

US unions condemn trade deal

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AMERICAN unions have attacked the proposed US-Australia free trade agreement as unacceptable and likely to cost US jobs in official reports to Congress, which will decide whether the deal goes ahead.

An alleged lack of protection for child workers, restrictions on workers' rights to choose their union and limits on workers' ability to bargain collectively also were cited as examples of Australia's "imbalanced, inadequate" labour laws.

The reports come amid a heated US election campaign in which unions and Democrats have lashed free trade agreements as damaging to the US economy, and presidential contender John Kerry has promised to review all FTAs.

Australia's FTA now risks being caught up in the political fight. The question is whether the unions actively lobby against the deal in Congress.

Unions previously criticised the recent Chile and Singapore FTAs with the US, but did not prevent them winning congressional support.

US Trade Representative Robert Zoellick sent to Congress yesterday the reports from 32 advisory committees, saying almost all of them supported the deal as good for the US economy.

But several of the agriculture committee reports were critical of the deal. Most in the processed food industry opposed it as "badly flawed" on the grounds that it excluded sugar and would set a bad precedent for future trade deals.

And, while beef and dairy farmers did not oppose the FTA, they continued to worry about its impact on their industries.

The most senior committee, on trade policy negotiations, called the deal "outstanding" and urged its speedy implementation, claiming it would boost US exports to Australia by \$US2 billion (\$2.7 billion) a year.

But Teamsters Union president James Hoffa issued a stinging dissent to the senior committee's findings, and the Labor Advisory Committee echoed his concerns.

Mr Hoffa claimed that the FTA's language "is insufficient to ensure that core labour standards will be respected in Australia".

Australia, while it had a vibrant labour movement, "has an imbalanced, inadequate system of labour laws that fail to fully protect workers' core rights", he said.