

House Democrats Again Pushing for Overhaul of Free-Trade Rules

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Dozens of House Democrats are again backing legislation that would revise existing trade agreements to ensure they reflect Democratic priorities and would establish a blue-ribbon commission to create a new framework for future accords.

The legislation, known as the TRADE Act, requires the Government Accountability Office to review the North American Free Trade Agreement, the Central America Free Trade Agreement, the World Trade Organization, and the free-trade agreement with Jordan, as well as pending deals with Panama, Colombia, and South Korea. Pacts failing to meet standards on environment, labor, food and product safety, agriculture, trade remedy, human rights, federalism safeguards, currency anti-manipulation rules and national security exceptions would have to be renegotiated. A special committee chaired by the leaders of the Ways and Means and Senate Finance committees would be charged with making those changes.

The legislation's introduction comes as President Barack Obama prepares to outline a new trade framework later this summer. Rep. Mike Michaud (D-Maine) believes the bill could be similar to what the president will propose.

"It's definitely consistent with what the president said he would do if he was elected," said Michaud, one of the bill's leading sponsors. "Hopefully, when he comes forward with what he believes in, it will be similar to the TRADE Act."

Despite nearly 100 Democrats supporting the legislation, two key lawmakers are absent from the list — Ways and Means Chairman Charlie Rangel (D-N.Y.) and the panel's Subcommittee on Trade Chairman Sander Levin (D-Mich.). Their support for the bill is crucial since their committees have jurisdiction over trade matters.

Levin has asked to see the bill but has not signaled if he would support it. Similar legislation was introduced last year with 74 Democratic co-sponsors, but Rangel and Levin never acted on the bill.

Critics says the measure would significantly delay enactment of trade agreements by adding an additional layer of bureaucratic reporting. Another concern of critics is that tariffs on U.S. businesses that would be removed by enacting pending trade agreements would remain in place.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce opposes the legislation and argues it puts at risk "millions of American jobs sustained by the hundreds of billions of dollars in annual U.S. exports to our trade agreement partners."

Rep. Louise Slaughter (D-N.Y.), however, said past trade deals have damaged local economies by shipping jobs offshore and destroyed the environment by lacking provisions to enforce environmental laws. She blamed the problems on a lackluster trade framework that the legislation would overhaul.

"Every trade bill in the last [few] years negotiated by the United States has not been negotiated in our favor," she said. "The first thing they want to do is raise the environment standards and take care of labor issues. It has never happened — not a single time."