

FREE TRADE REALITY TOUR

by Josefina M. Castillo

The People's Summit.

More than 60,000 people went to Quebec in April to express their concerns about the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). The motivating reasons for being there were many, the various forms of protest as well. Unfortunately the media focused on the uproar of those engaged in visible disturbance to bring the wall down. Very little was published about the approximately 6,000 participants from all over the Americas who converged at the People's Summit. My focus then is to talk about the non-violent, proactive component of the meeting in Quebec. The People's Summit was a unique opportunity to bring together hundreds of workers, human rights activists, farmers, academics, women's groups, environmentalists, and indigenous leaders from across the hemisphere to talk about the impositions of free trade.

AFSC organized a delegation of women workers to go on a speaker's tour, crossing the borders of Mexico and Canada. They visited various cities on their way to Quebec giving testimony of the effects of NAFTA upon their lives, their community and their working environment. The "Free Trade Reality Tour" as it was named, included speakers from the "maquila" industry in three different border cities in Mexico: Agua Prieta in the State of Sonora, Piedras Negras in Coahuila, and Reynosa in Tamaulipas. Petra Mata and Viola Casares, founders and organizers of Fuerza Unida in San Antonio, Tx. were also part of the tour. The main idea was to include the voices of the directly affected by free trade policy agreements not only in developing countries like Mexico, but within the US as well. It is not common to have enlightened academics speak of the mechanisms of the market economy, and next to them those who can attest to their words by telling their personal stories.

The Wall of Shame.

Quebec City was the latest battleground in the struggle between the people and the corporations/governments. There was the Official Summit of the Americas held on top of the hill, with a built-up fence two miles long, and there was the People's Summit of the Americas held in a big tent in lower Quebec. This high/low geographical location seemed like a metaphor for what was going on inside the wall and outside of it. Inside, leaders of 34 countries were making decisions on codified commercial relations like NAFTA/ALCA on what George W. Bush, carrying on the grand tradition of US imperialist presidents, labels "our backyard" (now extended to Argentina). Outside, the people were discussing how profitability has become the main goal of trade agreements, in detriment of social benefits and human rights. Every sector of society is hit by the unruly market be it by patented medicines, genetically modified crops, AIDS, and even the privatization of water! Later on as we were walking to our hostel, a sign caught my attention, it read "The wall of shame" perhaps because it enveloped the whole idea of what we witnessed that day.

The local and the global: the "glocal".

One of the lessons I learned from this trip is that even as complicated as it may seem, we have to associate the local with the global. It wasn't until I heard Viola say that in the past she couldn't even pronounce well the word "globalization" that it became clear how concepts may not mean anything until they are connected to our personal experiences.

We have to acknowledge the complexity and abstract language of economics, but it will not be until we decipher this language and relate it to our lives, that we will be able to make a difference. During our stay in Quebec, Viola mentioned how the Women's Forum had made it easy for her to understand what free trade and globalization meant. It was particularly moving to hear the words of wisdom of older women in what was called the "Conseil des Sages" or Council of Women Sages. We were stunned by the stories of courage and will of women who had suffered but had survived the tragic consequences of poverty in their

shattered lives. We heard how a woman from Colombia had lost two children in a war promoted by corrupt military governments and funded by greedy corporations, however, there she was stoic and strong giving her testimony. That forum inspired solidarity and strengthened the connections with our Southern sisters and brothers. The whole tour was a unique educational experience for all women who participated and I am sure that all the group that attended came back with a renewed spirit and will to keep up with the struggle.

The empowerment of women.

Participants of the Free Trade Reality Tour have expressed high comments of their experience in Quebec and New England. Viola Casares from Fuerza Unida in San Antonio said that the tour "empowered her to such an extent that she now feels the need to talk about it". All women were greatly impressed mainly by the Women's Forum activities and by the demonstrations. In my personal opinion, I think the tour was an eye-opener on the issue of free vs. fair trade for all participants, both speakers and listeners. The tour also enabled participants to make personal contacts with other groups and people through the Americas that are concerned and work with these issues. TAO will follow-up on the issue of fair trade making it part of every Economic Justice activity carried out by the office.