

Edwards' attack on Peru deal shifts debate

By Eoin Callan
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The Democratic presidential field in the US tilted to the left at the weekend as John Edwards came out against the US trade agreement with Peru.

Mr Edwards is the first leading contender for the presidential nomination to oppose the pact with the Latin American nation now making its way through Congress.

The move increases the political pressure on Senator Hillary Clinton to vote against the agreement when it reaches the Senate floor next month.

Although Ms Clinton is the clear frontrunner nationally, Mr Edwards has focused his campaign for the White House on the prospect of an early victory in Iowa, where he has made gains with a message of economic populism.

Mrs Clinton has responded by becoming steadily more strident in her criticism of US trade policy, denouncing a pending trade deal with Seoul.

The vote on the Peru agreement will be a key test of the New York Senator's desire to distance herself from her husband's legacy, which includes passing the North American Free Trade Agreement, now unpopular with the party's grassroots.

"This is where the rubber hits the road and we find out how far Hillary thinks she needs to go on trade to court the Democratic base. And because Peru is about to go to a Senate vote she can't duck the issue," said Lori Wallach, a critic of the deal at Global Trade Watch.

Mrs Clinton's main rival, Barack Obama, recently came out in favour of the Peru deal, while over the weekend Senator Joe Biden announced his his opposition to the agreement.

Mr Edwards said he also intended to "oppose the Colombia, Panama and South Korea trade agreements in their present forms".

His opposition to the Peru deal will be a setback for Congressional Democrats trying to build a strong majority behind the agreement on Capitol Hill.

The candidate said a historic bipartisan agreement between the George W. Bush, the president, and Democrats to include tougher labour and environmental standards in the Peru pact fell short.

"Despite strong efforts by many Democrats in Congress, labour organisations and fair trade advocates to embed international labour standards into the agreement, what resulted were references to general principles and not specific standards," he said.

"In short, this agreement does not meet my standard of putting American workers and communities first, ahead of the interests of the big multinational corporations, which for too long have rigged our trade policies for themselves."

The criticism was welcomed by the deal's opponents, who include the heads of Peru's labour movement and Pedro Barretto, the country's archbishop.

Mr Edwards singled out "provisions that could allow US banks to demand compensation if Peru reverses its disastrous social security privatisation".

He also offered a broader critique of the US approach to negotiating trade deals modelled on the North American Free Trade Agreement. "All of these agreements provide the expansive investor rights that literally create incentives to relocate US jobs overseas," he said.