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Multinational corporations against the world.
Heads they win, tails we lose.

NAFTA
Monika Baederlein investigates the North American Free Trade Agreement.
Cover Story

Who NAFTA helps—and who it doesn’t.

by Monika Bauerlein

There are two images that stick with Sarah Stern from her recent trip to Mexico, and they’re not memories of sunny beaches and mariachi bands. One is a paycheck stub for six days’ work at a factory just south of the border. The net figure is $145.53—just over $24 a week, or 96 cents an hour. The name on the check is a Minnesota household word: Honeywell, maker of thermostats, security systems, and industrial gear worldwide. The other image is a traffic sign along a southern California freeway, much like the deer warning signs scattered along Minnesota roads. Instead of a jumping doe, the yellow-and-black square shows the outlines of a small family—man, woman, and child by the hand—running for their lives. Turnouts like Mexican migrants are routinely hit by cars here as they hurry north.

To Stern, these two images illustrate more powerfully than words could what’s wrong with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) that President Bush negotiated and President Clinton has endorsed. It would, she says, integrate the United States, Canada, and Mexico into a continental economy driven by cheap labor to the north, consumer power to the north, and total mobility for money—but not people—to move around.

For some, that’s bound to mean good things: lower costs, higher profit margins, cheaper goods. For others, it may mean disaster. The US government estimates that NAFTA will save 3,000 U.S. jobs at a net loss of several million, lower wages, environmental destruction, and a weakening of local sovereignty in favor of business preconditions. Either way, it matters. NAFTA stands for adoption by Congress this year, “the most important public policy decision facing people in this country today.”

RUN FOR THE BORDER

To see for themselves some of the effects of the U.S.-Mexico trade, Stern and her boss, U.S. Sen. Paul Wellstone, recently went to Tijuana, the Mexican city just south of San Diego. Tijuana is one of Mexico’s maquiladora towns, part of a special zone created in the 1960s by the Mexican and U.S. governments. Under the program, companies ship their components from warehouses north of the border to Mexican “twin plants,” have them assembled, and ship them back with “Made in USA” labels.

The program gets a slow start back in the ‘60s, but in the last five years it’s taken off like a rocket. More than 2,000 U.S. firms now operate plants in Mexico, including Minnesota companies like Honeywell, 3M, H.B. Fuller, and Pillsbury/Grand Met. In all, they turn around a total of $45 billion and employ more than half a million workers.

There are obvious advantages to operating a maquiladora. Salaries for the mostly female workers range from about 50 cents to $1 an hour, about half the standard Mexican union wage in manufacturing. Unionization rates are low, and demand for jobs is so high that those who do try to organize can simply be fired.

Moving assembly work south of the border also allows companies to escape U.S. environmental and worker-safety laws. Mexico has its own, often rather stringent rules, but the government lacks the money and the desire to enforce them. Instead, there are plenty of documented instances of maquiladoras simply releasing wastes—sewage, fumes, chemicals—into the environment, turning border towns and rivers into cheap dumps. Toxic waste generated by maquiladoras is supposed to be shipped back into the States, but in 1988, the EPA reported that only 20 of the more than 1,600 plants then in operation had actually returned any of their waste.

Honeywell wouldn’t recall much about its Mexican operation, and sources say the company was so worried when Wellstone showed their paycheck on TV during a press conference. In fact, those who saw the plant seem to agree that the Mexican’s headquarters, as it’s called, is in the better maquiladora. In addition to the 96-cent an hour wages, the company pays for a host of benefits, including retirement and health care that are government-mandated, subsidized meals and transportation, and a nest little basketball court in the back yard. All this brings the total labor cost up to about $1.74.

Honeywell representatives also told Wellstone that in their view, Mexico had saved plenty of U.S. jobs by keeping Honeywell in a product line it would otherwise have abandoned. And, as far as the workers are concerned, they and other maquiladora operators agree, most of the young workers aren’t trying to support a family anyway—they’re just working for “movie and clothes money.”

I am very proud of what we’re doing here in Tijuana,” Honeywell plant manager Angelica Muller told El Financiero International, a Mexican-language Mexican newspaper that covered Wellstone’s visit. “We are giving a lot of people jobs and introducing them to an industrial setting.”

What the maquiladoras are also introducing, however, is a growing gap between how much people make and what they can afford. Until the early 1980s, Mexican incomes were low, but so were prices. Then, economic liberalization cut prices for basic commodities skyrocketing while wages failed to keep up. Today, food costs basically the same in Tijuana as in San Diego, Stern says. “I did a market-basket survey when we were over there, and I couldn’t believe the results. A carton of eggs was $1.16. So it takes more than an hour of work in the maquilas to buy a carton of eggs.”

