

Wayne Parker, a staunch union supporter, thinks the FTAA will be a drain on U.S. workers.

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Wayne Parker is a union man, through and through.

When he and his family go shopping, they check the labels on products and try to buy union-made and U.S.-made. They prefer American-made cars, too: He drives a Saturn; his wife, a Ford.

The family has been true to union causes for so long that Parker said his 15-year-old son won't eat grapes "to this day," a holdover from years of boycotting California grapes to support the United Farm Workers and protest pesticides sprayed in fields that had "babies being born with spina bifida and other horrible defects."

"In his mind, grapes are poison," Parker said proudly of his son.

Parker, 50, is mobilizing against the proposed FTAA pact because he sees free trade as a disaster for American unions and labor, a recipe for depressing U.S. wages and sending U.S. jobs offshore.

"Free trade is like a race to the bottom," he said, echoing a slogan the AFL-CIO has been using since debate on U.S. free trade with Mexico began a decade ago. "It's about increasing profits for corporations and reducing living standards for workers."

Parker believes the North American Free Trade Agreement with Mexico was bad enough, prompting many U.S. manufacturers to move factories to lower-wage Mexico and to chop the high-paying jobs in U.S. manufacturing that helped create America's middle class.

But he sees the 34-nation FTAA as worse, giving companies more options to relocate and to apply a controversial NAFTA provision that allows businesses, in some cases, to challenge local laws they see as blocking free trade and their profits.

"The FTAA will bring in free trade for services, too, so potentially, it could open all government services for bid: education, hospitals, the postal service, water. It could put it all up for sale," Parker said. "These services aren't profit-driven enterprises now, but turning them into businesses, costs would have to go up" for American consumers.

Boosting costs that workers pay and depressing their wages -- that's the opposite of what Parker has pursued for 23 years now, working with the American Postal Workers Union and the AFL-CIO in Palm Beach County, where he was born and continues to live.

The straight-talker has been pushing hard for "living wages," a base pay higher than the federal minimum, so a full-time salary can support a home and family. He recently helped gain a living-wage law for city employees in West Palm Beach. He's seeking a similar law for Palm Beach

County, with base pay to start at about \$8 an hour.

It was neglect by unions that first propelled Parker to labor activism. He was fresh out of school, just in his 20s, when he lost a job at the U.S. Postal Service after a brief trial period. He appealed the decision to a government board, and within weeks, got his job back. The union didn't help him back then.

"So, I didn't want anyone else to hear, 'No, I can't help you,'" he said.

Today, he's spending even his weekends helping to mobilize against free trade, often attending Saturday workshops in Lake Worth to spread the message that U.S. labor is at risk, that NAFTA and the FTAA are stacked toward business interests, not workers' rights.

"Call or write your representatives in Congress because they are the ones who ultimately will ratify an FTAA in 2005," he urges. "And turn out for peaceful, nonviolent protests in Miami in November."

"My prayer would be for unions in each country to do the same," Parker said. "Fight for fair trade, not a free ride for corporations."

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