



Winning Lessons from the NAFTA Loss

■ *Rand Wilson*

The period around last fall's Congressional vote on the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was the best of times and the worst of times for organized labor.

The threat of NAFTA's passage galvanized tens of thousands of rank-and-file union activists. Working in local coalitions with farmers, environmentalists, consumer advocates, Perot supporters, and other forces, union members waged a spirited, high-profile campaign over a public-policy question affecting millions of Americans.

"ROUGHSHOD AND MUSCLE-BOUND"

The class lines in this fight were sharply drawn, with the Clinton administration, corporate America, the mass media, the Republican Party, and many leading Democrats on one side, and the labor-led grass-roots opposition on the other. Often belittled and ignored in the press, labor was able briefly to reach—and finally speak for—a mass working-class audience.

In their dealings with members of Congress undecided on this issue, trade unionists dropped their usual reliance on polite entreaties of

professional Washington lobbyists and played a long overdue game of outside-the-Beltway hardball. “Friends of labor”—poised to cast the most anti-labor vote of their careers—were besieged with phone calls, petitions, picket lines, and angry delegations of working-class constituents. President Clinton himself was moved to complain about labor’s “roughshod” tactics and “muscle-bound” approach.

After many years in which union discourse about trade policy was dominated by Toyota-bashing and “Buy American” flag-waving, labor’s intervention in the NAFTA debate displayed a far more positive strain of internationalism. While the Perot forces voiced many workers’ concerns about the consequences of unfettered capital mobility (the famous giant “sucking sound”) and loss of sovereignty, much of the labor movement avoided narrow economic nationalism and protectionism. Labor organizations and progressive union activists used the NAFTA fight to articulate progressive concerns about the pace, consequences, and terms of global economic integration.

While some anti-NAFTA events were still marred by nativist rhetoric and demeaning images of Mexicans in ponchos and sombreros, many rallies featured speakers from Mexico or Canada, reflecting the understanding that workers in all three countries were going to be adversely affected by NAFTA. The dreadful workplace conditions, labor rights violations, and political repression south of the boarder were publicized in a manner reminiscent of the labor-based anti-intervention movement of the 1980s involving Central America.

Prior to the Congressional vote, hundreds of American local union officers and rank-and-file members made personal visits to factories, local union halls, and working-class communities where U.S. companies are already operating in Mexico. Institutional relationships were forged with the struggling unofficial unions and rank-and file caucuses critical of the pro-government CTM labor federation.

RHETORIC VS REALITY

The bad news, of course, is that labor lost. While the campaign against NAFTA certainly raised political consciousness and unleashed an impressive wave of rank-and-file activism, labor’s ultimate defeat left its membership angry, frustrated, and politically confused. The confusion is due, in part, to the big gap between the sabre-rattling union rhetoric about the consequences of politicians’ voting for NAFTA’s passage versus the reality of a quick return to labor politics-as-usual.

GRASSROOTS JUICE

In May, 1991, the Stop NAFTA campaign got off to a rocky start after Congress overwhelmingly approved “fast track,” a procedural vote enabling the Bush Administration to present a negotiated treaty to Congress and have it voted up or down without amendments. Even Majority Leader Richard Gephardt—usually a stalwart on trade issues—got an approving wink from Lane Kirkland and voted in favor. NAFTA looked like a done deal.

Nevertheless, across the country dozens of small local groups and a few state organizations began the grassroots fight against NAFTA. Led by a hard core of “fair-trade” activists drawn from labor, environmental, family farm, and social justice constituencies, these groups laid the foundation for a vigorous national fight by conducting modest educational activities and periodic public demonstrations. With assistance from the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy’s Fair Trade Campaign and their Canadian and Mexican counterparts, a vibrant network of fair-trade committees and Stop NAFTA coalitions eventually emerged in more than 40 states.

