

Obama Opposes Vote on Colombia FTA

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Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama is against scheduling a congressional vote after next month's election on a free-trade agreement with Colombia, a campaign adviser said.

Concerns about violence against labor leaders and low worker organizing rates in that nation haven't been resolved, and labor rights must "be addressed in a meaningful way" before a vote, said Lael Brainard, who represented the Obama campaign at the Washington International Trade Association today. "This is the moment the U.S. has leverage."

Democrats in Congress earlier this year delayed a vote on the trade accord, and lobbyists have sought a vote after the Nov. 4 election in a so-called lame-duck session of Congress. President Bush made approval of the Colombia free-trade agreement a priority for his last year in office.

Philip Levy, a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington and an adviser to John McCain, the Republican presidential nominee, said he doubts Congress will vote on Colombia this year.

Levy told the group that a McCain administration would back continuing negotiations in the Doha Round of the World Trade Organization and bilateral trade deals. As part of a WTO deal, "we need a president willing to push changes to expensive agricultural subsidies, subsidies we can't afford," Levy said.

McCain also would seek to expand aid to workers who lose their jobs because of overseas competition, and move to subsidize the salaries of older workers forced to take lower-paying replacement jobs, Levy said.

Brainard said that Obama would focus on enforcing existing trade agreements, including increasing pressure on China to raise the value of its currency. He would also "update" the North American Free Trade Agreement to include tougher labor and environment provisions, she said.

Obama also is skeptical of initiatives by the Bush administration to negotiate investment treaties with China and India, said Brainard.

The administration began negotiations this year for separate treaties with India and China that would govern how foreign investors are treated. While those efforts garnered strong support from U.S. businesses, both Brainard and Levy said a new administration would re-evaluate them.

Obama unveiled a new television advertisement Wednesday in North Carolina about McCain's votes for trade deals. The ad shows the closing of textile plants in the state and says McCain hurt the workers by voting for China's entry into the WTO and against a measure to levy more tariffs on Chinese imports.

Washington sold out the workers "with the help of politicians like John McCain," the ad says.

In the presidential debate in Tennessee last night, McCain said a free-market policy is one of the best ways to spur the economy, while suggesting Obama's plans would be similar to Herbert Hoover's, who was president at the start of the Great Depression.

"He practiced protectionism as well," McCain said.