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LIBERTY CITY

Activists warn of peril to jobs in trade pact

Activists at the Miami Workers Center denounce the Free Trade Area of the Americas as a threat to U.S. jobs.

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Activists see worker peril in trade pact. The Miami Workers Center in Liberty City told about 20 inner-city residents at a workshop Wednesday that they should protest the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas treaty when talks take place in Miami next month.

Workshop organizers expressed concern the treaty may strip jobs and opportunities from working-class Americans. "The fight is coming right here to South Florida, and we need to prepare and make our voices heard," Denise Perry, director of the nonprofit Power U for Social Change, said at the workshop. "We have to take whatever forums we can get to speak up. That's why there will be grass-roots groups from all over the country coming here to be heard."

Some observers have described the FTAA treaty as an expansion of NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement, which took effect in 1994. NAFTA eliminated tariffs and other barriers to trade among the United States, Canada and Mexico. The FTAA seeks a similar pact among NAFTA nations and 31 Caribbean and Latin American countries, excluding Cuba.

Trade ministers from many of those nations are scheduled to discuss the treaty Nov. 15-21 in Miami, and Miami-Dade County Mayor Alex Penelas wants Miami to be host of the permanent Free Trade Area of the Americas headquarters. Max Rameau, leadership development director of the Miami Workers Center, spoke about key FTAA elements in the workshop at the center, 6127 NW Seventh Ave.

"FTAA seeks to force privatization of many government services," Rameau told those in attendance. "These services would be considered the same as industries, and FTAA seeks an end to subsidies to government services."

Rameau cited what he called an example of how that works under NAFTA: United Parcel Service's more-than-\$160 million lawsuit against the Canadian Postal Service over access to Canada's overnight-mail market. If UPS wins the case, Canada will have to privatize its postal service and subsidize UPS office rentals in Canada or face punitive tariffs on most Canadian products imported into the United States, Rameau said.

"We feel all of this collectively takes power away from people and their governments and shifts it over to corporations," Rameau said. "Besides that, this suit will be settled in a secret NAFTA tribunal that is closed to the public."

Rameau and other workshop organizers said the FTAA will give companies unprecedented freedom to sue state and national

governments over labor and environmental laws, as well as claiming damages measured by potential -- not proven -- profits. The workshop was told that the FTAA calls for trade disputes to be settled in secret tribunals, as in NAFTA.

Perry said these treaties cut both ways. Vancouver-based Methanex, the manufacturer of a gasoline additive called MTBE, sued the state of California for at least \$730 million in lost potential profits. The state banned use of the additive in 1999 and the company sued within months.

"California discovered the chemical is carcinogenic and causes water pollution in state rivers and streams, even Lake Tahoe," Perry said. "The company sued because California bought the chemical to reduce air pollution and never asked about water pollution."

Gihan Perea, the Miami Workers Center's executive director, urged residents to get involved in the issue.

"We have to get organized and present a united opposition," Perea said. "Previously, antiglobalization groups have mostly been middle-class whites in solidarity with Third World people. But the FTAA ties into many issues affecting the black community, and we need to get front-and-center on this."