

Latino group blasts US trade accord

Says pact hurts Central America

By Jessica E. Vascellaro, Globe Correspondent |
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WASHINGTON -- One of the country's largest Latino civil rights organizations yesterday denounced a proposed free trade agreement with Central America, asserting that the pact would destroy the region's economy and lead to increased immigration to the United States.

The League of United Latin American Citizens, which overwhelmingly opposed the agreement, 499 to 1, at its national assembly earlier this month, joined several national Latino labor and trade organizations to urge Congress to vote against the Bush administration's Central American Free Trade Agreement. CAFTA was signed by the US trade representative, Robert Zoellick, on May 28, and President Bush said last week that he would not push for a vote on the agreement before the November election.

"The model on which CAFTA is designed is a flawed model . . . and needs to be changed," said Patricia Campos, a member of the Labor Council for Latin American Advancement, an organization representing more than 1 million Latino workers. "They claim that they have increased labor standards, but the language is weaker than anything we have had."

But Richard Mills, spokesman for Zoellick, said CAFTA, which will open a US export market of more than \$11 billion, has "innovative and enforceable labor provisions."

CAFTA "makes sure that countries fully enforce their own labor standards," he said. "If we believe that the countries aren't enforcing their labor laws . . . we can take them to court."

A broad range of leading Democrats, including the presumptive presidential nominee, John Kerry, oppose the agreement, saying that it lacks necessary labor provisions, such as the right to organize and prohibitions against child labor, and that it will send more American jobs overseas. If ratified by Congress, CAFTA would create a free trade zone that includes the United States, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Costa Rica, and the Dominican Republic.

At a news conference yesterday, Campos said the administration's approach to enforcing labor standards in Latin American countries is impractical.

Others said that the impact of the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement on the Mexican economy had turned them against CAFTA. According to Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch, a national consumer group, industrial wages in Mexico have declined by 25 percent and undocumented migration from the country has doubled since NAFTA's ratification.

"They say that it is going to lead to development and the end of immigration, but if we look at what happened after NAFTA, it is exactly the opposite," said Radhames Perez, a member of the New York-based Dominican Participation and Consultation on Free Trade.

Mills said that immigration provisions and protections are not typically negotiated in trade agreements. He added that the agreement would help the Central American economies by extending the current practice of allowing 77 percent of imports to enter the United States duty free.

The agreement, he said, asks them to return the favor to the United States.

Jessica E. Vascellaro can be reached at jvascellaro@globe.com.