



Who's on our side?

By Graham Trainor Oregon AFL-CIO President

Honoring the life of Sebastian Francisco Perez

Sebastian Francisco Perez: A 38 year old farmworker, husband, brother, and son went to work at Ernst Nursery and Farms in St. Paul, Oregon in the midst of the record-setting heat wave on Saturday, June 26, but the promise of a safe return at the end of his shift was broken. The loss of Mr. Perez the day after his 38th birthday was shameful, heartbreaking, preventable, and highlights—yet again—the complex and diverse dangers that so many workers face today when they punch the clock.

Mr. Perez was a Guatemalan immigrant who was working hard in Oregon's nursery industry to save money to become a father and start a family. He was one of nearly 200,000 migrant and seasonal farmworkers in Oregon who have faced one of the most dangerous and deadly years imaginable—heat, cold, historic wildfires, all during a global pandemic. Oregon's labor movement and worker advocates in every corner of the state mourn the loss of Mr. Perez and send our heartfelt condolences to his family. We also recommit to and redouble our fight for safe workplaces for every worker, as well as adequate protections for the complex and changing hazards facing so many Oregonians on the job.

This loss is unacceptable, and we must do more.

While we've been encouraged by the recent emergency rule adopted by Oregon-Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) aimed at ensuring workplaces are safe from high heat, this 180-day emergency temporary standard is not enough to address these long-term workplace dangers. That's why our focus will remain on securing a strong and enforceable permanent workplace protection rule for workers exposed to extreme heat and smoke as we continue to face increasingly harsh summer heat and wildfire seasons. Farmworkers, letter carriers, construction workers, warehouse workers, and any worker who is exposed to these types of dramatic and dangerous conditions are counting on us to keep fighting.

It's hard to think of a time when the intersectionality between the

struggles for justice at work and the fight for climate justice has been more obvious than these past few weeks as we've reeled from the devastation of these recent extreme heat events. Our climate is changing, our economy is changing, and workplaces are changing. That means the decisions that policy makers and regulators make on workplace safety standards and worker protection laws must keep up while also ensuring that our state agencies have the capacity to enforce these standards and laws. As the saying goes, a law is only as good as it is able to be enforced.

The loss of Mr. Perez on June 26 should never have happened. The news about Ernst Nursery and the farm labor contractor who he worked for was also disturbing. Both of these employers had repeated OSHA violations on their records, multiple worker safety complaints had been filed, and the federal Department of Labor had even fined the labor contractor for failing to provide safety information to workers. Because our state agencies currently lack the enforcement capacity needed to truly protect workers and because employers with health and safety violations are often fined so little—if at all—there is no real incentive for them to do what it takes to keep workers safe.

As this recent extreme heat event and last year's historic wildfire season become more the rule than the exception, workers need and expect more from our state government.

Pushing back on employers looking to protect their bottom line at the expense of worker safety is never easy, but the loss of Mr. Perez should be our state's constant reminder of the moral imperative we have to always do more, always keep pushing, and never stop fighting for the life-saving worker protections that can help our state guarantee that fundamental yet essential promise we must make to every worker and their family to keep them safe.

The Oregon AFL-CIO is a 138,000-member-strong federation of labor unions.



July 1, the day 'Free trade' died

ITC says 40 years of trade deals didn't help much. Our assessment: They accelerated the loss of American manufacturing.

By David Groves, Communications Director, Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO

NAFTA. CAFTA. WTO. FTAA. TPP. If you're a labor activist, those acronyms conjure up decades of pitched battles with lawmakers of both parties over so-called "free trade" agreements. Do they create millions of jobs and benefit the U.S. economy, as promised by Republican and Democratic presidents alike? Or do they kill jobs by making it easier to offshore them to low-wage countries?

The debate has been especially divisive in Washington state, regularly touted as the most trade-dependent state in the nation. Pundits and politicians have continually conflated principled opposition to free trade agreements with ignorant, self-defeating protectionism. Over the years, it has caused significant rifts between the state's labor movement and its Democratic members of Congress.

On July 1, the president's Trade Promotion Authority (TPA) expired. That means trade deals can no longer be negotiated by the White House and submitted to Congress for a straight up-or-down vote without amendment.

Anticipating a debate on whether to renew that authorization—previously known as "fast track" and long opposed by unions for helping to ram these trade deals through—Congress commissioned the U.S. International Trade Commission to study nearly four decades of TPA-negotiated trade deals. They wanted an answer: Have these deals actually boosted U.S. jobs and the economy?

On June 29, the ITC report was quietly released. The answer? Not much, if at all.

The ITC report concluded that TPA-negotiated trade deals have had a "small, positive effect" on U.S. economic growth and employment, but that these slight benefits "were not distributed evenly, with the biggest gains estimated for college-educated male workers." The report found

that 40 years of these trade pacts had increased U.S. economic output by \$88.8 billion, or just 0.5% of the nearly \$23 trillion U.S. economy, and they boosted overall U.S. employment by 485,000 full-time equivalent jobs, or just 0.3%.

But importantly, one big free trade deal outside the ITC report's scope was the agreement struck by the United States to pave the way for China to enter the World Trade Organization in 2001. That deal has been blamed for the loss of about 5 million U.S. manufacturing jobs over the following decade, a phenomenon known as the "China shock."

So in the aggregate, free trade policies have likely cost the U.S. millions of jobs with negligible economic benefit, just as organized labor has argued all along.

In the short term, it means TPA negotiation authority will be allowed to lapse and the Biden administration will not be incentivized to negotiate new trade deals, unless they are capable of serious Congressional scrutiny.

But the long-term economic and political consequences are incalculable. Free trade deals have accelerated the loss of America's manufacturing base, jeopardizing our nation's readiness to deal with everything from a major military conflict to a global pandemic. Plant closures due to offshoring have devastated communities throughout the nation, particularly in the Rust Belt states that handed Donald Trump the presidency. Democratic candidates have struggled to regain the confidence of the working-class voters who were once their base, but could see with their own eyes that the promises of free trade were a lie.

As trade deals' benefits flowed mainly to corporations and white-collar workers, their consequences were borne by the working class.

Anyone really paying attention has known for some time now that—as local trade guru Stan Sorscher likes to say—the old free trade approach is exhausted socially, politically, and economically.

Now it's official. Free trade died July 1—with a whimper. Good riddance.