

NAFTA Is Our Real Problem

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By Alexis Ball

What do immigration, border security, swine flu and environmental concerns have in common? If you answer that they all somehow relate to NAFTA, you would be so right. You wouldn't, however, have come up with that answer by reading reports of the most recent meeting of President Barack Obama, Mexican President Felipe Calderon and Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper. What was glaringly absent from their summit agenda was any talk about problems with this trade agreement that binds our countries so tightly together. With NAFTA commemorating its 15th year as a poster-child for the failed free trade model, what our leaders should have been talking about was renegotiation.

Instead they said, "We reiterate our commitment to reinvigorate our trading relationship and to ensure that the benefits of our economic relationship are widely shared and sustainable." Even though after 15 years, the very nature of NAFTA and the model it represents have shown to do just the opposite, the conversation continued to revolve around doing more of the same.

Unfortunately only big business has been a true beneficiary of NAFTA, leaving individuals to fend for themselves. Through reorienting whole economies to free market principles, NAFTA set up a system that benefits only a sliver of the population. In Mexico, this has resulted in the elimination of at least two million farming jobs which were to be replaced in the industrial sector in what is known to be poor quality, insecure and unsafe work in foreign-owned assembly factories.

Then when these factories moved to countries with even lower wage, labor and environmental standards, Mexico was left with an exodus of millions of people who could no longer feed their families.

Since the implementation of NAFTA, the yearly average of Mexicans migrating to the United States has risen from 28,000 to 500,000. Pushed off the farms and out of closed factories, Mexicans by the thousands cross the border in search of jobs that pay more per hour than a whole day of work back home. This has led to an enhanced border security to allow the free passage of goods but not people, and a highly sophisticated human smuggling system.

Before the summit, President Obama told reporters that because of the current economic, health and security crises in the three countries, now was not the time to begin renegotiating. Yet the global economic crisis has itself become proof that one of the fundamental premises of NAFTA—that a deregulated economy will self correct—is false.

Swine flu has been called the "NAFTA flu" because of its origins in hog farms that relocated to Mexico to benefit from looser health and environmental regulations. Security on the U.S.-Mexico border and in cartel-controlled states of Mexico is precarious partly because people are desperate and will

do what it takes to feed their families, whether that means taking a dangerous trip through the desert or becoming involved in drug trafficking. Not far away from the heavily guarded palace where the presidents were meeting, a parallel summit of over 60 civil society groups from across the continent was also discussing the future. This group, however, focused on proposals for addressing problems created by NAFTA as the essential starting point. "We demand an integral renegotiation of NAFTA," they state. "A new relationship between our countries based on complementing each other and solidarity, with clear respect for the sovereignty of each country and oriented toward a true redistribution of wealth...A national State liberated from the chains and limitations that NAFTA imposes to be able to follow through with its constitutional mandate: to actively promote true sustainable development on social and environmental levels..."

This October 12, 2009, they and many more concerned citizens and policy advocates will participate in coordinated actions throughout the Americas to demand change. "International Trade Action Day: Replace the Failed NAFTA Model" will call for the repeal of NAFTA, CAFTA, and the Peru FTA and their replacement with a justice-oriented trade model.