

Bush's trade pact won't fly

By JAMES P. HOFFA | 4/27/09 4:27 AM EDT

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Teamsters enter a Philadelphia courthouse in February.
Photo: AP

You don't have to have a Ph.D. to understand that our trade policies of the past 20 years have failed. In fact, if you were a high school graduate and had a manufacturing job that was sent to Mexico, you would get it better than any college professor or trade guru.

So-called free-trade agreements from the North American Free Trade Agreement to the Central America Free Trade Agreement to the World Trade Organization were sold as a way of boosting countries' economies. We now know how NAFTA and subsequent trade deals have hurt U.S. workers.

Our overall trade framework is broken. President Barack Obama, recognizing this, campaigned on a pledge to reform our existing trade agreements. During the Summit of the Americas recently, little mention was made of the Free Trade Area of the Americas treaty, proposed 15 years ago at the first such summit.

Our members are tremendously angered by NAFTA and the trade deals modeled on it. What was billed as free trade has robbed them of their jobs and their wages. In the 15 years of NAFTA and the WTO, 4.3 million manufacturing jobs left the United States, and household incomes stagnated.

In Mexico, the result wasn't any better. NAFTA displaced farmers from subsistence agriculture and enterprises that couldn't compete in the global market. Wages have actually gone down in Mexico.

It is time for a new trade policy that promotes the interests of workers and their communities, not just the interests of wealthy corporations. And it is crucial that our trade policies promote the protection and creation of U.S. jobs and opportunities.

That is exactly why the U.S. trade representative should not try to advance the treaties with Panama or Colombia that were negotiated by former President George W. Bush.

The American people don't need or want a leftover trade deal negotiated with Panama under the Bush administration. That deal won't create jobs, but it will continue to encourage tax evasion by U.S. companies. Panama is a country notorious for helping 350,000 corporations, including American International Group, evade taxes.

Panama ought to provide its own citizens with the protections it provides tax-evading corporations. Too many Panamanian children work as servants, and forced labor is a growing problem. Discrimination against women is widespread, and the government has done little to tackle the problem of discrimination against ethnic minorities.

Colombia's labor and human rights conditions are still horrific, and a trade deal with that country is insupportable. Last year, 42 trade union members were assassinated, more than in 2007. There are also growing revelations about the Uribe administration's links to right-wing paramilitaries responsible for the assassinations of union, Afro-Colombian and indigenous community leaders.

The killings of union members seeking to exercise their basic rights must end before it would be appropriate to consider any trade agreement with Colombia.

American workers are relying on the Obama administration to make sure our country doesn't enter into another NAFTA-style trade deal. That includes the Bush administration's leftover Panama and Colombia pacts, which are now being pushed by the same special interests that promoted NAFTA, CAFTA and the WTO.

Let's put a stop to these ill-conceived trade agreements and focus on rebuilding the U.S. economy.

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