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Contacts:

Lizette Olmos, LULAC, (202) 365-4553, ljolmos@lulac.org, www.lulac.org
Alexandra Acosta, LCLAA, (201) 390-7129, Acosta@lclaa.org, www.lclaa.org

National Latino Leaders Urge Congress to Rethink NAFTA-style Trade and Economic Policies

LOS ANGELES, CA – Reflecting on the roots of poverty and immigration in Latin America, the historic National Latino Congress has unanimously approved a resolution rejecting new NAFTA-style trade agreements and calling for the replacement of the flawed “Fast Track” legislation that helped to facilitate the expansion of NAFTA to Central America through the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), which was passed last summer by one vote.

The resolution, which complicates the Bush administration’s current efforts to further expand NAFTA to the South American countries of Peru and Colombia and to seek an extension for its expiring “Fast Track” trade negotiating authority, was passed in the final plenary of the Congress on Saturday, September 9th. It reads, in part:

“Now therefore be it resolved that our organizations call on the U.S. Congress and the Bush administration to immediately cease their anti-immigrant, failed trade policies that are continuing to force families to migrate from their homes in the first place; develop trade policies that promote the creation of sustainable development and good jobs in the United States and abroad by replacing the Fast Track process and replacing the failed NAFTA-CAFTA trade agreement model that has proved damaging to the livelihoods of the majority and the environment in involved countries while creating economic and social devastation that promotes dangerous, desperate cross-border migration.”

The resolution also specifically calls attention to national lawmakers who are attempting to push anti-immigrant legislation ahead of the November elections while continuing to push for expansion of trade and economic policies that force families to immigrate in the first place.

Latino leaders present applauded the passage of the resolution, calling it an important step towards addressing the obvious link between current U.S. trade policy and immigration.

“We live in a service sector economy where the race to the bottom is a common occurrence and the scapegoating of a segment of the population is done in the name of national security. However, before we begin to criticize those who have to work two jobs to make basic ends meet and who were forced to migrate illegally, we need to take a close look at our failed trade policies such as NAFTA and CAFTA,” stated Milton Rosado, National President of the Labor Council for Latin American Advancement.

“NAFTA caused over 1.3 million Mexican *campesinos* to lose their livelihoods. Not surprisingly, the number of people coming from Mexico to the United States each year rose 60 percent in the first six years after NAFTA,” said Dolores Huerta, president of the Dolores Huerta Foundation and co-founder of the United Farm Workers. “Passing a border security bill won’t have any effect

on immigration; we can only resolve immigration issues by addressing the bigger question of why people are being forced to immigrate in the first place – because of U.S. trade policy that makes it impossible for small farmers to compete with big agribusiness.”

“El Salvador was the first country to implement CAFTA, and we are already seeing an increase of both immigration to, and deportation from, the United States,” said Ana Perez, a board-member of the Salvadoran American National Network (SANN) and delegate at the National Latino Congreso. “CAFTA is locking in and deepening the U.S.- backed economic policies that have been impoverishing Salvadorans for decades.”

“We are for free trade but it must contain certain provisions for worker rights, human rights, civil rights, environmental and labor protections. We are against the exploitation of child labor,” said Rosa Rosales, President of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC).

“It’s election time, and a lot of politicians are blaming immigrants for the fact that working people keep losing ground in the United States,” said Oscar Chacon, co-founder of the National Association of Latin American and Caribbean Communities (NALACC), a national umbrella organization of Latino immigrant-led organizations in the United States. “But most of these immigrant-baiting politicians are the same ones who are pushing a reckless expansion of the very international economic policy that results in increasing inequality here and abroad, and that NAFTA-style trade agreements seek to reinforce,” stated Mr. Chacon.

The convening organizations of the National Latino Congreso, the first comprehensive gathering of Latino leaders, organizations and elected officials since 1977, include the Labor Council for Latin American Advancement (LCLAA), the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF), the National Alliance of Latin American and Caribbean Communities (NALACC), the National Hispanic Environmental Council, Southwest Voter Registration Education Project (SVREP), the William C. Velasquez Institute and Earth Day Network (EDN). The goal of the 5-day long event is the creation of an action plan and long term Latino agenda.

To read the entire resolution, as well as the other resolutions from the National Latino Congreso, go to www.latinocongreso.org.

The passage of the resolution came after Latino leaders and trade experts held a press conference on the link between U.S. trade policy and immigration on Thursday, September 7th. To read the press release from that event, please visit:

http://www.citizen.org/documents/TradeandImmigration_PressRelease_FINAL.pdf

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