In the beginning, many of these local fair-trade efforts were seen as exotic and generally shunned by the mainstream of the labor movement. For instance, in September, 1991, Massachusetts Jobs with Justice organized its first fair-trade protest at the Massachusetts State House when Carla Hills, the Bush Administration’s trade representative, held a public hearing on NAFTA. Massachusetts AFL-CIO officials read canned testimony against NAFTA at the hearing, but declined to participate in a lively demonstration of more than 100 trade unionists, environmentalists, and family farmers outside.

A number of industrial unions eventually banded together under the auspices of the Citizen Trade Campaign to implement a stepped-up fightback strategy. During this time, the Minnesota-based Institute on Agriculture and Trade Policy was instrumental in organizing and assisting many isolated grassroots efforts that were struggling to survive.

The Fair Trade Campaign scored its first legislative victory in October, 1992. With help from a few groups in Washington like the Nader-backed Public Citizen, local coalitions were instrumental in getting a large majority in the House of Representatives to co-sponsor a resolution rejecting any trade agreement that compromised labor or environmental standards. Although largely symbolic, this early success was an important shot across the bow for free-trade proponents in both parties.

Suddenly, despite the overwhelming support for fast track, the passage of NAFTA was not assured. The campaign to get co-sponsors for the

resolution (now led by Representative Gephardt) knit together the forces for fair trade and tested the capacity and strength of the grassroots organizations. Equally important, it became clear who our major allies and enemies on Capitol Hill would be well in advance. It also helped focus the efforts of the growing number of fair-trade coalitions across the country which by now were emerging as a real force in the national debate on trade policy.

THE MASSACHUSETTS EXAMPLE

The Massachusetts fair-trade fight was in many ways a microcosm of the national effort. Here, the local chapter of Jobs with Justice (JwJ) organized a fair-trade committee in 1991. The group sponsored a number of well-attended educational forums, held several press conferences, trained speakers to “Rap Against NAFTA,” and provided community and labor leaders with reams of information on the seemingly endless NAFTA and GATT negotiations. At the time, no one knew which would come before Congress first. By February, 1993, the committee had launched an ambitious state-wide grassroots petition drive to oppose NAFTA. Thirty-five community and labor groups endorsed and participated.

The signature campaign was kicked off with nine labor-led community-based press conferences in cities and towns across the Commonwealth. The press coverage—and the extent of local participation—surprised many skeptics who didn’t believe that such a seemingly abstruse issue could engage activists or local media at the grassroots level. Eventually, tens of thousands of signatures were gathered and turned in to members of the Massachusetts Congressional delegation.

One of the best features of the local coalition was the frequent meetings where a wide variety of organizations and activists shared strategies and perspectives on trade issues. Committee meetings in Massachusetts included union representatives from the Teamsters, ILGWU, UE, IUE, and Letter Carriers. On the community side, the most active participants were from the Massachusetts Toxics Campaign, the Student Environmental Action Coalition, Massachusetts Save James Bay, the Lawyers Guild, several Central America solidarity groups, and the Immigrant Workers’ Resource Center.

Over time, many smaller grassroots organizations and concerned individuals also began to work closely with JwJ. This occasionally led to some interesting cultural and political problems. Many of the small groups and almost all of the “loners” were unaccustomed to the political etiquette of coalition politics or the intricacies of the labor movement. At times they found the coalition confusing and cumbersome. For

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example, a small group called Put Americans to Work held strongly “Buy American” and traditionally patriotic views. To demonstrate the depth of their opposition to NAFTA, they urged everyone to hang their America flags upside down—a traditional sign of distress in wartime. This resulted in a lengthy debate about love of flag and country that tied up several meetings, frustrated everyone, and led nowhere.

PATW’s overt patriotism and nativist outlook alienated many liberals in the group. But it was hard to overlook their success in gathering more signatures than any other participating organization. Persistent problems also occurred with the growing number of well-meaning individuals unaffiliated to any organization who flocked to the trade campaign. In hindsight, leaving membership criteria as well as decisionmaking procedures somewhat vague wasted a lot of time and effort.

