

## Obama 'Going to Bat' for Unions in Trade Accords (Update3)

By Mark Drajem  
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U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk pledged the Obama administration will go "to bat for American workers" through greater protection of labor rights and more aggressive monitoring of overseas trade barriers.

Kirk, in a speech at a U.S. Steel Corp. plant in Braddock, Pennsylvania, today, said the government will force countries such as Peru and Guatemala to live up to labor commitments they made in trade accords, and publish new lists of countries' measures that block farm goods or manufactured products.

"We've been more eager in selling the benefits of trade than we have been vigilant in enforcing trade agreements," Kirk told about 60 workers at a plant near Pittsburgh. "Enforcement cannot be an afterthought; it needs to be the centerpiece of trade policy."

Kirk, who has been on the job for four months, has had to drop plans for a quick congressional vote on the Panama agreement after union leaders and Democratic lawmakers, including Representative Michael Michaud of Maine, protested.

Unions led the push to get stiffer labor provisions added to free-trade accords, and the pledge to step up enforcement is a prerequisite before the administration can garner support for stalled deals with Panama, Colombia and South Korea, Kirk said. Those deals have the backing of companies such as Citigroup Inc., Wal-Mart Stores Inc. and Caterpillar Inc.

"In addition to stronger enforcement, we also need an aggressive approach to negotiating and passing trade agreements," Frank Vargo, vice president of the National Association of Manufacturers, which represents companies such as U.S. Steel and Caterpillar, said in an e-mailed statement.

### **Fair Trade**

Kirk, in an interview on Bloomberg Television today, said the U.S. in the past has let some trade partners "run over us." In his speech, he outlined two specific proposals, vowing to publish annual reports on other countries food-safety restrictions that keep out U.S. meat products and technical rules that discriminate against American-made industrial goods.

Hog futures have fallen about 16 percent since April 23, as Russia, China and other countries barred imports of U.S. pork because of an outbreak of so-called swine flu.

"That's cost us the loss of hundreds of millions of dollars in revenues," he said.

Kirk said legal action would still be a last resort, with "vigorous oversight" and negotiation faster ways of resolving trade disputes.

## Actions Speak Louder

On labor rights, the U.S. trade office will review the labor rules in each of the 14 nations that completed a free-trade agreement with the U.S. in the past eight years and push those countries, including Peru and Guatemala, to adhere to pledges to prevent discrimination and child labor and let workers organize.

Michaud and Ohio Democratic Senator Sherrod Brown said enforcing current accords will not sway them to support new agreements.

“We should not confuse a key part of the USTR’s job -- trade enforcement -- with a new direction in trade policy,” Brown said in a statement. “Our trade strategy is broken.”

## A Better Job

Michaud, Brown and representatives of steelworkers also say they want the administration to do a better job of guarding against cheap imports. Obama faces a September deadline to decide if he will put tariffs or quotas on \$1.7 billion of Chinese automobile tires, in a case brought by the United Steelworkers.

That case will test how Obama maneuvers between the concerns of U.S. manufacturers and his pledge at the Group of 20 summit to avoid protectionist measures.

Arkansas Democratic Senator Blanche Lincoln and other senators are sending Obama a letter today urging him to impose tariffs or quotas on the Chinese tires.

“We firmly believe that providing this specific measure of relief would send a powerful message to the American people that you intend to keep your promise to enforce trade laws fully,” Lincoln and other senators wrote. This “is an important test case and an important step in regaining the public’s confidence in trade liberalization.”

Kirk, who didn’t address the tires decision today, said that getting nations to drop trade restrictions is different than erecting new barriers to imports.

“The ability of the U.S. to maintain the high ground is largely contingent on us acting the same as we are acting our partners to act,” he told reporters after his speech.

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