

October 22, 2007

Lessons from NAFTA - Day 1

Today was the first day of "[Lessons from NAFTA: Building a New Fair Trade Agenda](#)" - a conference that has brought together an amazing collection of civil society leaders, academics and government representatives from the U.S., Mexico and Canada. The opening session heard a rousing speech from [John Nichols](#), political writer for [the Nation](#), who outlined what a terrible job the media did in writing about and endorsing NAFTA prior to its approval in 1994. He also pointed towards the 2008 election as an opportunity to increase the number of fair trade supporters in Congress.

A larger roundtable discussion looked back at NAFTA and the specific experiences of people in the U.S., Canada and Mexico. Minnesota Secretary of State [Mark Ritchie](#) discussed the opportunity NAFTA brought to talk about trade to a wider audience and to build solidarity among civil society organizations in different countries. [Maude Barlow](#), of the Council of Canadians, spoke of the ongoing challenges and occasional successes in opposing the free trade agenda in Canada. [Victor Suarez](#), of ANEC, spoke of the challenges NAFTA brought to the Mexican countryside. [Oscar Chacon](#), of NALAAC, spoke of how NAFTA increased immigration and the difficulties facing new immigrants entering the U.S. And [Martha Ojeda](#), of Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras, spoke of the working conditions at manufacturing plants on the Mexican-U.S. border.

There were a series of great panels in the afternoon on agriculture, energy and the environment, and it is impossible to report on them all. One that I caught quickly, but seemed to have many good ideas to help shape future discussions at the conference, was from [Daniel De La Torre Ugarte](#), of the Agricultural Policy Analysis Center at the University of Tennessee. Ugarte pointed out at least two major flaws in NAFTA that must be corrected in future trade agreements: 1) the disparity in resources, both natural and capital, between trading partners must be acknowledged and addressed; 2) the right to export must not continue to trump other basic rights such as human rights, labor rights or environmental rights.

A full report, including recordings of the various presentations, will be available at IATP's web site as soon as we can pull it together. More to come tomorrow.

—[Ben Lilliston](#)