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Central American Resource Center (CARECEN)
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PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release: September 7, 2006

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Reflecting on Immigration, Latino Leaders Seek New Direction for Trade Policy at Historic Gathering

Members of Congress, National Latino Leaders and Trade Experts Cite Broken U.S. Trade Policies as Source of Increase in Immigration, Criticize Push to Expand NAFTA

LOS ANGELES, CA— Trade deals such as the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which are designed to advance economic policies pushed by the United States through international financial institutions, have generated great economic inequality and a deterioration of social standards both at home and abroad, making migration to the U.S. the only option to alleviate poverty in Mexico and the rest of Latin America, according to national Latino leaders and trade experts gathered at the historic National Latino Congreso, the first comprehensive gathering of Latino leaders, organizations and elected officials since 1977.

"I have firsthand met many migrant farm workers here in California who used to own their own farms in Mexico, farms they lost after NAFTA was put in place," said Dolores Huerta, president of the Dolores Huerta Foundation and co-founder of the United Farm Workers. "Instead of focusing on closing off the U.S. border, U.S. politicians must look at NAFTA's record, and realize that U.S. trade policy is turning property-owning farmers into migrant workers."

Over 1.3 million of these Mexican *campesinos* lost their livelihoods due to an influx of NAFTA corn imports. Not surprisingly, the number of annual immigrants from Mexico in the United States surged from 332,000 in 1993 (the year before NAFTA) to 530,000 in 2000 – a 60 percent increase. Today, immigration levels remain high, above 1993 standards, with the number of undocumented immigrants in the United States (who are mostly from Mexico and Central America) increasing 185 percent over the period, from 3.9 million in 1992 to 12 million in 2005.

"The *campesinos* who lost their farms because of NAFTA can't find decent work in Mexico because NAFTA forbids many of the local development policies the Asian Tigers used to reduce poverty. The new Mexican NAFTA jobs that were created are always at risk of being moved again – from Mexico's \$5-per-day to China's \$1-per day – if workers organize or wage levels increase.," said Lori Wallach, director of Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch, the watchdog group which monitors trade and globalization issues. "NAFTA-style trade policy has also become a U.S. political issue this year, with the incumbents who supported these deals facing voter anger over damage NAFTA also wrought here."

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"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.

"It's deeply hypocritical," said Angela Sanbrano, the Executive Director of the Los Angeles-based Central American Resource Center (CARECEN). "If these politicians are truly concerned about immigration, they should embrace trade and economic development policies that recognize the asymmetries between the U.S. and its neighbors in the South, and focus on creating opportunities for meaningful work."

"In the United States, it's been Latino workers who have been hit hardest by NAFTA," said Linda Chavez-Thompson, the Executive Vice-President of the AFL-CIO. "For the sake of our families and our children, we need to change course as a country now."

"We live in a service sector economy where a race to the bottom is a common occurrence and scapegoating a segment of the population is done under the guise 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 which promised to raise the standard of living in Mexico and Central America," stated Milton Rosado, National President of LCLAA.

The participating organizations at the National Latino Congreso are keenly aware of the need for trade and economic policies that create opportunities for workers in the United States and in Latin America. But policymakers seem unwilling to look beyond the same tired policy recipes. Despite these expressed concerns about NAFTA and CAFTA, the Bush administration and its allies in Congress continue to push for the expansion of the trade model to Peru and Colombia in South America, as well as globally through the World Trade Organization.

"The increase in immigration since NAFTA is a symptom of how unhealthy the current model of U.S. trade policy is for Latin America, and it's a sign that we have to do things differently," said Pablo Martinez, the New Mexico state director for the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the nation's oldest and largest Latino civil rights organization. "LULAC supported NAFTA, but we paid close attention to the results, and they are not the kind of results that we want to export to other countries, or to deepen here in the United States."

At its national convention in July, LULAC unanimously passed a resolution opposing the NAFTA expansion to Peru and Colombia, and calling on Congress to reject the deals. The U.S.-Peru Free Trade Agreement could come up for a vote in September, though vulnerable Republicans have been pushing their leadership to delay the vote on the unpopular deal until after the elections when public scrutiny would be lessened.