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## The Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) and Working Women

### What is a trade agreement?

Trade agreements are treaties between governments that define the rules for the way trade is conducted. When we talk about trade, we usually are talking about the trade in goods (things that you can physically touch), services (such as database entry and education) and capital (money and investments).

### What is the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA)?

The FTAA is a trade agreement that would include nearly all of the Western Hemisphere: North America, Central America, South America and the Caribbean (excluding Cuba). The FTAA will affect the lives of 800 million people throughout the hemisphere. The FTAA would expand the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which applies to Canada, the United States and Mexico, to include a total of 34 countries extending from Canada to Brazil. Economists estimate that U.S. workers have lost 800,000 job opportunities because of NAFTA trade. Like NAFTA, the FTAA would give corporations the power to drive wages down by moving factories to countries where workers do not have the right to form unions and working conditions are hazardous.

### Who is negotiating the FTAA and what issues are being discussed?

The United States is represented by the U.S. Trade Representative's office (USTR). The issues being discussed for the FTAA include agriculture, services, investment, dispute settlement, intellectual property rights, subsidies and anti-dumping, competition policy, government procurement and market access.

### How will the FTAA affect working women?

*It will decrease wages and make working conditions worse.* Most likely, the shoes you are wearing or the coffee pot you used this morning was made by a working woman living in a country that will be included in the FTAA. Under NAFTA, export processing zones (EPZs) have employed large numbers of women, most between the ages of 16 and 25. EPZs are tax-free industrial zones for foreign corporations in which labor laws often are suspended or not implemented, leaving workers unprotected. The wages women earn in an EPZ often are 20 percent to 30 percent less than for men employed in EPZs and below the minimum wage needed to provide food, electricity and shelter for a family.

*It will reduce access to public services.* The FTAA, based on NAFTA, greatly will limit the control of local and national governments over public services. Domestic laws that protect health and safety, the environment and the rights of working women and their families could be challenged under FTAA. The privatization of health care and education services has significant impact on working women who are public-service employees and working women who rely on the availability of affordable, high-quality public services.

***It will challenge fundamental rights of working women.*** Although NAFTA created employment opportunities for some women, these jobs usually are the lowest paid and offer no benefits. As a result of NAFTA, women increasingly work under hazardous conditions and often face such threats on the job as discrimination, sexual harassment, physical or verbal abuse and pregnancy exams as a condition of work.

The FTAA will affect the lives of working women, their fundamental rights as working women, privatization of public services and basic environmental standards. If the FTAA makes it cheaper and easier for corporations to move anywhere in the hemisphere and abuse workers' rights without being penalized, working women in all of the countries involved will find that employers have a new power to ignore their demands and violate their rights.

### **Are there any alternatives to the FTAA?**

Yes. In 1997, as government leaders met to negotiate the FTAA, 700 labor, environment and social activists discussed their own vision for the Americas and committed themselves to building a Hemispheric Social Alliance (HSA). The HSA is a network of groups from North, Central and South America that have come together in alliance around developing alternative strategies to the FTAA.

The HSA is organizing the Second People's Summit to discuss alternative strategies to the FTAA at the same time as the vice ministerial meetings on the FTAA. The People's Summit will take place in Quebec City, Canada, April 18-22, 2001. In Quebec, working women will join our brothers and sisters from the hemisphere to call for a rejection of the current FTAA and for a new direction in the negotiations away from the failed NAFTA model of corporate privilege and toward a new hemispheric model that prioritizes equitable, democratic and sustainable development.

### **What can you do?**

#### ***At the workplace:***

- \$Post the ILO poster that states the basic rights of workers.
- \$Talk to your employer to make sure your uniforms are made with sweat-free labor.
- \$Find out where your employer has other factories and ask your employer about the working conditions in there.

#### ***In your union:***

- \$Join the AFL-CIO's Campaign for Global Fairness to protect workers' rights globally. Visit [www.aflcio.org](http://www.aflcio.org) for information.
- \$Educate yourself and union members about the FTAA, fast track trade authority and other trade agreements.

#### ***In your community:***

- \$Look at the trade records of political candidates and representatives.
- \$Be a responsible consumer by buying products made by workers who have the right to gain a union voice at work and who work in worker-friendly conditions.
- \$Write or e-mail your representative and senators to ask them to support trade policies that support workers' rights to choose a union voice at work and to earn a livable wage with benefits.
- \$Write the stores where you shop to ask whether they support workers' rights in their factories.