

Central Americans Demonstrate against CAFTA

When the Bush Administration announced in 2002 the initiation of talks toward the establishment of a U.S.-Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), it declared that the accord would advance “regional stability, democracy and economic development.” Central Americans organized in unions, women’s, environmental, family-farm, consumers and youth organizations and social movements, on the other hand, have expressed their alarm at the agreement’s potential consequences in a series of protests that have paralleled the recently completed negotiations and the present planning for the accord’s submission to the U.S. and Central American legislatures for approval, perhaps later this year. These protests have often been linked to ongoing campaigns against the privatization of electricity, water and health care, the FTAA, and Plan Puebla Panama (PPP, a massive infrastructure corridor that would extend from Puebla, Mexico to Panama and that is designed to support export-led growth) and in support of family farmers in the region. In addition to the marches and demonstrations listed here, there have been hundreds of workshops, conferences and press events designed to increase public knowledge about CAFTA and its potential impact on people, environments and economies in the region.

24 March 2002: “Another Central America is Possible” forum is held in San Salvador. Hundreds of activists from the region gather to discuss the potential impacts of CAFTA. More would have attended, but numerous buses from Nicaragua and Honduras were illegally detained at the border, preventing those activists from participating. The forum results in the formation of the Central American Popular Bloc, which coordinates actions on CAFTA throughout the region.

22-23 June 2002: Over 1,000 representatives of social movements from Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras meet in Choluteca, Honduras at the first Mesoamerican Forum. They declare their rejection of CAFTA, the FTAA, PPP and develop plans for public education and mobilization.

5 September 2002: Salvadoran health-care workers declare a national strike against privatization, union busting and CAFTA, which they see as inter-related. .

12 October 2002: Mobilizations are held throughout the region. Some 13,000 Salvadorans march and peacefully obstruct 11 border crossing points to protest CAFTA, Plan Puebla Panama and the FTAA. On that same day, 1,000 indigenous Guatemalans block the Pan-American Highway at Huehuetenango and 6,000 protestors block highways, airports and border crossings in Petén. In Honduras, marches in Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula and Choluteca draw thousands of people protesting the privatization of health care, water, education and CAFTA. Thousands of Nicaraguans rally in Managua, as do hundreds of social and environmental activists in Costa Rica.

22 October 2002: More than 150,000 Salvadorans march to protest plans to privatize health care and electricity, which are seen as key elements in the government's plans for CAFTA and Plan Puebla Panama.

9 January 2003: Tens of thousands of Salvadoran activists protest the formal initiation of CAFTA negotiations, which begin that week in Washington, DC. The protesters in San Salvador blockade roads and bridges, occupy the city's cathedral and block entrances to three factories controlled by transnational corporations.

12 January 2003: Nicaraguan environmental and union activists gather outside the National Assembly to protest CAFTA. The groups call on legislators to reject the privatization of water (seen as a first step in the CAFTA process) and to demand genuine public participation in the CAFTA talks.

27 January 2003: Hundreds of Costa Rican activists from social movements, unions and environmental groups hold a peaceful protest against CAFTA parallel to the round of official negotiations being held in San Jose.

6 February 2003: Some 125,000 Salvadorans march against the privatization of health care and CAFTA.

13 March 2003: Nearly 250,000 Salvadorans march again against the privatization of health care and CAFTA.

2 April 2003: Tens of thousands of protesters from all over Central America hold a rally outside the official CAFTA negotiating session being held in San Salvador.

12 May 2003: Hundreds of farmers protest outside the site of the fourth round of official negotiations in Guatemala City. "We want to continue working without the threat of an invasion of subsidized U.S. products, as occurred in Mexico under NAFTA," the protestors announce in a press statement.

3-4 June 2003: Over 600 people representing citizens' organizations from the region gather in Managua for a two-day strategy session on CAFTA. The meeting coincides with a round of official CAFTA talks, and protests are held in front of the hotel where the talks are being conducted.

21-24 July 2003: More than 1,500 activists from Central America and Mexico attend the Fourth Mesoamerican Conference "For People's Self-Determination and Resistance" in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. The conference culminates in a march to the presidential palace attended by more than 10,000 people opposed to CAFTA and Plan Puebla Panama.