As a result, conditions in maquilas neighborhoods are unanimously described as horrific. Only one Twin Cities reporter, KYC-TV’s Laurie Stern, took up Wellstone’s invitation to travel along. The footage she brought back included abandoned homes covered with white plastic dust; black rivers of sewage; trash flowing through neighbors that used them for drinking water; large but ramshackle dwellings made of mud, refuse, perlite and asphalt, backs. Border organizations also report increases in birth defects and other symptoms of lead poisoning, conditions that cause a baby to be born with most of its brain.

“I had been to Latin America before, I had seen poverty before,” says Stern. “I never had seen it in such stark terms, when cause and effect are so clear. You see the agents of those who complain to plants—who would live in Tijuana if it was such a beautiful, middle-class—you can see them in their cars, expressing their hands, complaining about the traffic, at the border.”

And this is the border. Stern shows a tarmac of an eight-foot-tall wall, two fences per rota sere barbed wire at the top. Wellstone’s signs stopped here for 45 miles on the Mexican side. “They want us to go somewhere, turn their head or until then, and then they make it look like a straight line and then we’re in the middle of the border,” explains. “They make their way to the streets, and some of them get hit by cars, so we don’t, and then they fall into the border.”

These migrants, Stern argues, are the argument against the idea underlying NAFTA: “The reason for free trade in Latin America to become the standard for the rest of the world. They make it look like the flow of goods and services from one side to another. They make it look like a border, and then they make them leave the country.”

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And although there are plenty of [maquiladora] jobs, they are willing to risk their lives to come over here.

So what?

There is one big problem with Stoece's argument: All the things she talks about are already happening, NAFTA or not, and they're probably much worse than people think. The same is true of [maquiladoras]. Why, supporters ask, does the maquiladora scene even get dragged into the debate over NAFTA?

Tim Kehoe asks that question frequently. A professor of finance at the University of Minnesota, he's one of the "free-markets economists" Stoece is talking about. He's also spent a lot of time in Mexico, often with the man who calls himself the head of the Mexican government, Mexican Secretary of Trade and Industry Jaime Cereza.

Back in the late 1980s, when the government of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari first came up with its trade-liberalization policy, Kehoe helped put it together, taking unpaid leave from the U.S. to create computer models for the Mexican government. He got paid for that work, at what he says was half his regular rate, but stresses that he's not doing consulting work while working for the government.

"What you have to understand about NAFTA," says Kehoe, "is that it's not going to be as slowly as everyone might think. It will happen over the four to six years. Six years ago, Mexico was one of the most closed economies in the world. Then the Mexican government decided to open it up, and that needed to happen.

That decision didn't come by itself. It was at the urging of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and large U.S. banks, which had the huge amounts of money to developing countries, including Mexico. When these countries could no longer make their interest payments, the banks offered more loans. But in exchange, they demanded radical policy changes, known as 'structural adjustment.' These included cutting the value of national currencies, encouraging exports, and discouraging foreign investment—all things that assisted companies like the maquiladoras.

NAFTA will do, Kehoe says, is put those investments into a "more stable financial and political environment." At the same time, future Mexican governments from taking control of the country's industrial sector.

So much for NAFTA's effect on Mexico. Now let's look at the United States. What's happened is that the last 20 years wages of low-wage workers have fallen," says Kehoe. "Part of the reason is what people call the New World Economy— you know, automobile workers in Detroit to have to compete with automobile workers in Japan and South Korea. For the people who's losing their jobs, it's a pretty unfortunate trend."

But NAFTA, Kehoe insists, won't have the big effect on the trade in cars. While it is true that, for example, the U.S. economy is more than 20 times as large as Mexico's, to NAFTA's effects to the automobile industry in the U.S. More important, "there are factories that want to go to the United States are already doing it. There's been nothing to keep the factories from doing it for years."

So what, if anything, will happen under NAFTA? This, in broad strokes, is the scenario if the more optimistic proponents are correct. At first, the Mexican market opens up, consumers hungry for blue jeans, computers, and shoes, a shakeout and a shakeup in the auto industry, often to the detriment of the auto industry..

Just about to be built in Mexico and Mexico is a new, much more competitive auto industry. But some of those prepared workers for the announcement in early February that Ford was about to build a new plant in Mexico and

Farmers listen to Paul Wellstone at a NAFTA town meeting in Northfield: It's being slow in coming, but politicians admit the backlash against NAFTA is here.