JUST SAY NO!

Probably the biggest debate was whether we should “Just say No” to NAFTA or begin to promote a longer-term “fair-trade” alternative. The union establishment—both locally and nationally—generally sought to avoid what might be a difficult and potentially divisive discussion about the mobility of capital and the regulation of the international exchange of goods and services. Others, particularly the more left-leaning members in the group, saw the anti-NAFTA campaign as an opportunity to bring together a broad base of people around a new, positive vision of international labor solidarity and community control over capital investment.

The lobbying effort to convince members of Congress to vote against

NAFTA also brought out deeply contrasting styles on how best to bring pressure to bear. Officials of the Massachusetts AFL-CIO, who are more comfortable meeting behind closed doors, convened private sessions to lobby members of Congress to vote against NAFTA.

JwJ organized a number of constituent delegations that usually involved large numbers of grassroots leaders from within each congressional district. Invariably, after a month or so of applying pressure for a meeting with a Congress member an aide would call and notify us that we could have 30 minutes “the day after tomorrow.” This put us in a mad scramble to assemble a credible local grouping on very short notice. Usually the aide would also say something like, “Just bring a few people.” We usually ignored this advice and always tried to bring the largest group possible.

In another case, at the height of the campaign, Clinton came to Boston for the dedication of the new Kennedy Memorial Library. To the disappointment of many activists, Representative Joseph Moakley (D-South Boston) succeeded in getting the state AFL-CIO to discourage any anti-NAFTA demonstrations during Clinton’s visit. The peace treaty was in exchange for some assurances that Clinton would not use the dedication ceremonies or a brief visit afterwards to a large nonunion Gillette plant to promote NAFTA. The compromise left a lot of local folks wondering how deep the AFL-CIO’s concern about NAFTA really was—especially after Clinton made NAFTA a center piece of his remarks at both the party and plant, much to the chagrin of many labor officials.

As the vote neared last fall, the campaign mushroomed into a statewide publicity and lobbying blitz, mobilizing hundreds of union members and their families who had previously been uninvolved in trade issues. They found themselves pitted against the supposedly pro-labor Mass-



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achusetts Congressional delegation. Jobs with Justice's final effort was coordinating a four-day, 16-city Teamster tractor-trailer caravan. The caravan was aimed at increasing the pressure on the four remaining undecided Representatives who had not announced how they would vote. Complete with mobile phones, banners, and thousands of postcards and flyers, the caravan kickoff in front of the Teamsters' local union hall was one of the biggest press events of the campaign, with nearly every local news outlet, and even some national reporters, attending.

We learned a hard lesson in media work. Amidst the large crowd of Teamsters' members, union officials and other supporters milling around the grounds in front of the union hall, were two local union members dressed in ponchos and sombreros. It wasn't clear whose responsibility it was to deal with them. In the crush of reporters and personalities, no one thought too much about them. Too bad, because the next day, the *Boston Globe* led with a picture of these two guys on page one. That one photo helped undo months of solid progressive organizing and positive PR that JwJ had been building.

There was one big surprise that came out of the Teamsters-JwJ caravan. Republican Congressman Peter Blute announced his opposition to NAFTA just hours before the caravan was to arrive in the biggest city in his district. However, his decision was more likely a recognition of the strong Perot base that he'll need to get re-elected than the result of pressure from progressive forces mobilized by labor in his district.

The press conferences and demonstrations came to a crescendo in the final two weeks before the vote. Local talk shows actually competed for available labor representatives and other anti-NAFTA speakers. Even a hastily organized candlelight vigil in front of Ed Markey's office the night before the vote got great press. But in spite of all the lobbying, the Massachusetts House delegation split, with half voting yes and half voting no.

