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Manufacturers act to get government action

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Textile mill executives gave Commerce Undersecretary Grant Aldonas a round of applause when he pledged trade relief last spring during an industry meeting in Coral Gables.

But the April 3 American Textile Manufacturers Institute's gathering at the Biltmore Hotel perhaps was the last time the textile industry was so courtly in its relationship with the government.

JUNE ACTION

Miffed over Commerce's delays in publishing the promised provisions for filing safeguard petitions against surges in China's apparel imports and what the industry considered overly generous apparel access for Vietnam, the industry got together in June to launch a joint plan of action. Spurred by the American Manufacturing Trade Action Coalition, the groups filed four safeguard petitions and agreed to oppose proposals for tariff reduction in multilateral trade talks and for the use of Asian fabric by Central American apparel makers under new trade provisions.

In town meetings, letters to the editor, talk shows and petitions to Congress, hard-hit manufacturers have begun to wage a grass-roots campaign to demand government action on the loss of manufacturing jobs and the departure of factories to foreign shores.

This month, the South Florida Manufacturers Association launched a "Save Florida Manufacturing" initiative, inviting CEOs and state lawmakers to meet in Davie to discuss the issue on Sept. 10 -- the day world trade ministers will gather for the World Trade Organization meeting in Cancun, Mexico, to discuss the state of global trade negotiations.

CHANGED ATTITUDE

This is a new stance for small businesses, especially those in South Florida.

"Our association has been fairly apolitical," said Brian Neff, vice president of the South Florida manufacturers. ``At our most recent board retreat, there was a recognition that we would have to increase our political activity because of what was going on."

A decade ago, NAFTA -- the North American Free Trade Agreement -- was opposed by environmentalists, labor organizations and consumer activists, as well as former presidential candidate Ross Perot, who famously coined the warning of the giant "sucking sound" of jobs going south to Mexico. But manufacturers were not all opposed.

That's changing.

NEW CLIMATE

“‘Win-win’ has a hollow ring at the end of 2.5 million manufacturing jobs being lost,” said Harley Shaiken, an expert on the global economy at the University of California at Berkeley. “It’s a very different climate today than during the height of the NAFTA debate.

“There was a broad optimism about the future economically and some fear [over criticizing] because the conventional wisdom seemed to say that questioning free trade was akin to endorsing flat-earth geography,” Shaiken said. “That’s no longer the case.”