THE VIEW FROM NORTHFIELD

Diane Mayfield is not impressed with those models. She's the president of the Minneapolis-based Minneapolis Regional AFL-CIO Local 1418, which represents some 450 workers at Northfield-based Boldi Corporation. The company has been a thorn in the side of NAFTA opponents, often due to the whim of the auto industry,

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COMMON DENOMINATORS

Labor, of course, isn't the only issue in NAFTA. Indeed, trade liberalization has been about one of the only concessions that will be affected. In fact, critics and proponents alike say what the deal is really about is a complex political agenda. By satisfying the demands of the U.S., and its European partners, NAFTA and its global counterpart, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), would help the U.S. and European negotiators achieve other goals, including improvements in agricultural policies and stabilization, and regional integration. NAFTA and GATT, they argue, would help the U.S. and European negotiators achieve other goals, including improvements in agricultural policies and stabilization, and regional integration.

NAFTA is very much an economic document, as well as an agreement, according to the Fair Trade Coalition, a group of 54 Minnesota organizations critical of the agreement. "It's also a tremendously political document, because it creates a new North America of the corporations, by the corporations, and for the corporations. It removes from citizens their rights to enact their own policies and regulations. The Canadians see this far more clearly than we do...they're not even talking about trade anymore, they talk about the corporate agenda. That includes a lot of the things we have known as Reaganomics, as well as the attack on local sovereignty, and so on." Not everyone sees such a gloomy picture. Roger Funke, a University of Minnesota professor who worked on GATT for the Carter administration and has talked to the Clinton team, says the danger to local laws is overdrawn. "Wouldn't you be surprised to find that GATT has overturned the municipal water standards in Minnesota?" he asks.

But you can argue that government bodies had been more concerned with making sure that if NAFTA is adopted, it would create a local and national sovereignty on many issues to international trade. As negotiations on both NAFTA and GATT, there has been much talk of striking down non-must requirements—out other words, laws and regulations that restrict the flow of trade. The Canadian government doesn't matter whether they were even conceived as trade measures. All that matters is whether they take away an economic opportunity a trading partner "might reasonably have expected to occur to it."

And it looks like more legal hairpinning, it's not. In 1991, a GATT panel overruled the Thai government's health ban on tobacco imports because it was "not the least trade restrictive." Negotiations are still open that matter for U.S. cigarette makers. Cigarette importers, a panel under the U.S.-Canada Free Trade Agreement in 1990 overturned U.S. tobacco on tobacco imports. And in 1990, a group of Mexican fish products challenged the U.S. Marine Mammal Protection Act, which protects dolphins. The case was settled. Under both GATT or NAFTA, decisions like these are made by judges and lawyers. They are the responsibility of small panels, appointed by international trade agencies, deliberating in secret, and relying heavily on existing international standards—such as the rules put together by a Rome-based United Nations agency known as the Codex Alimentarius. Codex's meetings are dominated by industry representatives. At a recent meeting, 16 of 18 U.S. delegates came from food and agriculture giants like Nestle, Coca-Cola, Hershey, and Kraft. It regulates fewer pesticides than either the U.S. or Minnesota, and routinely certifies as safe "pesticide" concentrations many times over U.S. limits, according to the staff from Congress's General Accounting Office.

And that's only the beginning. Both GATT and NAFTA are veer clear about the fact that states, cities, counties, and towns can't be permitted to discriminate against foreign producers, either. "Even this year, residents of the state Legislature compiled a preliminary list of Minnesota laws that could be under the gun with GATT or NAFTA. They included subsidies for small businesses, local covenants to protect property rights such as patents and copyrights. Under the NAFTA deal, a U.S. company whose patent has been violated by a Mexican firm can bring a claim and stop products right at the border. No such enforcement is envisioned for labor and environmental standards, which NAFTA supporters have argued the trade agreement should support."

HISTORY LESSON

But while the official debate focuses on just how meaningful the side agreements will be, the real story may be elsewhere. One group may gain something to open up the side, that is, when it comes to the actual flows of NAFTA's discussions ("You're stealing my job!" "Am not!"), the Mexican-U.S. Dialogues, says New York-based economist David Brooks (never mind the gringo name). Dialogues sponsor discussions with people from the U.S., Mexico, and Canada, from what Brooks says is a broad spectrum including business, labor, environmentalists, and so on.

"First, says Brooks, remember that NAFTA didn't come out of nowhere. 'In all three countries (Mexico, the U.S., and Canada) we've had policies implemented over the last 10 years that were quite similar. They have been implemented by the same policy makers that are pushing NAFTA, and they have resulted in economic growth."

