

# Democrats' Third Rail: Free Trade

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New York Times  
August 12, 2007

The Democratic presidential candidates all sounded the same critical note about the North American Free Trade Agreement when they debated in front of an audience of union members in Chicago on Tuesday.

“Well, I had said that for many years that, you know, Nafta and the way it’s been implemented has hurt a lot of American workers,” said Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, conveniently not mentioning that her husband wrapped up the trade pact’s negotiations and pushed it through Congress when he was president.

“We should never have another trade agreement unless it enforces labor protection, environmental standards and job safety,” chimed in Gov. Bill Richardson, who as a Democratic whip in the House in 1993 helped Mr. Clinton win approval of the trade deal with Mexico and Canada.

There has always been a huge space between what candidates say when they’re running for president and what they actually do in office. When it comes to trade, that space is bigger than on most issues — particularly for Democrats. Far more than their Republican counterparts, Democratic presidential candidates rely on labor unions — committed free trade foes — for money and manpower.

On the campaign trail, cozying up to labor by bashing trade makes short-term sense. Everyone does it. Mr. Clinton did so when he was campaigning in 1992, and that is partly why the labor unions were so mad at him when he became president and then pushed through Nafta and other trade deals, including the pact that established the World Trade Organization, and even negotiated China’s entry into the global trading system. But once a candidate becomes president, things change. And that’s where the space between what a candidate says on the campaign trail and what he or she does after being elected shows up. Even staunch free trade foes who welcome the trade-bashing during primary season acknowledge this fact of life.

“I don’t have my head in the sand,” said John Sellers, president of the Ruckus Society, a human rights advocacy group that opposes most trade pacts. “I have a hard time believing that this is anything but spin on their part. Nafta and the most nefarious anti-labor agreements in the W.T.O. were all ratified under the Democrats’ watch.”

For the Democrats, it can be a tough row to hoe. Although the consensus is fragmenting somewhat, most economists still agree that free trade, for the most part, helps the economy, through increased job creation and lower prices, more than it hurts it, through jobs lost to low-wage competitors around the world. Overall, the aggregate benefits of

globalization to American consumers, economists say, outweigh the costs and painful dislocations for workers and families and even whole towns, no matter that the losers are more easily identifiable — and vocal — than the winners.

Writ large, that argument falls back on a principle that has fueled the free trade argument for more than a century: nations flourish by focusing on their comparative advantage — the things that they do best — and trading with other countries for the things that those countries are more efficient at producing.

But this argument has zero resonance when presidential candidates are facing an audience of union members in Chicago who are worried that their jobs are being outsourced to India. So, with the exception of Representative Dennis Kucinich, who announced Tuesday night, to ringing applause, that during his first week in office as president he would withdraw from Nafta and the World Trade Organization, the rest of the Democrats at the A.F.L.-C.I.O. forum were more cautious. When asked whether, for all of their Nafta-bashing, they would pull the United States out of the trade pact, they quickly veered to vague talk about stronger worker protections.

“I would immediately call the president of Mexico, the president of Canada, to try to amend Nafta because I think that we can get labor agreements in that agreement right now,” said Senator Barack Obama, before quickly taking refuge in talking points about corporate lobbyists and how important it is that “trade agreements be good for Main Street as well as Wall Street.” Even former Senator John Edwards, who has worked hard to win over the unions, stopped short of calling for the United States to pull out of Nafta.

“Scrap it or fix it?” the moderator, Keith Olbermann of MSNBC, asked.

“It needs to be fixed,” Mr. Edwards said, then quickly changed the subject to take a swipe at Mrs. Clinton, who was recently featured on the cover of Fortune with the headline “Business Loves Hillary (Who Knew?).”

“The one thing you can count on is you will never see a picture of me on the front of Fortune magazine saying, ‘I am the candidate that big corporate America is betting on.’ That will never happen,” Mr. Edwards said. “That’s one thing you can take to the bank.”