

Protests target 'free trade' backers in North America

by Marcia Merry

Last May, the Senate voted by only a margin of 20 votes to extend the mandate for congressional "fast track" approval of proposed "free trade" treaties to be negotiated by the Bush administration for a North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) from Canada through Mexico, and for a global GATT (U.N. General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade). This vote came after an extended period of bitter debate, and the count was 59-36 in the Senate; and 231-192 in the House of Representatives.

Now, after four months of worsening economic conditions, there are signs of increased labor and farm opposition, strikes, and other mobilizations that could potentially blow apart any "free trade" deals in the works, with or without Congress's "fast track" procedural authorization.

In the U.S. there was angry testimony and contempt expressed for free trade at a round of five showcase public hearings on NAFTA in August and early September, convened by the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative. Federal authorities intended these occasions as a gesture toward "public involvement" in discussing NAFTA, but instead the hearings were forums for rage at the economy, the advocates of free trade, and Washington in general.

In Canada—supposedly the willing partner in the two-year-old free trade treaty with the United States—September opened with a wave of government and transit worker strikes over lagging wage rates, joblessness, and the poor economy.

Reacting to the angry mood, Rep. Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.), the House Majority Leader, released a statement in early September, calling for "new thinking" on NAFTA in "the area of free trade." Gephardt last May had played a decisive role in getting the controversial "fast track" passed in Congress, as he betrayed his self-professed labor and farm constituencies and supported Bush's demands for fast track. Gephardt's new statement rationalizing NAFTA is a new sellout bid. But he may not get away with it so easily this time.

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Anger at NAFTA hearings

In Texas, the two days of hearings Aug. 26 and 27 opened to a picket line by state AFL-CIO members opposing NAFTA. On the second day of the hearing, U.S. Trade Representative Carla Hills's representative David Weiss pronounced that "the purpose of these hearings is not to decide whether we should have a free trade agreement. We have already decided that. The purpose is to get input into what goes into that treaty." However, he was sternly corrected by Harley Schlanger, EIR's Houston bureau chief, who has run for Senate on the Democratic ticket, who reminded him that there is no decision yet for a treaty, and it is up to the Senate.

Schlanger reported on his own findings about the miserable living and working conditions of the *maquiladoras* in the U.S.-Texas border region, and referred to sections of the EIR special report released last June, "The North American Free Trade Agreement: George Bush's Auschwitz Below the Border."

On Sept. 9 in Cleveland, Ohio, labor leaders also spoke out strongly against the proposed pact, and union members rallied outside the hearing. United Auto Workers (UAW) Region 2 director Warren Davis testified and pledged his members' support for strike activity against any plant which planned a move to Mexico. He said that 500 jobs have been lost to General Motors workers in Cleveland alone, due to free trade with Mexico. Davis described the conditions in the *maquiladoras* as a "cesspool of toxic wastes, ground water contamination, and air pollution." He said that the UAW is planning a campaign to bring renewed focus on the slave labor conditions there. There is also reportedly a UAW commit-

ment to back a resolution by Sen. Don Riegle (D-Mich.) to demand point-by-point congressional consideration of any proposed treaty, instead of the current "fast-track" rubber stamp procedure. Also testifying in Cleveland was Ohio Rep. Marcy Kaptur (D), who spoke of 100,000 jobs lost to Mexico. She has since released an open-letter invitation to Carla Hills to come to Ohio and tour with her the areas devastated by job loss to Mexico.

On Sept. 11, hearings in Boston at City Hall were another scene of confrontation. Gov. William Weld, the scion of the Boston banking family White Weld, proudly described himself to the panel as someone who had "always been a free trader." Though newly elected, Weld is widely hated for his continuation of debt service to the New England banks while he has been slashing the budget. Typical is the situation in Chelsea, the town that went bankrupt and is in state receivership. There, schools opened a week late, and chaos reigns under Weld's debt service priorities.

