today, (Wednesday) union members said they plan to hold protests in other border cities and Washington, D.C. Now is the time, Zimmick said, because President Barack Obama is in office and Congress is under Democratic control.

"Some say it is too late for what we are doing, but I think it is never too late," he said.