

# Guest column on trade: Overhaul policies to benefit workers; reject Colombia deal

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Speaking at a February campaign rally, Sen. Barack Obama decried "leaders [who] change their positions on trade with the politics of the moment." He argued, "We need a president who will listen to Main Street - not just Wall Street; a president who will stand with workers, not just when it's easy, but when it's hard."

These words hold as true in the general election as they did in the primaries, when grass-roots demands for a trade policy that respects workers' rights and protects the environment made the topic a hot campaign issue. Yet today the presumptive Democratic nominee risks backsliding into a business-as-usual advocacy of corporate globalization for the hemisphere.

In a June interview with Fortune magazine, Obama moved away from his earlier denunciations of the North American Free Trade Agreement. Queried about his comments characterizing the agreement as "devastating" and "a big mistake," Obama said, "Sometimes during campaigns, the rhetoric gets overheated and amplified." The candidate then softened his past proposal to renegotiate NAFTA, saying he would merely favor "opening up a dialogue" with Canada and Mexico.

Obama also came under criticism this summer from labor advocates for appointing as his top economic aide Jason Furman, an economist who has defended so-called free-trade policy and aligned himself with economically conservative sectors of the Democratic Party.

These signs are troubling, because the arguments made during the Democratic primaries were not only accurate; they are too rarely voiced within a Washington establishment that seems oblivious to how pro-corporate economics have adversely affected working people in this country and abroad.

There is good reason to believe that NAFTA - and the broader agenda it represents - was indeed a big mistake. President Clinton promised that the agreement would bolster a trade surplus with Mexico. We now have a trade deficit with the country that soared to a record \$74.3 billion in 2007. He promised that labor and environmental concerns would be fairly addressed by NAFTA's side agreements. Those who have inspected the maquiladora zone in northern Mexico have found wanton environmental and human-rights abuses.

These are among the reasons why 56 percent of respondents in a new Rasmussen poll from June said that NAFTA needs to be reworked, while only 16 percent thought it should not be. As the firm reported, voters "in every age group, income level, range of education and political category overwhelmingly believe it needs to be renegotiated."

The Bush administration hopes to expand free-trade economics by ratifying a trade agreement with Colombia by the end of the year. During the primaries, Sen. Hillary Clinton criticized the deal, citing Colombia's "history of suppression and targeted killings of labor organizers." Thankfully, Obama has also voiced opposition to the accord.

In early July, Sen. John McCain, the presumptive Republican nominee, traveled to Colombia, a country he has dubbed "a beacon of hope in [the] region," to tout the potential trade deal. In reality, his trip only highlighted the disaster that is current U.S. foreign policy in Latin America. McCain was forced to lavish praise on the dubious achievements of the Colombian government in large part because there are so few other allies to point to.

Countries including Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Paraguay and Uruguay have elected progressive leaders and asserted a greater level of independence from the White House. They have done so not because of the machinations of Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, as the Bush administration would like us to believe, but because the free-trade dictates promoted by Washington in recent decades have created huge inequalities in their societies and failed to serve the majority of their people.

By answering the demands of the American people for a new type of trade policy, a President Obama would have the chance to both attend to the needs of working people in this country and improve U.S. relations with southern neighbors. Only by avoiding a retreat into corporate globalization will the candidate honor his campaign's much-needed call for change.