



Opposition to Free Trade Is Internationalist, Not Isolationist

by Karen Hansen-Kuhn

The current debate on fast-track or “trade promotion” authority has been marred by accusations by public officials that are either inflammatory, irrelevant or both. A recent example is U.S. Trade Representative Robert Zoellick’s assertion that those opposing the Bush Administration’s request for that authority are “xenophobes and isolationists”.¹ In fact, opposition to this model of corporate-led globalization is both global in scale and internationalist in perspective. In this hemisphere, for example, there is substantial opposition to the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). Tens of thousands of people from Buenos Aires to Quebec have taken this message to the streets, to city councils and national legislatures to demand a very different kind of economic integration.

Many of these people have raised the concern that free-trade agreements, rather than engendering development, will only increase economic inequality and insecurity.² Alberto Arroyo, a member of the Mexican Action Network on Free Trade, examining the negative impacts of the North American Free Trade Agreement on the Mexican people and economy warns, “[I]t is important that the U.S. Congress understand the enormous opposition to neoliberal globalization that has emerged around the world. Authorizing the President to negotiate even greater liberalization would feed people’s growing discontent and mobilization against this kind of globalization... Legislators should understand that the majority of people, as much in developed countries as in less developed, have not benefited but instead have been harmed by this corporate-led globalization.”

Peruvian organizations meeting recently in Lima also question the assumption that free-trade deals will help the poor. “In the FTAA talks,” they wrote, “officials speak of a direct, almost magical relationship between development, free trade and economic growth. We question this relationship, given the depth of poverty in the region and in our country. Ten years of free trade in Peru has generated greater poverty and increased concentration of wealth. This is unacceptable. We want fair trade; we want growth that results from technological, economic and social development, not growth based on the over-exploitation of workers, communities and the environment.”

1. “Zoellick Calls for Date on House Fast-Track Vote to Firm Up Votes,” *Inside U.S. Trade*, 26 October 2001.

2. The full texts of the statements cited in this article are included in *Latin Americans Against the FTAA – Another Americas is Possible*, which is available from The Development GAP or at www.art-us.org.

The Inter-American Regional Organization of Workers (ORIT), which represents some 48 million workers in the Americas, declared that, “[O]ur experience with free-trade agreements at the global and regional levels is that the promised benefits have not been realized. On the contrary, the result has been to increase the power of multinational corporations, limit the ability of governments to regulate in the public interest, degrade the environment and reduce the standard of living, rights and protections for working men and women. In particular, investment liberalization clauses have damaged our nations’ sovereignty while contributing to increases in unemployment.”

Many people also question the lack of democracy in current trade talks. In a joint statement with U.S. groups, Chilean civil-society organizations urge governments to take the time to conduct comprehensive and public assessments of the potential social, economic and environmental impacts of free trade. “Such consultations take time,” they write, “but it seems that this process is on a ‘fast track’ that is advancing without the proper process. We are also concerned that, in both countries, our legislative representatives are not adequately involved in the preparation of this accord. In the United States, Congress is considering whether to grant the President so-called “Trade Promotion Authority” that would effectively prohibit the inclusion of social issues in trade agreements and would unreasonably limit congressional debate on those accords.”

Each of these critiques reflects broad-based concerns about poverty, inequality and democracy that transcend national borders. People in Mexico, Peru, Chile and the United States, as well as international organizations such as ORIT, work together in the Hemispheric Social Alliance (HSA), a network that opposes the current model of free trade because it grants great privileges to corporations while disregarding the needs of the hemisphere’s peoples and environments. The HSA has developed a set of policy proposals for a different kind of economic integration, one that would support improvements in living conditions for people in every country in the Americas. The document, *Alternatives for the Americas: Building a Peoples’ Hemispheric Agreement*, includes proposals designed to support local efforts to determine development plans democratically and to channel investment appropriately, to reduce inequalities both within and among nations, to ensure the protection of all peoples’ basic human and labor rights, and to prioritize sustainable development and environmental protection over the expansion of trade and investment.

The real issue is not whether opposition to free trade is nationalistic or not but who wins and who loses under the resulting accords. People throughout the Americas understand that it is not countries that benefit or suffer from these policies but rather specific sectors within each nation. Workers, environmentalists, family farmers, women and many others in the United States have joined forces with their counterparts in other countries to advance a common agenda, one that stands in sharp contrast the goals of corporate-led trade and investment agreements.

November 2001