

GUEST COLUMN

Free trade not working for Wisconsin

The Wisconsin State Journal editorial of Feb. 22, "Newest free trade pact merits state's support," was right that I oppose the Central American Free Trade Agreement, but to suggest that "free trade is working for Wisconsin" couldn't be further from the truth.

One doesn't have to look far to know that



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Wisconsin workers have been hit hard in the last few years by unfair so-called "free trade" deals. In the first 10 years since the North American Free Trade Agreement was signed, the United States lost more than 879,000 jobs. In fact, since 2000, Wisconsin has lost nearly 92,000 manufacturing jobs, many of them due to NAFTA and other flawed trade agreements.

"Working for Wisconsin"? Not quite.

As I have heard throughout our state, these are crucial jobs in Wisconsin, because they provide family-supporting wages and health benefits to workers without 4-year college degrees — the majority of Wisconsin's workers. These jobs are increasingly being replaced by lower-paying jobs without benefits, mainly in the service sector. The last thing Wisconsin workers need is further decline in the manufacturing sector.

My opposition to unfair trade deals like CAFTA is simple: They don't create a level playing field for Wisconsin's businesses, workers and farmers. And without a level playing field, Wisconsin will lose jobs and more family farms, just as we did with NAFTA. CAFTA has the same sales pitch that NAFTA did: "It will create jobs in the United States."

But we now know that, because of NAFTA, thousands of jobs relocated from Wisconsin to Mexico. According to the Economic Policy Institute, NAFTA cost Wisconsin a net loss of about 23,000 jobs. CAFTA promises more job losses, and another bad deal for Wisconsin.

These agreements contribute to American job loss because they put our businesses, workers and farmers at a competitive disadvantage. This is certainly true of CAFTA,

which contains only weak language about labor protections and strongly favors multinational agribusiness over Wisconsin's family and smaller corporate farms.

As the editorial pointed out, CAFTA is supposed to contain stronger labor protections than its precursor, NAFTA, to prevent firms engaging in a "race to the bottom." In fact, while the language in CAFTA pays lip service to abiding by international labor standards, the fine print makes clear that no country can be bound to the labor standards of any other country.

That means there's no real incentive for countries that, for instance, allow child labor or restrict union activity to stop those practices. According to human rights and labor organizations, both of these practices occur in Central American countries. That makes it tougher for firms in the United States, which are bound by such laws, to compete.

The editorial also said that CAFTA will benefit Wisconsin's farmers by lowering trade barriers so that farmers can export more products to other countries. Unfortunately, the farmers who benefit aren't the family farmers and smaller corporate farmers we have here in Wisconsin. CAFTA strongly favors multinational agribusiness by promising to drive down the commodity prices of grain and livestock, and allowing for the "dumping" of products across markets.

Wisconsin is particularly vulnerable to all the negative impacts of CAFTA. The state's economy depends on manufacturing, which would lose jobs and business to lower-priced, higher-volume goods from Central American countries that lack our labor and environmental protections.

Trade agreements can benefit Wisconsin if they give our businesses, workers and farmers a fair shake. By any measure, CAFTA is another bad deal for Wisconsin. To support it would be to endorse the false promises and failed trade policies that have not worked for Wisconsin.

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