IT'S TIME TO INVEST IN POLITICAL ALTERNATIVES

Bill Clinton's unholy alliance with Congressional Republicans, his costly pork-barrel deals on behalf of ratification, and the powerful lobbying of a united business community swung the votes in his favor in the House of Representatives on Nov. 17, 1993. Unfortunately, most of the politicians who betrayed working people knew too well that they were secure in their offices. The liberal Massachusetts Representatives who voted for NAFTA were convinced that—even in a worst-case scenario—they could be assured of being re-elected without labor's active support.

In retrospect, many seasoned political pundits were surprised that the

anti-NAFTA mobilization lasted for more than three years and even gained strength as time passed. In early 1991, when fast-track legislation passed, most people in grassroots leadership positions thought NAFTA's approval was a certainty. As a result, some groups decided to offer critical support for NAFTA in exchange for a seat at the policy table. Many others, however, persevered in building a progressive anti-NAFTA perspective at the grassroots level with farmers, workers, and environmentalists.

No one could have predicted how quickly things changed as the economy turned downward. The all but invincible Bush Administration was severely weakened; candidate Clinton waffled; and of all people, Ross Perot stepped forward. To everyone's surprise, the grassroots movement found itself in position to champion what had suddenly become a real national movement.

The anti-NAFTA movement successfully captured broad working-class anxiety and anger over the state of the economy. The labor movement found itself in the position of articulating the plight of working people and providing organizational leadership for both the organized and unorganized. Fair-trade activists—previously isolated on the margins—became mainstream leaders because, when the political winds shifted, they were prepared to seize the moment by presenting an analysis and an alternative vision. The anti-NAFTA message had a clear rich-against-poor internationalist content—especially when it was coupled with the concrete presence of Mexican and Canadian trade unionists and other non-U.S., anti-NAFTA activists.

The heartfelt discussion and heated debates in grassroots anti-NAFTA coalitions throughout the country reflected well the current American political terrain. Many of the alliances were genuinely new and unprecedented. That forces as disparate as the Teamsters and the Rain Forest Action Network or Central America Solidarity Association found themselves seated next to one another was, one hopes, a harbinger of potent future alliances.

In Massachusetts, as elsewhere, there was always tension between the progressive No NAFTA forces and the Perotistas. But by building a base alliance with the Perot forces, we engaged thousands of working people caught up in the same anxiety and anger as most union members over the future of the economy. Working with them undoubtedly left a strong impression about the labor movement and greater clarity about their true friends and enemies.

But our political weakness—reflected in the loss when NAFTA came up for a vote—also underscored the need for a long-term political strategy that involves expanded support for independent political initiatives like Labor Party Advocates and the New Party—and a stepped-up commit-



ment to community-labor coalitions like Jobs with Justice. Some union leaders are finally providing a real opening. Teamster President Ron Carey has called on labor to “develop political alternatives for the 1994 and 1996 elections so that working people will not be taken for granted or forced to choose between the lesser of two evils.”

These steps towards independent political action will be a worthwhile investment in labor’s future—a future without a total reliance on the Democrats to defend workers’ interests in the political arena. Conversely, failure to develop real political alternatives will cede this fertile terrain to emerging right-wing populists who are only too eager to tap the huge reservoir of anger and pent-up frustration among America’s working class.

The fight against NAFTA made labor and environmental standards part of the national debate on trade policy. These concerns will remain important issues in future trade negotiations—including any talks to extend NAFTA to other Latin American countries. Currently, Chile is rumored to be the next signatory to a NAFTA-style free-trade deal with the U.S.

Perhaps most important, the concept of fair trade—as opposed to free trade—will continue to be the rallying cry for workers and communities that want to chart their own destiny in the global economy. The challenge for fair-trade activists is to build on the strength of the grassroots coalitions that emerged to fight NAFTA’s passage. Our next step must be to promote concrete policies that will strengthen the hands of communities and workers struggling to achieve a high standard of living in the context of the global economy. ■