

Wisconsin Put Trade on the Agenda

John Nichols
The Nation
February 19, 2008

If the 2008 Wisconsin Democratic primary contest is remembered for anything it will be as the place where an unfocused debate on economics began to get serious about the issue of global trade.

In a state where there is a general sense that the North American Free Trade Agreement and the extension of permanent most-favored-nation trading status to China have done severe harm to Wisconsin workers, communities and industries, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton realized quickly that they were not going to get away with vague statements about globalization.

Obama began his Wisconsin campaign a week ago with a speech to almost 20,000 people in Madison that featured several references to the need to change this country's approach to trade deals. And the next morning, at the behest of U.S. Sen. Russ Feingold, a Wisconsin Democrat who has not endorsed in the presidential race, Obama went to Feingold's hometown of Janesville to deliver a major address on economic policy at the General Motors plant there.

"(When) I am president, I will not sign another trade agreement unless it has protections for our environment and protections for American workers," he told the United Auto Workers union members. "And I'll pass the Patriot Employer Act that I've been fighting for ever since I ran for the Senate--we will end the tax breaks for companies who ship our jobs overseas, and we will give those breaks to companies who create good jobs with decent wages right here in America."

Not to be outdone, Clinton told workers in DePere -- in the paper mill region of the Fox River Valley -- that she would institute a "time out" on all new trade agreements and institute a review of existing agreements with an eye toward addressing flaws that have saddled the United States with huge trade deficits. She, too, called for ending all tax incentives for companies that shutter U.S. factories and move jobs overseas.

"We have to take back every single tax break that companies get for exporting jobs out of Wisconsin," said Clinton, whose husband Bill led the fight for the NAFTA and China trade deals and bent tax policies to satisfy the demands of business interests.

The tough language on trade represented a rhetorical shift for both Obama and Clinton, who before reaching Wisconsin had been far more cautious about breaking with the "new Democrat" mantra that free-trade benefits U.S. workers and consumers.

Many critics of current trade policies, including key unions such as the United Steelworkers, had backed a third candidate, former North Carolina Senator John

Edwards, who emerged as a far stronger critic of free-trade deals and corporate excesses than Obama or Clinton during the early stages of the campaign.

After Edwards left the race, both Obama and Clinton sought the 2004 Democratic vice presidential nominee's support, and that of his supporters. In pursuing this backing, they muscled up some of their rhetoric on trade.

But things really changed when the remaining contenders got to Wisconsin, where factory towns such as Beloit, Janesville, Kenosha, Manitowoc and LaCrosse have all seen the factories of major employers shuttered in recent years.

Both candidates came to understand that, in Wisconsin, feel-good rhetoric about "the new global economy" was not going to sell. And they recognized that after today's Wisconsin primary, they would be headed for Ohio for the March 4 primary in a state where trade issues are, if anything, a bigger deal.

As the Wisconsin campaign wound down, both Clinton and Obama provided the most detailed responses yet to questions about precisely where they stand on the federal government's approach to trade.

The questions came from Wisconsin Fair Trade Coalition, a network of labor, farm and environmental groups that pressured the candidates to get specific about how they would change trade policies that even Republicans who are associated with President Bush -- an ardent backer of free trade -- now criticize as threats to U.S. industries and, ultimately, to national security.

In response to the coalition's inquiries, the candidates have now renewed their opposition to the planned Colombia Free Trade Agreement, and expressed opposition to proposed Panama and South Korea agreements

Both Obama and Clinton also called for changes in how NAFTA has been implemented and indicated support for a review of how trade deals are negotiated and enacted.

"If a campaign is going to run hundreds of thousands of dollars on ads about outsourcing or taxes, they should also indicate support or opposition to the trade agreements currently on the table", said Wisconsin AFL-CIO President David Newby, who chairs the Wisconsin Fair Trade Coalition. "We're glad that both Senators Clinton and Obama have indicated the NAFTA model of trade agreement is dead."

The answers from Obama and Clinton, while groundbreaking in their detail and depth, did not address every concern of the Wisconsin Fair Trade Coalition, which is affiliated with the national Citizen Trade Coalition. For instance, many members of the coalition would like to see candidates specifically commit to abandoning the fast-track model for negotiating trade agreements with other nations and regions -- a model that gives the executive branch the authority to shape deals with little in the way of thoughtful input from Congress.

But the responses of the two Democratic candidates to the coalition's questionnaire distinguished them from the three Republicans running in today's GOP primary. Arizona Senator John McCain, former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee and Texas Congressman Ron Paul all failed to respond to the coalition's inquiries.

"It's disappointing to see candidates spend millions on a campaign, and highlight economic issues, and yet never take a real position," complained Don Collins, a lead organizer with United Steelworkers District 2, and a Wisconsin Fair Trade Coalition board member. "Primary voters in Wisconsin are smart. Photo shoots and sound bites are not going to cut it."