Weld was interrupted in his address to the hearing by activist Bill Ferguson, who denounced Weld for bailing out the banks, and waved a copy of the *EIR* exposé on NAFTA. While police were called to eject Ferguson, members of the panel and the audience rushed to make sure that they got their personal copies of the report.

There is also anti-Washington action in the making on the farm front. As of October, dairy farmers in at least 15 states are planning some form of strike action against the low prices they receive for raw milk—a policy that the Bush administration maintains is essential for "free market" competition.

'Free Canada, trade Mulroney'

On Sept. 16 in Ottawa, a crowd of over 20,000 people were on hand to greet the convening of the Canadian Parliament, and prominent placards included the demand: "Free Canada, Trade Mulroney!" This demonstration came as part of a first-ever national strike by the 155,000 members of the Public Service Alliance of Canada, the government workers union. The issue is wage levels, but "free trade" has become a specific target as well.

Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney—called "Lyn' Baloney"—was last elected to office by a hair, on a platform favoring the U.S.-Canada Free Trade Agreement, now two years old and rightly blamed as part of the cause of the worsening economic conditions on both sides of the national border. Mulroney is in very hot water.

Since on Sept. 18, officials of Canada, the United States, and Mexico submitted briefs on proposed tariff reductions for a future continental free trade treaty, the Canadian strike wave is troublesome for George Bush's intended free trade timetable. Canadian labor leaders estimate that at least 350,000 jobs have been lost in Canada since the start up of the U.S.-Canada free trade treaty in 1989, and the economic conditions for thousands still employed are deteriorating rapidly. The Canadian government workers strike began on

Sept. 9, and the same week, a strike of 8,600 transit workers in Toronto stalled transportation for 500,000 commuters.

On Sept. 16, Mulroney rejected the option of using mediation in the government workers' strike, and his Conservative Party introduced strike-breaking legislation to impose a wage freeze ("Public Sector Compensation Act"). The measure calls for a year-long wage freeze; then a wage limitation for the following year of 3%. Strikers carried signs reading, "Zero Percent Won't Pay the Rent," and "Mulroney Mocks Collective Bargaining."

This picture of the rage sweeping Canada has been played down by the major media to U.S. audiences, in deference to Bush. The administration is pursuing its free trade demands despite all expressions of public disfavor. On Aug. 21, Carla Hills told a Seattle press conference that labor standards do not belong in a trade treaty. However, the public protest mood has caused some shifty maneuvering by the "Bush Democrats" and their labor collaborators.

Gephardt's 'new thinking' on NAFTA

House Majority Leader Richard Gephardt delivered a ludicrous formulation to justify supporting NAFTA, in a speech Sept. 10 at the Institute for International Economics. Crooning about how "a well-negotiated treaty creating a free trade area from the Yukon to the Yucatan would be in the deep self-interest of the United States," Gephardt then tried to pour oil on waters. He stressed that he will ensure that Congress considers everyone's concerns. He said, "I believe the NAFTA is an example of new thinking in the area of trade. We have brought labor and corporate representatives, environmentalists and the defenders of workers rights all under one tent. And, we have given Congress a concrete basis for rejecting a bad agreement, which should foster a more constructive dialogue between the Executive Branch and Congress as the negotiations continue. These breakthroughs mean that the NAFTA may provide a model for future trade agreements that produce the results we want without the polarizing political disagreements that so often thwart our common purpose."

Gephardt specified that his way of protecting workers is not to oppose the treaty, but to pass "legislation to provide incentives for U.S. corporations to abide by Mexican labor and environmental standards." What if they don't? Gephardt said, "We'll help Mexico to enforce it by allowing stockholders to sue the company for opening it up to potential liability." Most union members who have heard this have some choice words for the idea that "the right to sue" will protect you from slave labor.

Lane Kirkland, AFL-CIO national president, has been superficially critical of the proposed NAFTA, but behind the scenes has been backing the deal. To try to protect Gephardt from his Missouri labor constituency, Kirkland reportedly put out the word that St. Louis unionists must continue to back Gephardt, or they might get something worse!