

# Group argues Bush trade policies sending jobs overseas

By Jim Phillips  
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With a little more than two weeks left before the presidential election, a panel of speakers in Nelsonville urged voters on Saturday to consider how the two major-party candidates line up on "free trade" agreements and the outsourcing of American jobs.

The panel discussion came at a time when the relocation of jobs from a shoe factory in Nelsonville to the Caribbean has become a touchy issue in a local state Senate race.

"The rules of the global economy are extraordinarily important to all aspects of our community," said Jim Jontz, a former U.S. representative from Indiana. "They affect everyone."

The event, which was sparsely attended, was sponsored by Stop Outsourcing Ohio, a group opposed to international economic treaties such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the World Trade Organization (WTO), the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) and the proposed Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA).

While the non-profit group is legally constrained from lobbying voters to choose specific candidates, it was clear from the panelists' comments and the organization's literature that they would consider John Kerry a great improvement over George W. Bush on trade issues.

Jontz alleged that NAFTA "was written very specifically" to bring business conditions in Mexico into line with those in the United States, so as to make it more attrac-

tive for U.S.-based corporations to relocate plants south of the border. "Companies have always been free to go wherever they want," he noted. "But there have historically been reasons why companies were reluctant to go (to other countries)."

According to Jontz, NAFTA eliminated some of those reasons, such as concerns over currency exchange and local laws, "to make it easier for companies to go where wages are lower." The effect, he said, has been to erode local sovereignty in the United States, Canada and Mexico, whenever local laws on labor rights or environmental protection interfere with the ability of corporations to maximize profits.

"In essence, what we would call legitimate functions of government are called barriers to free trade," he said.

Jontz stressed that in the upcoming presidential election, "voters on Nov. 2 will have a real choice." Many undecided voters, he suggested, "don't understand the connection" between trade policy and lost jobs in Ohio and elsewhere. "Those voters are yet to connect the dots," he said.

Local business owner Chris Pyle, who helps run Donkey Coffee in Athens, said his opposition to treaties like NAFTA is based on his Christian faith.

Pyle said numerous verses in the Bible stress the importance of economic justice, such as Isaiah 10:1-2 ("Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless") and

Proverbs 29:7 ("The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern").

"Those are pretty convincing verses for people who want to follow Jesus," he maintained. Regarding the Bible story of God's destroying Sodom and Gomorrah, Pyle noted that while many people assume the cities' main offense was sexual decadence, Ezekiel 16:49 records that the major sin of Sodom was being "arrogant, overfed and unconcerned."

Pyle said that trade treaties such as NAFTA have given free rein to corporations to put profits above their impact on local communities. "When the people in power do not have accountability, they will almost always choose greed," he argued.

Bill Wend, a local business owner and member of Nelsonville City Council, said he has seen first-hand the impact of outsourced jobs on his community, in the form of lost state funding for villages and towns.

"Before I was on council, I took so many things for granted," Wend said, such as water and sewer service. After serving on the council, he said, "I realized what went into making those things happen."

Wend recalled that about three years ago, the state froze local government monies, which has cost Nelsonville about \$200,000 in funding. This translates into "less police protection, less fire protection, less money for streets... Our infrastructure's worn out."

This dwindling of money for small communities, according to Wend, "all comes back to NAFTA. It's all about tax dollars."

However, Wend defended the decision of

Rocky Shoes and Boots to move manufacturing jobs offshore, which he said was forced on the company by market competition. "I think they were a victim of NAFTA," he said. "They didn't want to shut those doors, but they had to compete."

Rocky CEO Mike Brooks recently blasted state Senate candidate Terry Anderson, who used Rocky as an example of Ohio jobs being outsourced to other countries, after Brooks' family donated money to the Democrat's campaign.

A new sign outside Rocky Boots' retail store in Nelsonville urges citizens to vote against Anderson (and presumably for his opponent Sen. Joy Padgett, R-Coshocton).

In response to Wend's comments about Rocky Boots, however, a local union representative argued that Rocky didn't have to outsource its jobs to be competitive, but did so to boost its profit margins.

"It wasn't so they could compete — it was so they could get greedy," maintained Gary Arnold, a staff representative for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Council 8. "They're still charging 400 bucks for a pair of hunting boots."

Literature from Stop Outsourcing Ohio claims that Bush supports FTAA, CAFTA and other agreements that promote the privatizing of public services, and allow corporations to sue governments over environmental, consumer and labor laws, while Kerry opposes them. The group argues that Kerry is in favor of "fixing" NAFTA to include better protections for workers and the environment.