

Columbia free trade bad for America

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Debate over the Colombia Free Trade Agreement came to the forefront last month when the pact emerged as President Bush's top legislative priority. A wide range of Democrats, from Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama to Earl Blumenauer and David Wu, quickly announced their opposition.

They rightfully argue that consideration of a trade agreement with Colombia is inappropriate until that nation improves its atrocious human rights record. Why, then, does Congresswoman Darlene Hooley remain undecided?

My union, the Association of Western Pulp and Paper Workers, typically opposes free trade agreements because of their harmful legacy of offshoring American jobs.

Our members have experienced first-hand the destructive impact that cheap, foreign imports can have on Oregon families and communities. Trade deals that increase the federal trade deficit, put Americans out of work and cause environmental damage are the wrong choice for this country.

As bad as past trade policies have been, however, the Colombia Free Trade Agreement is even worse. This pact is especially repugnant given Colombia's status as the deadliest country in the world to be a union member. Since 1991, more than 2,300 labor advocates have been assassinated there – many only after being kidnapped and brutally tortured first.

Apologists for the trade agreement point out that the numbers of assassinations are down from their historic highs.

While distastefully arguing that only 39 unionists were murdered last year, and only 17 have been murdered so far this year, they fail to acknowledge that more than 400 murders have taken under the watch of Colombia's current administration, and that the rate of impunity for the murder of trade unionists remains around 97 percent.

Not only do the level of assassinations in Colombia remain the highest in the world, but those responsible continue to walk the streets freely.

The routine violence against labor advocates in Colombia has created an intense climate of fear. This has had the intended affect of sinking the nation's unionization rate from 15 percent two decades ago to approximately 3 percent today – the lowest in Latin America.

Even if the killings stopped completely tomorrow, if the fear of violence continued, the sweatshop working conditions under which many Colombians toil would remain the same.

Trade between nations simply cannot be “free” when workers in one country lack basic freedoms of speech and assembly. Nearly 15 years after enactment of the North American Free Trade Agreement, we today know that large corporations use such pacts to shift jobs around the globe to wherever labor is the cheapest.

If passed, the Colombia trade deal would force Oregonians to compete with workers literally forced to accept poor working conditions under the threat of death.

The fate of the Colombia Free Trade Agreement today rests in the hands of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. While acknowledging the human rights concerns implicit in the agreement, the Speaker has repeatedly pronounced her willingness to negotiate with the Bush administration over allowing it to the floor.

In this context, it is crucial that all members of Congress express their disdain for the agreement.

A clear message must be sent that there is no room for negotiation when it comes to the basic rights of working people.

While including strong and enforceable labor, environmental and human rights standards should be a prerequisite for any future trade agreement, this alone is not adequate for the Colombia trade deal to pass muster. In a country where the rule of law is so often disrespected, simply putting new rules down on paper is not enough.

Congresswoman Hooley is Oregon’s only House Democrat who fails to understand that to accept the Colombia Free Trade Agreement one must first accept Colombia’s death squads.

No matter what she has convinced herself is to be gained by this agreement, she should not lose sight that this issue is ultimately about one’s respect for basic human liberty. For true Americans, there should be little indecision.

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