

Free trade finding more resistance

Rock Hill meeting illustrates sense globalization out of hand

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Charlotte Observer
December 13, 2007

As a worker in the retail sector, Charles Bellinger of Rock Hill has seen fewer and fewer made-in-America labels.

He and his wife have tried for years to buy American, because they say they like the idea of supporting American workers.

So when he showed up to a pro-U.S. manufacturing rally Wednesday night in Rock Hill, he was wearing a T-shirt imprinted with the Stars and Stripes. But he said that when he put the T-shirt on Wednesday afternoon, he was embarrassed to see that it was made in Mexico.

"It's kind of disturbing." He worries the United States is importing more than it exports and said if things don't change, "Everybody's going to wind up working at McDonald's."

Worrying about the costs of free trade, especially as a presidential election looms, is nothing new.

What's different this year is that proponents of free trade are meeting fiercer resistance to the idea.

A group called the Alliance for American Manufacturing organized Wednesday night's meeting in downtown Rock Hill. The alliance says it's a partnership between companies and labor unions, particularly in the steel industry, that got organized to advance U.S. manufacturing.

The "Keep It Made in America Town Hall Meeting," had scheduled panelists that included a union leader from Charlotte's Continental Tire plant, which halted tire production last year; local community-college officials; and John Ratzenberger, the actor and host of a Travel Channel program on American-made products. Ratzenberger is best-known as mailman Cliff Claven on the 1980s sitcom "Cheers."

The alliance has been conducting meetings mostly in states that are holding early presidential primary elections, such as South Carolina. About 250 people showed up for Wednesday night's event.

In the past, support from both major parties has been crucial to passing trade agreements, such as with the 1993 North American Free Trade Agreement that opened up trade with Mexico and Canada.

Today, though, a public wary of lead-tainted Chinese-made toys and boarded-up factories is pushing Democratic and Republican leaders to cast a much more skeptical eye toward new trade agreements that further open the U.S. to foreign goods.

In the Carolinas, some of the shift comes from the decimation of the states' old-line industries, such as furniture and textiles, says Ferrel Guillory, director of the Program on Public Life at UNC Chapel Hill and co-author of a report on social and economic trends in the South. The trade issue then becomes part of a larger issue of income inequality.

"It's been a hard decade for workers depending on stability in old industries," he said.

Since 2000, the Carolinas have lost 318,000 manufacturing jobs, or 29 percent of the employment in that sector, according to figures from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Most of the manufacturing layoffs took place early in the decade, and the rate of job loss has slowed since then. Still, 782,000 people still work in manufacturing in the Carolinas.

Over the same period, total nonfarm employment in the two states (including manufacturing) has climbed by 320,000 jobs, to roughly 6.1 million, an increase of 6 percent.

A poll conducted last month by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press showed that 44 percent of S.C. Democrats surveyed said free-trade agreements were a bad thing -- roughly the same figure as four years ago. On the other side of the political spectrum, a Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll in October showed that 60 percent of Republicans agreed that free trade has been bad for the country.

While differences in the wording of questions make poll results hard to compare, even ardent free-traders concede there's been a shift that makes new agreements a hard sell. Congress approved a free-trade agreement with Peru last week, but pending votes on agreements with South Korea, Colombia and Panama face an uncertain future, as do multilateral agreements.

"Absolutely, it's tougher," says Dan Ikenson, associate director of the Center for Trade Policy Studies at the free-market Cato Institute in Washington. "The issue is demagogued fairly well."

He says politicians and labor unions often blame free trade for layoffs when companies have become more productive because of technological innovations. The loss of manufacturing jobs clears the way for the U.S. to add high-value jobs that rely less on manual labor, he says.

Meanwhile, Ikenson says, people often take for granted trade's many benefits -- such as lower prices and access to fresh fruit in the stores during winter.

"People register anti-trade attitudes after watching TVs which are made in China, and they express disdain for trade on iPod phones, which are made in China," he says.

In an interview with the Observer last week, Ratzenberger urged voters to ask hard questions of politicians when they pass through.

"Hillary and Rudy and the others, don't let them escape," he said. "Ask them point-blank, 'Why are you trying to destroy the middle class of this country you profess to love?' "