Minnesotta laws that could be threatened under either NAFTA or GATT include subsidies to distressed regions, family farmers, and local beer, restrictions on toxins, pesticides, and wasteful packaging; and dozens more.

"But the consequences of this economic growth have not been increased employment or better living conditions. On the contrary—living standards have gone down and jobs have been lost in all three countries. So the question is, Brooks asks: What do you want economic growth and trade for? Is it enough to get money to move around? Or are there other goods that aren't automatically achieved through more business?"

This is where NAFTA meets world history. As long as NAFTA's limits can't be remembered in the industrialized world at least—have not talked about the relationship between rich and poor countries as something that actually affects them. Almost the only people who care about international trade are those who have a stake in it—transnational companies, customs agents, academics.

The NAFTA debate, says Brooks, is the first time large numbers of people have taken an interest in "North-South relations," read the massive global inequalities that are starting to look like the biggest issue of the 21st century. And since the U.S.-Mexico border is "the most unique meeting of North and South in the world," this is where the debate gets its first and more visible real-life test. "This is no longer the abstract rhetoric of the U.S.," Brooks concludes, "it's real people who for the first time are talking about international economics as a real issue, a domestic policy issue. And that's tremendous."

It's not an easy debate, though. One of the most tough that can only be whispered even in casual discussions on NAFTA is that even the fairest trade policies won't be able to bring people everywhere up to U.S. standards of living. They included subsidies for small businesses, local covenants to protect property rights such as patents and copyrights. Under the NAFTA deal, a U.S. company whose patent has been violated by a Mexican firm can bring a claim and stop products right at the border. No such
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 cyclic no one wants to talk about Americans (or other "have" nations) having to give up what they've got.

"U.S. labor unions have a long history of protecting workers at the expense of workers in other countries," acknowledges Peter Rachelle, a labor history professor at Maclester College.

"And that's just not possible any longer, whether there's NAFTA or not."

Tom Laney has suspected that for a while. A few years ago, one of his co-workers at the Ford plant in St. Paul was browsing through the company bulletin board Peacenet when he found a news item about another Ford plant, in a Mexican city named Cuautitlan. Apparently, Ford had laid off a number of people, then hired them back at sharply reduced wages. The workers—at about $15 a day among the best-paid manufacturing workers in Mexico—were on strike.

Several hundred armed guards were brought in; it's not clear just who hired them, Ford or Mexico's government-sponsored union. A fight broke out; nine workers were injured and one died.

Laney and others figured some solidarity was in order—after all, these were fellow Ford workers. "We put up a number of requests to our international union, asking them to support that strike," he says. "They didn't even respond. We asked them to do a voluntary collection, 10 cents a member. All they said was 'and what are we going to do the next time someone wants a dime?'"

Laney and the others did what they could. They sent delegations to Cuautitlan, brought Mexican workers to St. Paul. They got Wallaces (then barely installed in his Senate seat) to send letters. But in the end, Laney says, they concluded that what was really needed was a different union. "We need to be transnational unions, just like these companies are transnational. So that Ford workers everywhere are on the same side, so that we can tell Ford that if you're going to ship Ford workers in Mexico, we won't handle Mexican parts when they come to our shops. That's what the old UAW would have done."

"There's this 20-year organizing gap in American labor," Laney adds. "We've been going to the table every year to collect our 3 percent increase. In the meantime, they were sending the National Guard into Hormel (the Austin meat-packing plant), and they were shooting down Mexican workers. And what we're finding now is that because we didn't deal with these things, the meatpackers in Austin and the workers in Cuautitlan can't afford to buy a new pickup truck, and we can't sell the products we make."

If Laney's experience is any guide, NAFTA has actually started breaking down barriers—though not in the way negotiators may have had in mind. Either way, says Rachelle, the wake-up call was desperately needed. "NAFTA is forcing us to do things that needed to be done, on two planes. [First] we need to organize together with Canadians and Mexicans, not to defend special interests of Americans vis-a-vis our neighbor to the north or south, but to organize globally against our common enemies."

"The other kind of organizing we need to do is horizontal labor together with environmentalists, together with farm activists, together with peace and justice activists. NAFTA forces us into a position of organizing the kind of multinational coalition that all three groups need if they are to find a position of power to fight multinational corporations from."

In an ironic way, NAFTA might end up being a godsend even to its critics.

News interns Tresa Gogax and Sam Aeslaine contributed to this story.