

Pushing the Dems on Trade

By Ruth Conniff,
The Progressive
May 2008 Issue

Somewhere between Pennsylvania, Ohio, and the Upper Midwest, Hillary Clinton morphed into Hugo Chávez.

“I believe that trade agreements must elevate standards of living around the world and not empower corporations to hold those standards down,” Clinton declared in Ohio.

Or, as Chávez put it, “We must confront the privileged elite who have destroyed a large part of the world.”

Like Chávez—the president of Venezuela who called the president of Mexico a “lapdog of the empire” for supporting trade deals like NAFTA and the FTAA—Clinton now says such deals are undemocratic, and are enriching corporate honchos at the expense of ordinary citizens here and abroad.

“As part of my plan to fix NAFTA, I have called for revising the provisions that permit foreign companies to challenge U.S. laws,” Clinton said. She slammed corporations’ ability, under NAFTA, to overturn “regulations intended to protect workers and protect the environment.”

That’s quite a switcheroo for Hillary, who, despite her protestations to the contrary, advocated for NAFTA’s passage in her husband’s Administration, according to records of her meetings as First Lady.

Clinton’s turnaround is a sign of how much the winds have shifted on the issue of trade.

Not to be outdone, Barack Obama has been attacking NAFTA with increasing vehemence. “During the NAFTA era, we have seen one out of every four U.S. manufacturing jobs destroyed and real wages decline,” he told trade activists in Wisconsin. He denounced NAFTA’s “special protections that eliminate the risks of moving to low-wage countries,” and “attacks on our domestic environmental, health, and safety laws upon which communities rely.”

Both Clinton and Obama have promised to renegotiate NAFTA. Both have taken increasingly progressive stances on other trade deals, shifting from what one activist calls “ten years of bipartisan, D.C. orthodoxy” that led them to support an agreement with Peru (though neither showed up to vote for it) to opposing recent deals with South Korea, Panama, and Colombia.

“You have two candidates who have come so far that if someone had predicted this stance one year ago, people would have called you crazy,” says Andy Gussert, national director of the Citizens Trade Campaign, an umbrella organization of state activists from environmental, labor, and interfaith groups that care about trade.

Gussert and his colleagues see the tight race between Hillary and Obama, particularly in states where economic insecurity is a big issue, as an opportunity to force the Democrats to take better positions. And that is exactly what the group has been doing.

In Wisconsin, Ohio, Texas, and Pennsylvania, the Citizens Trade Campaign got community leaders whose support was crucial to the campaigns to push the candidates to answer more and more specific questionnaires on their positions on trade.

“It really was these two Democratic candidates not wanting to be in a position where the other campaign had outdone them,” says Sachin Chheda, who led the Wisconsin effort. “We had both campaigns asking, ‘What is Obama doing?’ ‘What is Clinton doing?’ ”

In written responses to the questionnaires, the candidates answered yes to the question: “Will you commit to renegotiate NAFTA and CAFTA?”

They said they would add binding labor and environmental standards to all trade agreements.

And they committed to rewriting the rules that allow companies to sue governments, in closed tribunals, for cash damages over environmental and public health standards.

“We’ve put on a full-court press,” Gussert says. “Both Democratic candidates made commitments no one expected—truly progressive, major steps forward.”

But what does all this mean if, as the “NAFTA-gate” story that blew up in Ohio shows, both Presidential campaigns have been quietly telling the Canadian government they don’t mean what they say when they talk about renegotiating NAFTA?

“Promises need to be kept. That’s the other half,” says Gussert.

The beauty of the Citizens Trade Campaign approach is that the candidates are on the record with specific promises. But there is plenty that they haven’t said yet: that they will eliminate the President’s “fast-track” authority to push through trade deals without a vote from Congress, or that they will pull out of the Doha Round of World Trade Organization negotiations if stricter labor and environmental standards are not met.

“You have a window when they want your attention,” says Gussert. “While this window is open, we’re asking them the questions, and they’re answering. We have a written document that says what they believe.”

And just about the time the window closes for the Presidential candidates, the Citizens Trade Campaign will go after members of Congress. The group also plans a platform fight at the Democratic Convention, Gussert says.

It is increasingly obvious to American workers that competing with an extremely low-paid work force elsewhere is a losing proposition for everyone but the top tier of corporate CEOs.

“My goal is to have everyone in the U.S. understand that, more than anything else, trade agreements will determine whether or not they have a job in five years,” says Gussert. “Trade will determine their economic future.”

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