

Colombia Trade Deal Is Threatened

Stephen R. Weisman
New York Times
July 13, 2008

WASHINGTON — To President Bush, the free-trade deal his administration negotiated with [Colombia](#) has something for everyone.

If approved by Congress, it would open a new market for American produce and manufactured goods. Unlike other trade deals, it would not threaten American jobs, because imports from Colombia are already coming in nearly duty-free.

And it would have the added benefit of shoring up a respected ally, President [Álvaro Uribe](#), who has made progress in taming the narcotics traffickers, right-wing death squads and left-wing guerrillas that had almost made Colombia a failed state.

In recent months, nearly 100 newspapers in the United States have endorsed the Colombia trade agreement. So have many top Democrats, including Mayor [Richard M. Daley](#) of Chicago. And Mr. Uribe, who was already popular in Congress, was widely lionized after the dramatic rescue of hostages in Colombia on July 2.

Yet the trade agreement remains a long shot, because of opposition by American labor unions, Democratic leaders in Congress and Senator [Barack Obama](#) of Illinois, the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee.

“I am not optimistic that the Congress will have an opportunity to review the bill this year, unless something unforeseen or dramatic occurs by the administration,” said Representative [Charles B. Rangel](#), the New York Democrat who is chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee. “I don’t think they handled this correctly.

As the price for approval of the Colombia deal, Representative [Nancy Pelosi](#), the House speaker and a California Democrat, demands specifically that the administration expand programs for American workers. She blocked the agreement from coming to a vote in April, infuriating Mr. Bush.

Her aides have not set a specific price, but some Democrats say it would have to be at least \$30 billion for items such as worker training, children’s health programs, unemployment benefits and expenditures on roads, bridges and infrastructure.

Some Democrats say a deal could emerge in the closing weeks of Congress this fall, perhaps in discussions over a new package to stimulate the economy.

Within the administration, [Henry M. Paulson Jr.](#), the Treasury secretary, and Susan C. Schwab, the United States trade representative, are believed by Democrats and some

Republicans to be more receptive to that sort of deal than is the White House, which is trying to limit spending.

The White House and Senate Democrats have made some progress on negotiating an agreement on spending for “trade adjustment assistance” for workers who have lost jobs because of imports or outsourcing to other countries. But for now, each side accuses the other of bad faith in refusing to negotiate on other programs for workers.

What Mr. Bush has done instead is wage one of his most elaborate campaigns for a measure in Congress since he took office in 2001, winning newspaper endorsements from the broadest political spectrum.

Also, since August, at least 55 members of Congress, including two Democrats from the Senate and 25 from the House, have traveled to Colombia, in trips usually led by an indefatigable cheerleader for the trade pact, either Ms. Schwab or the commerce secretary, Carlos M. Gutierrez.

The White House says Mr. Bush has called for passage of the deal 40 times, and Ms. Schwab and other cabinet members have given 145 speeches on it.

In addition, the administration has lined up the support of Democratic mayors and members of the Clinton administration, and obtained endorsements from trade associations with ties to Democrats, including those for the movie, music and consumer electronics industries.

Democrats acknowledge that perhaps a third of their members of Congress are ready to support the deal, but only if the leadership wins more concessions on other legislation relating to jobs.

In May, Mr. Bush stood before a tractor and a Harley-Davidson motorcycle on the White House South Lawn and said that 40 percent of United States growth last year resulted from exports. “That motorcycle right there,” he said, would be \$4,000 less expensive in Colombia because of the deal.

“There will be no diminution of how cool one is when they drive a Harley,” the president said, to laughter. “But it’s going to be easier for somebody to buy it.”

By itself, trade with Colombia represents barely 1 percent of total United States trade volume. Imports from Colombia totaled \$9.4 billion in 2007, mostly oil, spices, coffee and tea. Exports, of machinery, chemicals, plastics, corn and other goods, were \$8.6 billion. But the symbolism of the trade is enormous.

Opposition to the Colombia deal is not rooted in organized labor’s fear of lost jobs, the issue behind unions’ opposition to past trade deals like [Nafta](#). Rather, it is over the killings of labor advocates in more than two decades of Colombia’s long civil wars.

According to the National Labor School, a research organization in Colombia, more than 2,500 union members have been killed since 1985, with fewer than 100 cases resulting in convictions.

Since Mr. Uribe took office in 2002, the number of killings of union members has dropped sharply, though labor leaders have noted that killings are up this year from 2007. Mr. Uribe's government has also made progress in quelling the left-wing insurgency, as reflected by the recent hostage rescue.

Senator [John McCain](#) of Arizona, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, tried early this month to help his own campaign and its advocacy of free trade with a visit to Mr. Uribe's presidential palace in Cartagena, where he hailed the Colombian leader as a champion of the war on terrorism.

But that trip prompted a rebuke from [John J. Sweeney](#), the president of the [A.F.L.-C.I.O.](#), which has said that approving the deal would in effect be rewarding the increase in anti-labor violence and the failure to arrest many people responsible for killings.

Labor officials dismiss the idea that the hostage rescue, in which three Americans were among those freed, should resuscitate the Colombia trade pact.

"I don't understand why people are even raising the hostage issue," said Thea M. Lee, public policy director of the A.F.L.-C.I.O. "The concerns are about workers and conditions of workers in Colombia."

An official from the Colombian government, asking not to be identified because of embassy rules, said that if an agreement were reached on "trade adjustment assistance" for workers affected by imports, as seems likely, that would improve the prospects of the trade pact.

"There are a lot of Democrats who recognize the economic sense of the agreement," this official said, adding that the hostage rescue showed "that the military that Colombia has today is different from the one of six years ago."

But administration officials concede that it will be difficult for Democratic lawmakers to defy the wishes of organized labor in a presidential election year.

"All I can tell them is that politics is too strong right now," Mr. Bush said in one of his trade speeches. "But I also haven't given up hope."