

Lawmakers Meet With Kirk to Press for New Trade Policies

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House Democrats opposed to pending trade deals got their first meeting with U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk on Wednesday, a success unto itself despite some Members leaving the meeting with mixed feelings.

"It was not totally satisfactory, but it was a good beginning," said Rules Chairwoman Louise Slaughter (D-N.Y.), who was one of eight Members in the meeting with Kirk.

The group has been pressing for a meeting with Kirk for months, Slaughter said, but it wasn't until the lawmakers unveiled legislation laying out their vision for a new trade policy that they got their meeting. She speculated that Kirk recognized the momentum behind their bill, which has 111 co-sponsors, including half of the committee chairmen and two Republicans.

"I mean, we write to a lot of secretaries and never hear a word," Slaughter said.

The group has already made some headway on the trade front: After loudly opposing movement on any of the three pending trade deals leftover from the Bush administration, President Barack Obama agreed not to send them over until their concerns are ironed out.

Slaughter said Kirk listened to everyone's concerns and "made it clear" that Obama campaigned on many of the same issues important to them. But for now, she said, Kirk does not support their bill.

"There is definitely a need for several meetings," said Mike Michaud (D-Maine), chairman of the House Trade Working Group. "We didn't get a chance to get into details on how trade deals are negotiated."

Kirk's biggest concern with their bill was a provision that would require the Government Accountability Office to review NAFTA, CAFTA and the World Trade Organization, Michaud said. Kirk's concern was that that would result in stopping trade for two to three years, which Michaud said was inaccurate.

"Hopefully, the ambassador took away that we do want trade," Michaud said.

Rep. Phil Hare (D-Ill.) said that Kirk was "fairly receptive" to the lawmakers' concerns but that he left the meeting with mixed emotions, mainly because Kirk didn't touch on the need for a new trade model.

Backers of a new trade policy are pinning their hopes to a major speech on trade that Obama will deliver this summer. No date has been set, but some reports have suggested that it could be timed to complement the G-20 summit in late September.

"We anxiously await it," Slaughter said.

Hare added: “He doesn’t have to be in lockstep with the House Trade Working Group, but make these trade deals workable. The hurdles are there; we can get over them.”