

Touchy Bush lashes out at NAFTA foes

by Suzanne Rose

As of mid-May, the congressional leadership came out in favor of granting George Bush's imperial demand for continuation of a "fast track" procedure, by which Congress relinquishes its right to amend whatever North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) Bush concludes with Mexico. However, the more the issue has been aired in the "hinterlands," the more adamant has been the public disapproval and disgust. Whatever the final vote, an opposition movement is underway.

House Majority Leader Rep. Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.) backed the bill in early May, and on May 14, the proposal got the approval of the Senate Finance and House Ways and Means committees; the full floor votes are expected to take place the week of May 20. But these actions came amidst rising voices of disapproval.

In April, Rep. John LaFalce (D-N.Y.) pointed out in a *Journal of Commerce* commentary that the high rates of hepatitis-A in the Southwest were related to the lack of sewage treatment in the border zone. On May 1, EIR News Service released its special report on the dangers of NAFTA, which showed the disease vectors by which cholera will spread northward through Mexico to the United States along the "free trade" routes. The AFL-CIO released a videotape showing squalid living conditions, raw sewage, and malnourishment.

The references to disease and impoverishment in the *maquiladora* regions—George Bush's cited exemplars of development—have made the White House see red. The *Washington Post* quoted a "senior White House official" as saying, "comparing the spread of free trade to hepatitis is on the edge."

Feeling the pressure, Bush personally lashed out at opponents of his proposed NAFTA agreement at a Hampton University commencement speech May 12, by calling opponents "racist" who criticize living conditions in Mexico. (Virginia's Hampton University student body is mostly black.) As proof, Bush's aides submitted to the press copies of the AFL-CIO's ads which show photographs of horrendous living conditions in the *maquiladora* sections of Mexico.

This had the unintended effect of putting Bush's congressional pals on the spot, since the point of NAFTA is to spread the low-wage, poverty conditions throughout the continent. Gephardt, who enjoys the support of organized labor in his district in St. Louis, was forced to demand an apology for the charge of racism. Nonetheless, Gephardt and Rep. Dan Rostenkowski (D-Ill.), chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, have stood by their eight-page resolution

endorsing the President's request for fast track treatment of the treaty.

Opposition takes its case to the public

Sen. Paul Wellstone (D-Minn.) held a press conference in Minneapolis on May 13, with representatives of farm, labor, environmentalist, and human rights opponents to NAFTA. He showed a video of living conditions in the *maquiladoras* and said, "For me to sign an agreement which would institutionalize these conditions, does not make me prejudiced against Mexicans, it is an agreement which could hurt Mexican citizens as well as U.S. citizens."

At a Midwest governor's association meeting called in Chicago on May 8 to allow administration representatives to promote NAFTA, farm and labor leaders instead rebutted administration claims. In particular, they refuted the 82 pages of assurances that Bush released to Congress on May 1. AFL-CIO representative Ed Feigen challenged the administration's assertion that the treaty "will help us keep up with the newly reunified Germany and our other competitors." Feigen pointed out that Germany has made a real commitment to develop eastern Germany, while the U.S. has made no such commitment for Mexico. Feigen called the Bush report nothing but vague promises.

In lobbying for the agreement, the administration has hyped the supposed farm export potential (see agriculture column), a ludicrous proposition in the face of the well-documented malnourishment and growing poverty of the Mexican population. Mexico is currently servicing a \$100 billion foreign debt. Payment of the debt, under current practices, takes priority over the health and well-being of the population. The administration also claims that fears of job relocations to Mexico under a treaty are unfounded because any company wishing to move and take advantage of cheaper labor could have done so already, since restrictions have largely been removed. However, as the *EIR* study points out, a signed treaty will represent a commitment to enforcing conditions which today exist primarily along the border. Companies which have hesitated to move because they worried the Mexican government might intervene to stop the exploitation, will be assured of the backing of the U.S. government under the treaty.

A week before the expected House and Senate votes on the fast track, two bigwigs from the Trilateral Commission, Henry Kissinger and Cyrus Vance, came out demanding that there be no delay from Congress in giving Bush the right to negotiate whatever he wants. In a commentary in the May 13 *Washington Post*, they expressed the hysteria going on behind the scenes among the Rockefeller banking circles who want looting rights from free trade deals. "We strongly urge Congress to grant this authority. In our opinion, such an agreement would be the most constructive measure the United States would have undertaken in our hemisphere in this century," they wrote.