

Trade pacts seen pushing U.S. jobs away

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KENOSHA, Wis. - Outsourcing has drained the Kenosha area of some of its best jobs, and those attending a forum on the subject blamed the North American Free Trade Agreement for causing many of the job losses.

"Ten years ago, we told people that after NAFTA we would lose some jobs, but those people would retrain," said Andy Gussert, project director for Stop Outsourcing Wisconsin and organizer of Wednesday's town hall meeting.

Karen Hansen said that's what she did, only to have the situation repeat itself.

She said she was laid off from a factory in Illinois, but retrained and became a machinist at Snap-on in Kenosha. She lost that job this year, within six years of her first layoff.

"It's like you get a slap in the face, and you turn your head and say, 'Hit me again,' " she said.

Judy Jensen, AFL-CIO community services liaison, said she hears many stories like Hansen's when visiting businesses that are leaving the area for one reason or another.

"Karen is not the exception," Jensen said. "There are some (workers) we are seeing three, four, five times."

She said the problem is that government decision-makers who crafted trade agreements like NAFTA did not consider all the impacts.

"When they've gone in and made these agreements they've left out the human element," she said.

Jim Jontz, president emeritus of Americans for Democratic Action and a former Indiana congressman, said that Wisconsin's status as a swing state in the presidential election could make it the tipping point in the future of global trade.

With two new large-scale international trade agreements due to take effect Jan. 1, the president could support or dismantle them, he said.

"Whoever we elect, we need to hold them accountable for the decisions they make," Jontz said.

Gussert, Jontz and most of the meeting participants said they expect that trade policies favored by the Bush administration would lead to more layoffs as companies move operations out of the country.

"We're at a really critical moment in the future of our country's global trade practices," Jontz said. "We can have global trade without the environmental and workers' rights abuses."