

Op-Ed

Subject: North American Free Trade Agreement.

Author: Mark Ritchie, executive director of the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, headquartered in Minneapolis.

Don't Trust Bush on Trade

by Mark Ritchie

President Bush has begun pleading with the American people to "trust him" on the issue of free trade with Mexico, but I'm afraid we can't trust him on this one.

Negotiations for the so-called North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA, have been conducted in secret--not exactly the best way to engender trust. And it's the American public that is being kept in the dark.

Thousands of senior executives of major multinational cooperations have privileged access to the negotiations as advisers. A couple of trade-union leaders and environmentalists have also been invited, but they are clearly outnumbered, and their constituents--as well as the rest of the public--are effectively shut out of the process.

Another reason we can't trust Bush on this one is that he's given away the store to multinational corporations. The executives demanded the right to move any or all of their factories to Mexico to take advantage of low wages, weak environmental standards, and non-enforcement of workplace and consumer-protection regulations. Under the proposed agreement,

these executives get their way.

As a result, multinationals will be able to beat out the American companies that choose to stay in this country and protect the environment and their workers' health. If you are a factory owner in the United States, this agreement gives you an incentive to do the wrong thing.

Bush hasn't looked out for the interests of American consumers, either. Under some of the proposed provisions, food imports from Mexico would not have to meet U.S. standards. For instance, the agreement would permit the sale of Mexican fresh fruit and vegetables with DDT residue levels up to 50 times higher than allowable under current U.S. laws. This is a serious threat to our health.

The opening of our borders to virtually unlimited imports of fruits and vegetables from Mexico will also damage the U.S. produce industry. According to some estimates, as many as one million U.S. workers in the farm and food industry will lose their jobs if this agreement goes through.

There is one final reason for not trusting Bush on the trade agreement: Once the deal is done, it will be all but impossible for the public or even the Congress to make any changes. Special "fast-track" procedures give the President enormous power by prohibiting Congress from altering the final text signed by the President. Under the "fast-track" arrangement, Congress can rubber stamp the deal or reject it, but it cannot amend it.

The free trade agreement is too costly and too anti-democratic. On this one, don't trust President Bush; trust

yourself. The jobs he'd like to ship off to Mexico may include your own.

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Mark Ritchie is executive director of the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, headquartered in Minneapolis. He wrote this column for the Progressive Media Project, an affiliate of The Progressive magazine in Madison, Wisconsin.