

TESTIMONY ON CAFTA

William H. Slavick, Coordinator, Pax Christi Maine
April 19, 2005

I am Bill Slavick, coordinator of Pax Christi Maine, the Catholic and ecumenical peace and social justice movement. I speak out of the Catholic social teaching tradition which is uncompromising about the rights of workers to a living wage, to organize, to safe working conditions, and to share in the fruits of their labors. That tradition places the dignity of every human being, the common good, and environmental sustainability before the rights of corporations to large profits and expanded power. The late John Paul II was repeatedly critical of the global economy and capitalism in their exploitation of labor and resources; policies and practices that continue to transfer wealth from the Third to the First World, and an unending proliferation of arms required and used by the haves to maintain their economic advantage and power.

At this stage in the run up to approval of NAFTA eleven years ago, I was a spokesperson for the Maine Fair Trade Coalition. Notably, every dire prediction we made for NAFTA has been fulfilled. We have lost a million jobs and remaining wages have declined in a race to the bottom; our trade deficit with Mexico and Canada has increased over 1000 per cent; a million Mexican farmers have lost their farms and increased the urban glut in Mexico and flow of immigrants northward. Canada has suffered as well. Comparable results have followed from the World Trade Organization's agreements and their extension to China. We are now seeing the economic, environmental, and political disaster following from US agribusiness dumping subsidized rice in Haiti, once Haiti's protection of its agriculture was broken, and so destroying its agriculture-based subsistence economy.

I am not as well-informed about the particulars of CAFTA, but I understand that it closely follows the NAFTA model--a trade agreement of, by, and for the multinational corporations whose stockholders and management alone benefit. Like NAFTA, CAFTA abrogates worker's rights, fails to protect working conditions, and will lead to reduced wages and environmental degradation. Like NAFTA, CAFTA will abrogate government rights to protect workers, the public interest, and the environment in ways that, were the electorate fully informed, they would never approve. Public accountability is forfeited to the profits of a few. Ill-informed though the public is, most Democrats, Republicans, and Independents oppose the conditions included in NAFTA. Moreover, NAFTA does nothing, as any responsible trade agreement today should, to address poverty in Central America and the Caribbean. Like NAFTA, the enforcement mechanism is a sham.

Like NAFTA, CAFTA would use the capitulation of signatory governments to a free trade agreement to serve special interests' demand for greater profits and for power. Notably, the Guatemalan government, notorious for its repressive abuses of workers and consumers alike over half a century and its government's abject service of business interests, has reacted violently to massive anti-CAFTA demonstrations with police repression and threats of use of military force against the peaceful protesters. Guatemalan workers know that CAFTA will only make their lives worse.

We have enough poverty, exploitation of workers, and abuse of our fragile ecosystem already. In fact, we have far too much. What we need are trade agreements that start with human values--the dignity of persons, the primacy of the common good, safeguarding the environment, agreements in which our government staunchly upholds those values, not another agreement that serves only greed. In my judgment, the last thing we should do is abet our government's rejection of the common good as its responsibility by approving the Central American Free Trade Agreement.

Thank you.