

# feature

## Universitarios play host to the three amigos

by Adam Newman

In November of last year I attended a continental meeting of students and young people opposed to the North American Free Trade Agreement. I knew virtually nothing of NAFTA at the time; I had never studied economics and felt generally overwhelmed by the conflicting bits of information which I had encountered.

The Canadian Federation of Students (CFS) supports fair trade, and opposes the type of free trade offered by our government. NAFTA was negotiated by middle-aged men behind closed doors. If passed, it will be implemented over 40 years, profoundly affecting your future and mine, and the future of 360 million people on this continent.

### STEPPING ON CULTURAL TOES / NOTES FROM THE MEETING

The International Student Trade and Environmental Alternatives Development (INSTEAD) was established in the fall of 1991 by American students concerned with the effects of free trade. INSTEAD held its first organizing meeting in San Diego in June 1992, linking student groups

from Canada, the US and Mexico. Together they planned a larger meeting, hosted by the Mexican *Federacion de Estudiantes Universitarios* (FEU) last November.

I arrived in Guadalajara on a Friday night, amidst discussion of the agenda, which had been set by the Coordinating Committee, composed of two representatives from each country.

Saturday we were presented with folders emblazoned with the flags of our three countries, and the logo *Encuentro Continental de Estudiantes* (Continental Student Meeting).

The three flags were, in order: the US, Canada, and Mexico. Many of us tried to figure out why. Geographically it made no sense - the US should have been in the middle. Did it have to do with the size of each country's population? Then Canada should have been last. Clearly if the ranking of the flags signified anything, it was a ranking of the countries in terms of economic power.

We had come to Guadalajara to overcome precisely that kind of thinking. We saw ourselves not as members of superior and inferior countries, competing for scarce resources, but as people united in our support for each other and the environment. It was our goal to ensure

that existing problems be addressed. If a trade agreement threatened to increase inequality, as I learned NAFTA does, we should demand it be stopped.

*There was a mariachi band, dancing, and plenty of tequila*

The folder contained a poster, again displaying the three-flag logo, but no material explaining the position of the Mexican students. I began to wonder if it was not insignificant that we were being billeted in a posh hotel, owned by the University of Guadalajara, and financed by the federal government of Mexico.

Later conversations with several Mexican students and a professor from Mexico City assured me that where we were staying, and courtesy of whom, were unimportant facts. Mexican universities have tradition-

ally been autonomous, and able to oppose the government. However, if your criticism of the government in Mexico gets too specific, you may disappear, the professor said. Many journalists have been killed.

### WORKING TOGETHER

On the eve of the second day of the conference we piled into a room and were given headsets for simultaneous translation. National statements were read aloud at this press conference. I did not see any press, but was assured they were "in the other room". Nevertheless, I was quite pleased to see the Mexicans had taken the same strong stand against NAFTA as the Americans and Canadians. Now we would be able to work together.

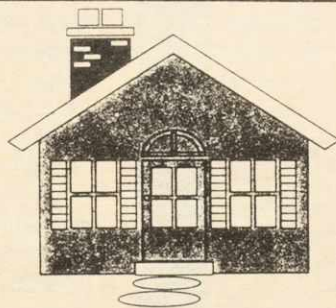
That night the Mexicans hosted a party. There was a mariachi band, dancing, and plenty of tequila. The next morning, at 6:30 am, an American ran and knocked on all the *cabanas* (cabins), shouting, "Are

there any Americans here?" The US students had called an emergency meeting to consolidate the many dissenting factions within their contingent. There were about 70 Americans, representing 42 different groups, and many ethnic and racial minorities. However, they failed to notify the Coordinating Committee of their action plan. As a result, the Canadians, who were also up and meeting reasonably early, held a caucus of their own. Meanwhile the Mexicans slept.

The most important differences were ideological, and not necessarily along country lines. There was an extremely sharp contrast in the opinion of youth from different organizations in Mexico. Because of that country's history and the conditions forced upon them, Mexican youth have traditionally been politically active to a larger extent than their northern neighbours.

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