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Why is free-trade relevant to war?

By Judith Rosenberg and Josefina Castillo

Globalization, trade and war are the talk of today. Governments envision a future where people of different nationalities and cultures will be able to share and trade resources across boundaries in a manner that will benefit all of humanity. However, the testimonies of the women at the panel on Free Trade from the Sierra Tarahumara in Chihuahua and from the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras in Coahuila offer a different perspective.

Julia Quiñonez and Ana Ma. Hernández from the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras (CFO) related the impact that NAFTA has had during the past ten years on workers and women at the border in Mexico. Julia mentioned that trade liberalization really amounts to economic low-intensity war where women have been the first targets of these agreements. "We wonder whether it's better to die all at once as they have in Iraq or to die slowly as the workers are," Julia commented around this issue. In similar testimony, the Rarámuri women from the Sierra Tarahumara told how they began losing their ejido lands (communal property) 20 years ago, first when the World Bank financed road construction project, second as a local cacique (a powerful, corrupt and violent authority), took land for logging and killed resistance leaders. In the wake of violence, many Raramuri fled. The cacique forced those who remained into marijuana and poppy cultivation in place of their subsistence farming.

As Northern Mexican people suffer these depredations, the South faces other trade invasions. This is what Plan Puebla-Panamá (PPP) is all about.

Agreements such as NAFTA, FTAA, PPP and bilateral accords, guarantee northern corporations access to Southern markets, eliminating all barriers to the repatriation of profits, and handing over control of key resources like oil, water, and grains by means of privatization. In other words, re-colonization, pure and simple. Specific national programs, like the Plan Puebla-Panamá (PPP) are also part of the whole array of neo-liberal policies that foster the principles of other trade agreements. While the notion of spurring development in the Mesoamerican region may seem attractive, there are numerous questions about the proposed infrastructure development project. Josefina Castillo's presentation showed how PPP aims to displace whole communities in order to build highways that will serve as corridors for the transportation of goods between nine States of Mexico up and down Central America to Panama. With financial support from the Inter American Development Bank and private investors, local governments will relocate indigenous groups so that corporations can exploit natural resources such as timber and water power.

Judith Rosenberg, speaking as a member of Austin Tan Cerca de la Frontera, from knowledge gained through solidarity with the CFO, described how the first maquiladoras were set up to employ men thrown out of work when the US stopped the Bracero program; however, 90% of the labor in those first maquiladora's were women. From that moment, protected by free trade, corporations targeted women for special forms of control and exploitation. Today we still see these practices - like the so-called pregnancy tests in which women are asked to show their sanitary napkins; twelve-hour week-end shifts so that mothers with partners can stay home during the week; and the design of the assembly line in a way that forces physical contact between workers that often turns into sexual harassment. Since women more often than men head single-parent households, they suffer more the anguish of inadequate salaries that don't allow them to provide for their children. To make ends meet, some women turn to prostitution or sell their blood to hospitals across the border.

In twenty years of organizing in worker communities, the CFO has focused on empowering and developing the leadership of women. Julia Quiñonez recalls that in past times, when a worker was fired, she would cry. Today, equipped with knowledge of the law, a fired worker will say, "Please put that in writing." THAT'S A GOOD PLACE TO END, YES?

The voices of the women in the Free Trade panel showed how people have not remained silent. The goals of the communities they represent are founded on the collective use of land and natural resources, and on the respect of the rights of workers. Their struggle and resistance was evident in their words.