

Congress lacks courage to stop NAFTA

by Suzanne Rose

Judging from the actions of U.S. House Agriculture Committee members at a hearing on the proposed North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on April 8, there will not be any serious resistance from that quarter to the Bush administration's drive to turn the continent of Ibero-America into a vast cheap labor zone. Members of the committee signaled their assent to the agreement by their failure to even seriously question the open support for the agreement by committee chairman Rep. Kika de la Garza (D-Tex.).

At the hearing, Agriculture Undersecretary Richard Crowder reported on the progress of the negotiations to committee members, representatives of farm advocacy and commodity groups who came to testify, and an audience of press and observers. Crowder implied that the negotiations were on track, with only minor obstacles to be overcome.

The questions to Crowder were perfunctory. Other witnesses largely expressed concern about how their particular interests would be affected, and they were not questioned by committee members. The only serious opposition to the agreement came from Nebraska grain farmer and Food for Peace activist Don Eret, a former two-term state senator.

The lack of interest in the hearing was not surprising, because Congress gave up its say in the negotiations when it voted to grant the administration fast-track authority last spring, which means that Congress cannot substantially alter or amend the treaty once it is negotiated, but only accept or reject it. Status hearings before the Agriculture Committee will now occur monthly, according to De la Garza. But the real struggle is going on behind the scenes at the ministerial level conferences. In agriculture, Mexico is being arm-twisted over its refusal to include corn and beans in the agreement—staple foods for the population—and questions involving the right of foreign investors to own land. The fourth such meeting between U.S. Trade Representative Carla Hills and her Canadian and Mexican counterparts is now occurring in Montreal.

The tone for the questioning was set by De la Garza in his opening remarks. "This member feels that it is in our nation's long-term best interest to proceed with this agreement as Canada and Mexico are the United States's first and third best trading partners." He acknowledged minor concerns with the treaty but expressed the hope that it could be concluded quickly because the "stability of Mexico is in the national interest of the United States."

An 'Auschwitz below the border'

Eret submitted a written statement and concluded the hearings with a five-minute summation. He demonstrated that following the reduction of trade barriers worldwide after the Tokyo Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, world trade collapsed, as measured by world seaborne movement of freight.

Eret's testimony quoted Henry Carey, the great 19th-century economist and adviser to President Abraham Lincoln, who understood the evils of free trade. Carey wrote in his book *Harmony of Interests*, that the ability to import is based on the ability to pay, and that the ability to pay is greatly diminished when the labor force is compelled to compete against cheaper, foreign labor. Carey wrote, "The policy that produces a necessity for depending on trade with people who are poorer than ourselves tends to reduce the wages of our labor to a level with theirs, and to diminish commerce." Eret used the Carey references to blast the USDA's repeated lie that Mexico's population is just waiting to become an 80 million-strong consumer market for U.S. exports once trade barriers are removed.

Eret pointed out that to force Mexico and other Third World countries to restructure their economies to increase exports will lead to an "Auschwitz below the border," where epidemic diseases like cholera will spread, given the lack of investment in water projects and sanitation.

Cholera has already broken out in Monterrey, Mexico, and the public health director of El Paso, Texas warned in March that it may be expected soon there.

None of the questioning betrayed any understanding of the immoral and destructive nature of free trade. Even panelists who presented a case that their industries would be destroyed, like the Florida citrus growers or the Western Growers Association, said they did not oppose the treaty, but hoped their produce could be given special treatment. Congressmen and panelists who represented sugar and dairy producers, which are protected by import quotas, did not even object to the suspension of the quotas under a NAFTA agreement. They complained that Mexico will be able to import from Cuba and the European Community and send these products duty free into the United States, destroying U.S. producers. This is indeed a likely scenario, but the blame should be placed on the cartel trading companies, which make their profits trading the same goods back and forth over national boundaries, while weakening the power of national governments to interfere.

There was a moment of comic relief when Crowder announced that an agreement has been reached on plant and animal health and food safety standards. Crowder explained that Mexico will have to adhere to the high standards of the United States. One congressman had the temerity to point out that less than 1% of the produce coming across the border is inspected. De la Garza added, "and they publish the days they are going to inspect ahead of time."