22 September 2003: Some 10,000 Nicaraguans from unions and family-farm, women's youth, consumer, environmental and other citizens' organizations gather to protest the official CAFTA talks being held in Managua.

20 October 2003: More than 3,000 Costa Rican students, workers and activists march to the Congress to demand that it reject CAFTA.

21 November 2003: 5,000 Costa Rican telecommunications and insurance workers (sectors that would likely be privatized under CAFTA), along with students and other activists, march to Congress and to the Presidential Palace to express their opposition to CAFTA.

26 November 2003: 20,000 Guatemalan family farmers and indigenous people march to demand changes in the government's agricultural and land-tenure policies and to protest CAFTA, the FTAA and Plan Puebla Panama.

10-12 December 2003: Over 2,000 Salvadoran farmers, students and other citizens' groups march to protest the final round of CAFTA negotiations being held that week in Washington, DC.

5 February 2004: More than 15,000 Hondurans organized by the Bloque Popular Hondureño demonstrate against CAFTA.

8 March 2004: Hundreds of Honduran women march in Tegucigalpa on International Women's Day, demanding greater political representation in the country and voicing their rejection of CAFTA.

12 March 2004: Some 3,000 Hondurans consumer activists demonstrate against recent price increases and CAFTA

20 March 2004: Costa Rican activists hold a concert and mobilization in San José against CAFTA and the Iraq War. Some 4,000 Honduran activists, including a large contingent of indigenous people, demonstrate against CAFTA and the Iraq War.

23 March 2004: Thousands of Guatemalan farmers, women, workers and youth march and block roads to protest CAFTA, Plan Puebla Panama and recent price increases on consumer goods.

31 March 2004: More than 10,000 indigenous Guatemalans organized by the Mayan Wagib'Kij march to demand that the government cancel mining permits on their lands and that it review CAFTA, the FTAA and PPP and initiate a process to redefine those agreements in consultation with indigenous peoples.

1 May 2004: Demonstrations commemorating Labor Day take place throughout the region. Some 15,000 Honduran workers take to the streets and present a list of 12 demands, including a call on the government not to ratify CAFTA. More than 6,000 Costa Ricans march, as well, against the privatization of public telecommunications and insurance services and the signing of CAFTA.

31 May 2004: Some 20,000 Costa Ricans march to the National Assembly to express their opposition to CAFTA. Legislator Gloria Valerín (PUSC, the majority party) vows to vote against the agreement, adding, "I am pleasantly surprised by the massive support for this effort

by the Costa Rican people. Now it is our job to make sure more Deputies vote against CAFTA.”

8 June 2004: Thousands of Guatemalan farmers, workers and indigenous peoples block highways and border crossings, protesting violent land evictions, proposals for regressive taxes and CAFTA. The government agrees to a series of commitments in response to the protests, including a promise to hold public hearings on CAFTA throughout the country.

2 July 2004: Honduran students, teachers and workers blockade streets in Tegucigalpa to protest the lack of any response by the government to the demands presented on 1 May.

19-21 July 2004: Social movement leaders from throughout Central America meet in El Salvador at the fifth Mesoamerican Forum. Representatives of more than 700 organizations sign a petition against CAFTA.

23-30 August 2004: Tens of thousands of Costa Ricans bring the country to a halt in demonstrations against a foreign company’s control of vehicle inspection services, against the possible ratification of CAFTA and for much needed wage increases. The government accedes to several of the protesters’ demands, leading to resignations by four ministers (including the trade and finance ministers) and other top economic advisors.

Sources: USTR, *U.S. and Central American Countries Conclude Historic Free Trade Agreement*, 17 December 2003; *CAFTA News*; *CISPES National Office Reports*; *Nicaragua Network News Service*; *La Nación* (Costa Rica); *AP Latin America Newswire*; *La Tribuna* (Honduras); *Diario La Prensa* (Honduras); *El Diario de Hoy* (El Salvador); *La Hora* (Guatemala); *Prensa Libre* (Guatemala); and reports by Raúl Moreno (Red Sinti Techan, El Salvador), Matthew Kavanagh (NISGUA) Tom Ricker (Quixote Center), Gerardo Cerdas (Encuentro Popular, Costa Rica), Carlos H Reyes (Bloque Popular, Honduras), and Ursula Roldan Andrade (Plataforma Agraria, Guatemala).

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