

# Local protesters speak out against 'free trade' confab in Miami

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With the ministerial on the Free Trade Area of the Americas taking place this week in Miami, local opponents of the treaty gathered Saturday to speak out against it.

"It's a new form of neo-colonial control," alleged Ohio University graduate student Hilary Jones, who's going to Florida to join protests against the FTAA. Jones said the agreement — which the United States is allegedly using "strong-arm tactics" to impose over the will of the majority in Latin America — will benefit large U.S.-based corporations and hurt the poor in developing countries.

Supporters of the FTAA claim it will reduce poverty. The world's largest trade agreement, it would create a single trade area over 34 of the region's 35 countries (excluding Cuba) and affect 800 million people.

Supposedly, by reducing government interference in cross-border trade, the FTAA would make businesses more competitive, drive prices down, and improve living standards across the region.

Opponents say this rosy scenario is a fantasy. What the FTAA will actually do, they claim — like NAFTA before it — is cause the loss of jobs in the United States, reduce bargaining rights of U.S. unions, and allow a secret, supra-national trade authority to override economic and environmental decisions made by elected governments.

The ministerial in Miami has been called

to iron out disagreements over the terms of the treaty, which have arisen among the member nations.

At a press conference Saturday organized by the Appalachian Peace and Justice Network, and held in the morning chill of the Athens Farmers Market at University Mall on East State Street, four local people voiced a range of concerns about the FTAA.

Nelsonville City Councilmember Bill Wend said if the FTAA is anything like NAFTA, he wants no part of it. Wend said the latter trade agreement already has had noticeable effects on the region, in the form of drastically slumping state funds for local governments.

"This is the money that provides services in Appalachia," Wend said. "Without jobs, without businesses, these local government moneys are going to continue to shrink... Because of NAFTA and things like that, we're going backwards in our quality of life."

Wend, who owns a vending company, said he personally felt the pinch of local jobs relocating outside the country, when Rocky Shoes and Boots, a large Nelsonville employer, and his company's second-largest account, moved production operations offshore. "I don't really blame them for that," he said. "They have to have a level playing field, and NAFTA doesn't give them that."

The councilmember added that those hardest hit by the cuts in government funding are those who can least help themselves, like the elderly, handicapped and children. "If we can't help the people that truly need the help, God forgive us," he said.

Chris Pyle, an owner of Donkey Coffee in Athens, based his opposition to FTAA on Christian scripture, arguing that the trade agreement is clearly in opposition to Biblical injunctions to seek justice.

"Justice has to do with the exercise of power," Pyle said. "God is concerned with the exercise of power." Achieving justice involves making sure that everyone has access to a society's productive capacities, he said, which the FTAA and similar treaties do not do.

"Much of these trade policies are in direct opposition to the Kingdom of God," he said. He quoted, among other scriptural passages, a statement by the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel, who condemned the people of Sodom most heartily not for their carnal sins, but because they were "arrogant, overfed and unconcerned. They did not help the poor and the needy."

Pyle called NAFTA and the FTAA "a triumph of greed," and concluded with a reference to Prov. 31:8-9, which in the King James Version calls on believers to "open thy mouth, judge righteously, and plead the cause of the poor and needy."

Rory Lewandowski, a county extension agent employed by Ohio State University in Athens County, stressed that he was speaking for himself and not for his employer. Lewandowski, who works in agriculture, said the FTAA is particularly unfair to developing countries on this issue. (Differences over agricultural policies are one of the major sticking points in the FTAA as in other multi-national trade agreements.)

"Free trade is not fair trade," Lewandowski

charged. He pointed out that while the FTAA would ban the use of protective tariffs, it would have less impact on the use of farm subsidies, which are more available to rich countries and which allow their farmers to profitably dump crops on the international market at below-cost prices, wiping out small farmers both at home and abroad. He cited estimates, for example, that the United States between 1991 and 2001 sold cotton on the world market at prices up to 60 percent below the cost of production.

Even in the United States, he added, subsidies "are not helping small farmers; they are not helping the family farms," but mainly benefiting large corporate farms. He predicted that a poll of participants in the Athens Farmers Market would not turn up a single subsidy recipient, and noted that FTAA-like policies encourage large-scale, unsustainable, single-crop agriculture.

Jones, who is heading to Miami, said she's concerned that new security measures, supposedly required by the "war on terror," will be used to crack down on legitimate domestic protest like that planned for the FTAA ministerial.

"Absolutely," she said. "Already activists have been arrested in Miami under extremely questionable circumstances." She added that the Miami City Council also has adopted an ordinance specifically aimed at the expected demonstrators.

Though she hopes for a peaceful protest, Jones added, "I have great concerns that there will be police repression."