

Hoffa To Bush: Drop Free Trade

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On Friday, Teamsters General President Jim Hoffa, son of former leader Jimmy Hoffa, told U.S. President George Bush how to do his job. Hoffa suggested that Bush should have vetoed a free-trade agreement with Peru and instead should have signed a bill to provide health care for children.

“Working men and women understand the damage done to them by these job-killing free-trade agreements,” Hoffa said. “These deals are less about reducing trade barriers than they are about exploiting cheap labor and protecting investments of multinational corporations.”

Bush had loftier goals. "The bill will help increase opportunities for workers, ranchers, farmers and business in both our countries," he said, standing with President Alan Garcia of Peru.

In calling on Congress to also approve pending free-trade agreements with Colombia and Panama, Bush - without naming names - jabbed leftist leaders like President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, an outspoken antagonist of Washington, and, recently, Spain. (See "Chavez Inspires Million-Dollar Insult")

"The champions of false populism will use any failure to approve these trade agreements as evidence that America will never treat other democracies in the region as full partners," Bush said. "Those who espouse the language of false populism will use failure of these trade agreements as a way of showing America isn't committed to our friends in the hemisphere."

Hoffa, 66, was elected president of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters in 1998 after having been a lawyer for the union from 1968 to 1993.

With his eyes now focused on upcoming free-trade legislation Hoffa was particularly militant.

“If the Bush administration brings forward a free-trade agreement with Colombia, I hope Congress will agree with me and say ‘Hell No,’” Hoffa said. “It’s time to say yes to cracking down on China’s currency manipulation, yes to food and product safety standards for imports, yes to keeping jobs in America instead of shipping them out of the country.”

Organized labor in the U.S. today has only a fraction of the membership and clout it had when Hoffa's father -- who mysteriously disappeared in 1975 -- reigned as the national

president of the Teamsters Union. Nonetheless, various labor organizations such as the Writers Guild of America (See "Hollywood Talks Break Down") and United Auto Workers (See "The GM Strike: Seems Like Old Time") have recently made headlines with job actions.

Free-trade agreements allow goods and services to flow across borders without import duties. One effect is to encourage corporations to site their manufacturing operations in countries with low labor costs, which can have the effect of shifting jobs from relatively wealthy countries like the United States, to less affluent nations, such as Peru.

The Associated Press contributed to this article