

# U.S. Blocked Release of CAFTA Reports

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WASHINGTON -- The Labor Department kept secret for more than a year government studies that supported Democratic opponents of the Bush administration's new Central American trade deal, internal documents show. The studies, paid for by the department, concluded that several countries the administration wants to be granted free-trade status have poor working conditions and fail to protect workers' rights. The agency dismissed the conclusions as inaccurate and biased, according to documents reviewed by The Associated Press.

"In practice, labor laws on the books in Central America are not sufficient to deter employers from violations, as actual sanctions for violations of the law are weak or nonexistent," the contractor, the International Labor Rights Fund, wrote in one of the reports. The studies' conclusions contrast with the administration's arguments that Central American countries have made enough progress on such issues to warrant a free-trade deal with the United States.

The administration and its congressional supporters argue that the elimination of trade barriers for U.S. products would open new Central American markets for U.S. farmers and manufacturers. Critics argue the trade agreement would allow serious labor violations to continue in Central America.

Hoping to lure enough Democratic votes to win passages, U.S. Trade Representative Rob Portman earlier this month promised to spend money and arrange an international conference to ensure "the best agreement ever negotiated by the United States on labor rights."

But behind the scenes, the administration began as early as spring 2004 to block the reports' public release. The Labor Department instructed its contractor to remove the reports from its Web site, ordered it to retrieve paper copies before they became public, banned release of new information from the reports, and even told the contractor it couldn't discuss the studies with outsiders.

The Labor Department has now worked out a deal with the contractor that will allow the labor rights group to release the country-by-country final reports - provided there's no mention of the agency or federal funding. At the same time, the administration began a pre-emptive campaign to undercut the study's conclusions.

Used as talking points by trade-pact supporters, a Labor Department document accuses the contractor of writing a report filled with "unsubstantiated" statements and "biased attacks, not the facts."

The contractor's deputy director, Bama Athreya, blamed U.S. Trade Representative officials for circulating the document and citing passages that won't be included in the final versions of the reports.

One lawmaker said he was shocked that a federal agency charged with protecting the rights of Americans workers would go to such lengths to block the public from seeing its own contractor's concerns before Congress votes on the Central American Free Trade Agreement.

"You would think if any agency in our government would care about this, it would be the Labor Department," Sen. Byron Dorgan, D-S.D., said.

Dorgan said he would use the contractor findings in an attempt to defeat the agreement, known as CAFTA.

Dirk Fillpot, spokesman for the Labor Department's Bureau of International Labor Affairs, said the agency and an independent evaluator concluded the contractor "failed to meet the academic rigor expected to fulfill its contract" and the relationship was terminated June 10.

The competitively bid contract totaled \$937,000, but Fillpot said \$250,000 will be refunded to the Treasury.

Rep. Kevin Brady, R-Texas, who supports the trade agreement, said he is familiar with drafts of the reports and believes they will be "widely dismissed as a fraud." He accused the contractor of producing "a propaganda piece" and concealing "its rabid anti-CAFTA bias."

Athreya, the contractor official, has testified in Congress against the agreement.

The documents show the studies came within a whisker of widespread release in March 2004, when the labor-rights group posted them briefly on its Internet site.

The Labor Department quickly and successfully demanded the reports be removed on grounds they weren't approved by the agency. Officials also demanded the group retrieve a limited number of paper copies that were distributed at a hearing of a Latin American human rights body.

Shortly after that incident, Rep. Sander Levin, D-Mich., began a yearlong effort to pry the studies from the department through a Freedom of Information Act request. The department rejected his request until two months ago, when Levin received - and released - early drafts of the reports.

The Trade Representative's spokesman, Richard Mills, said trade officials referred to the Labor Department's critical document after receiving inquiries about the studies.

"From our perspective, nothing has changed. It's a great agreement that will improve labor conditions in Central America," Mills said.

**On the net:**

Read related documents at <http://wid.ap.org/documents/cafta/index.html>

International Labor Rights Fund: <http://www.laborrights.org/>

U.S. Department of Labor: <http://www.dol.gov/>