

Labor, Public Interest Groups Send Obama Letter Seeking New Start for Trade Agenda

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The Bush administration's failed trade policy should not serve as a starting point for a new U.S. trade policy, labor and public interest groups wrote in a Sept. 22 letter to President Obama.

The Teamsters, Friends of the Earth U.S., Americans for Democratic Action, United Steelworkers, TransAfrica Forum, and several other groups said in the letter that some administration trade officials had described the "Obama trade agenda" as implementation of the pending Panama, Colombia, and Korea free trade agreements and completion of the Doha Round negotiations of the World Trade Organization.

The groups said that the leftover FTAs, which were negotiated and signed by the Bush administration but never implemented, reflected the unsuccessful end to the past administration's trade policy and should not serve as the starting point for a new U.S. trade policy.

"We want to make clear that we strenuously oppose the three leftover Bush FTAs and will fight for their defeat if they are brought to Congress," the groups said. The groups said that they want to work with the administration to renegotiate the agreements to "ensure that they minimally pass the do-no-further-harm-test and thus become first steps towards a new trade model."

The groups said proposed legislation, the 2009 Trade Reform, Accountability, Development, and Employment (TRADE Act), could serve as a helpful road map on which to build a new trade agenda.

Groups Say Renegotiation Necessary

The groups said the pending FTAs need to be renegotiated and then could serve as a starting point for a new trade agenda.

The group said, for example, that May 10, 2007, environment and labor standard changes agreed to under the Bush administration were insufficient. The letter said that signatories to FTAs should be required to enforce core International Labor Organization standards.

The groups advocated for other changes, including eliminating extraordinary foreign investor privileges, allowing Buy American policies in government procurement rules, removing provisions that require the United States to accept imported food that does not meet U.S. domestic safety standards, fixing agricultural provisions, and facilitating access to medicine.

The groups also said that there were specific problems with the Colombia, Panama, and Korean FTAs. They said labor and human rights problems existed in Colombia, that Panama was an international tax haven, and that the Korea FTA had lopsided auto provisions, as well major financial sector deregulation problems.