

TRADE

Chamber Praises Meek For Trade Stance

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by Peter Cohn

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce this week wrote to Rep. Kendrick Meek, D-Fla., thanking him for removing his name from a bill that could force the United States to renegotiate several existing and pending trade agreements.

Meek, who is running for the Senate, withdrew Oct. 21 as a co-sponsor of the legislation, authored by Rep. Michael Michaud, D-Maine, even though it is rapidly gaining steam among House Democrats.

Among the top priorities of labor and progressive groups, the bill has the support of 126 House Democrats. That is four co-sponsors away from a Caucus majority, which would send a strong signal to the White House at a time the Obama administration is struggling to come up with a trade policy.

The Michaud bill would establish a lengthy set of labor, environmental and consumer protection standards for trade accords. If those standards are not met in four pacts -- the North American Free Trade Agreement, the U.S. accession to the World Trade Organization, the Central America Free Trade Agreement and a U.S. pact with Jordan -- they would have to be renegotiated.

Pending deals with Panama, Colombia and South Korea would be sent back to the drawing board, and new trade negotiations would have to incorporate the bill's standards as well. To reinforce their position, Michaud and House Rules Chairwoman Louise Slaughter wrote to Obama before he left for Asia today to reiterate concerns with the South Korea deal as it stands.

The Michaud bill is anathema to U.S. multinationals and business groups. The Chamber's chief lobbyist, Bruce Josten, wrote to Meek Tuesday that 57 million Americans are employed by U.S. exporters, and hundreds of billions of dollars in exports and related jobs could be put at risk.

Meek has been endorsed by most major unions, and some are re-evaluating their support or dropping it altogether in light of his withdrawal as a co-sponsor. He had to do some damage control among his union backers as a result, and Meek could use some more financial help.

According to the Center for Responsive Politics, he is well behind one potential GOP challenger, Florida Gov. Charlie Crist, in fundraising. Crist has raised \$6.9 million, with \$6.2 million in cash on hand. Meek has raised \$3.8 million and has nearly \$2.7 million in available cash.

According to the CRP, unions have donated only \$95,000 to Meek, although that pace could pick up once the party nominations are set. The Chamber is not among Meek's funders thus far, and the group is generally less generous with its donations to Democrats, although that has changed a bit in the most recent two cycles.

In the 2010 cycle to date, the Chamber has cut about 41 percent of its checks to Democrats, including Reps. Melissa Bean of Illinois and Adam Smith of Washington. The Chamber has also contributed to PACs controlled by the Blue Dog and New Democrat coalitions, as well as the PAC steered by House Majority Whip Clyburn.

The fact that Meek generally enjoys strong labor support is almost in spite of his record on trade. While he opposed CAFTA, he has voted for accords with Peru, Singapore, Chile and Australia.

"The Chamber appreciates your record of support for agreements that have opened foreign markets for U.S. exports and created American jobs," Josten wrote. He added his group thanked Meek for recognizing the Michaud bill "would have the opposite effect."