

Say 'no' to CAFTA

Sunday, July 17, 2005

Huntsville Times

The proposed trade pact is fatally flawed in its present form

A current radio commercial urges Alabamians to oppose CAFTA "because CAFTA rhymes with NAFTA" and references the opposition to NAFTA of H. Ross Perot, the erstwhile presidential candidate who once claimed President George H.W. Bush was plotting to disrupt Perot's daughter's wedding.

No, that ad doesn't give you much meat to chew on. Anyone who would oppose the Central American Free Trade Agreement (or CAFTA-DR, now that leaders in the Dominican Republic have come aboard) on the basis of that sound byte isn't thinking things through.

But within the complicated legislation are very good reasons for Americans to withhold their support. Some involve border security.

To start with, the proposal that the U.S. House of Representatives will vote on this month has to be up or down. That might be a good idea on federal court nominees, but the notion that a trade document can't be amended by representatives of different constituencies across the country should raise red flags.

And CAFTA has other problems. What it primarily does is ease the way for investors to come into poor countries and make them poorer. Laws that help strengthen local economies take back seats to international business' needs. Problems between nations and business will be decided by secret panels, with business holding the upper hand. Local efforts to protect the environment and improve the lots of workers, particularly women, will be stymied.

Proponents make much of the fact that ending produce tariffs will help U.S. farmers. What will happen, however, is that Central American family farms will no longer be able to compete. Those who live on the land must find work elsewhere - primarily the United States.

The giant sucking sound from Mexico, thanks to NAFTA, is the United States sucking in an estimated 600 poverty-stricken peasants a day who can no longer eke out a marginal existence in their homeland. Yes, it may take workers longer to get from Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, et al., to our borders, but if CAFTA passes, they are coming.

In an opinion-page column for The Washington Post, U.S. Rep. Sander Levin, D-Mich., says that a free-trade agreement with Central America "must be to expand markets and raise living standards, not promote a race to the bottom."

CAFTA promises more bottom-feeding - not just for working people in Central America but for many in the United States as well.

It's another license to outsource, to run roughshod over people already living on the margins, to do to other another region what has been done to labor in Mexico.

The proposal needs to be reworked. This is another area where bipartisan efforts are needed. As it stands, CAFTA will mostly benefit only the very rich, the very powerful and the very greedy - and should be rejected.

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