

# Democrats, Unions Push Plan to Review, Overhaul Trade Accords

By Mark Drajem  
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Democrats and labor leaders opposed to the Bush administration's free-trade agreements urged an outside review of the effect existing trade deals have on jobs and the U.S. economy.

In proposed legislation, they called for a moratorium on new accords until existing deals are reworked to include new rules on investment and food safety and stiffer labor and environmental provisions.

“We're tired of playing defense. We're here to play offense,” Larry Cohen, president of the Communication Workers of America, said at a briefing today on Capitol Hill.

Their proposal won't pass Congress this year, and instead will establish a marker for how trade policy must adjust next year once a new president takes office, said Democratic Senator Sherrod Brown of Ohio, the bill's chief sponsor.

Brown said his staff has spoken to the staff of Illinois Senator Barack Obama, the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, and Obama supports critiques of existing deals.

Even before the measure was introduced, the Washington-based U.S. Chamber of Commerce said the proposal would undermine American exports, one of the few bright points in the U.S. economy. Instead of mandating a report on existing trade deals, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement, Congress should pass pending deals with Colombia, South Korea and Panama, the business lobbying group said.

Brown predicted that none of those deals would get approved by the Democratic Congress, and contended his legislation would be the best way to lay the groundwork for a new type of agreement that Democrats would support.

## **‘Have to Change’**

“The public has spoken so loudly the next president will have to change,” Brown said. “We're not going to pass any more of these bad trade agreements; take that to the bank.”

The legislation says new trade agreements must mandate that countries have equivalent or higher health and food safety standards, enforce an acceptable minimum wage and occupational safety laws and implement multilateral agreements to protect the environment.

The review of existing deals would be undertaken by the Government Accountability Office and submitted to a trade review commission of lawmakers. New deals could be blocked until existing agreements are changed to reflect the lawmakers' demands.

One of the Bush administration's top priorities this year is getting a trade pact with Colombia approved by Congress. After Bush tried to force Congress to vote on that agreement, the U.S. House of Representatives voted to remove a 90-day deadline to hold the vote, putting off consideration of the accord indefinitely.

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