

Members of U.S. Congress, Labor Speak Out on Andean Free Trade Agreement (AFTA) Talks

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 16 /U.S. Newswire/ -- Speaking on Cannon Terrace today, members of the U.S. Congress and labor leaders sent a clear message to the Bush administration and the United States Trade Representative as they attempt to wrap up talks for a free trade agreement with Ecuador, Peru, and Colombia: Move away from a failed trade model or face another tough battle in Congress.

Sherrod Brown (D-OH) said, with the Central American Trade Agreement (CAFTA) "our Congress made the wrong choice almost four months ago, and here we are again. AFTA is just as bad as NAFTA, just as bad as CAFTA for working families. These are failed policies that sell out American working families and ship American jobs overseas."

Linda Sanchez (D-CA, also noted, "CAFTA was a bad idea for American working families, and our country cannot afford another trade deal that rewards countries which have poor labor standards. It is time to call on President Bush to stop making deals which favor his cronies and to start protecting the hard working men and women who make up the workforce around the world.

The main concern expressed by members of Congress is the lack of enforceable worker rights protection in the current Andean Free Trade Agreement (AFTA) text. This was the same concern that led to near unanimous opposition from House Democrats in the vote on CAFTA in July.

"President Bush and the USTR have not learned their lesson, and they crank out agreement after agreement using the same bad model designed to enrich the few at the expense of many" said John Murphy, vice-president of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters.

Xaiver Becerra (D-CA) noted that AFTA did not have to go down this road: "Peruvian president Alejandro Toledo has said publicly that he would welcome the inclusion of internationally accepted core labor standards into the Andean Free Trade Agreement and I thank him for taking that important step. It is our hope that as we move forward with finalizing negotiations, all participating countries follow President Toledo's lead to include the five International Labor Organization core standards within the four corners of the agreement."

But unless the Bush administration changes course AFTA will not be able to garner support.

"This trade deal is simply unacceptable; more trade unionists have been murdered in the past decade in Colombia than in the rest of the world combined, and this is the country we single out for a trade agreement. This is a reward for violence and a climate of terror for working people. The current trade model simply does not work: poverty and income inequality are on the rise especially in countries with whom we have agreements, and there is a rising trade deficit and a decline of wages and employment in the U.S.," concluded Thea Lee, policy director for the AFL-CIO.