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NOT THIS NAFTA: A TRINATIONAL CITIZENS' PERSPECTIVE
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Much of the recent press on the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has caricatured the opponents of NAFTA as looking to the past, in contrast to the "forward" looking proponents of the agreement. In fact, it is precisely because of concerns about the lessons of the past decade that many NAFTA opponents throughout North America are worried about the kind of future this agreement would lock us into.

Canada's experience under the U.S.-Canada Free Trade Agreement provides a glimpse of what the United States could expect under NAFTA. Since that agreement was implemented in 1989, Canada has experienced its most profound recession since the 1930s. Canadians have lost more than 567,000 jobs, including over one-fifth of the country's manufacturing workforce, as companies consolidated production and moved to the lower-wage, less-unionized areas of the United States.

Former Prime Minister Mulroney, whose government negotiated and implemented the agreement, saw his support plunge to just 17 percent of the electorate. In last month's national elections, Canadians clearly voiced their rejection of the policies embodied in both the U.S.-Canada agreement and NAFTA by electing Liberal party candidate Jean Chretien, who had stated his intention to renegotiate NAFTA. Mulroney's Conservative party was consigned to the political dustbin, their representation in the federal parliament dropping from 156 to only two seats.

In Mexico, as well, the experience of the past decade has raised concerns about what kind of future NAFTA would bring. Since 1982, the economic liberalization policies of structural adjustment, which have laid the groundwork for NAFTA, have concentrated income and political power in the hands of the economic and political elite and precipitated a 50 percent decline in real wages. The long absence of free elections, of an independent labor movement and of the rule of law has helped keep the fruits of any economic expansion in the hands of a minority.

It is a myth that Mexicans would feel betrayed were this NAFTA not ratified by the U.S. Congress. In fact, despite a massive propaganda campaign by the government, only one-third of Mexicans polled recently by the largest private bank in the country expressed support for the agreement. Popular organizations, family farmers, small and medium businesspeople and many others across Mexico have been articulating their rejection of this accord as best they can, given the virtual control of the media by the government, and putting forth viable alternative trade and development strategies for North America. Their approach would include development financing and debt relief, encourage industrial planning and a regulatory framework, confront the issue of worker mobility, upwardly harmonize labor standards, create an environmental and consumer protection charter and institute a broad multi-purpose dispute-resolution mechanism.

As the European Community has understood in making the adoption of important democratic practices a prerequisite for membership, economic integration cannot serve the interests of the citizenry of each participating country if any one is subjected to arbitrary rule. Hence, it is critically important to support the efforts and follow the progress of the Movimiento Ciudadano por la Democracia (Citizens' Movement for Democracy) and other broad-based Mexican citizens' coalitions that are pressing for the democratization of their country's political institutions, particularly in the presidential-election year ahead. How free and fair the campaign and the elections themselves are will give a good indication as to whether the negotiation of another NAFTA is worth pursuing.

Americans from all walks of life also reject the idea that a trade agreement that codifies the failed trickle-down economic policies of the 1980s can possibly lead the United States into the high-wage future described by the Bush, and now the Clinton, Administrations. Much more important than the reduction of already low trade barriers, NAFTA would give corporations greater freedom to transfer production in search of lower costs. Hundreds of U.S. firms have moved to Mexico over the past decade, attracted by weak or poorly enforced environmental and labor standards and by wages that have been kept to one-eighth of those in the United States. NAFTA, which is much more an investment pact than a trade accord, would stimulate far greater job losses by giving foreign investors in Mexico unprecedented rights and protections.

The movement against this agreement extends well beyond organized labor and Ross Perot. It includes grassroots environmental, family-farm, religious, human-rights and development groups in all three countries. They have joined to reject NAFTA and to develop and articulate to their respective governments a different vision and concrete proposals for a set of economic relations that would raise labor and environmental standards, lift incomes and increase living standards throughout the continent.

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