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CAFTA bound to be campaign issue

It hasn't been a real good year for the Bush administration regarding trade issues. First the global trade talks in Cancun, Mexico, collapsed and then the administration had to compromise with Brazil as far as areas that will be covered in a Free Trade of the Americas Agreement. After that, the President had to reverse himself by lifting tariffs on foreign steel in face of threats of European and Asian trade retaliation.

So the administration was ebullient last week when it reached a free trade agreement with four Central American nations. The Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) will be the sixth such pact since the North American Free Trade Agreement with Canada and Mexico was struck a decade ago. If Congress approves the deal it will cover trade with Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua. Talks are still continuing with Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic.

U.S. Trade Representative Robert Zoellick called CAFTA "an important milestone" toward reaching a free trade agreement with every nation in the Americas except Cuba. Union leaders and Democrats in Congress aren't likely to be so agreeable.

AFL-CIO President John Sweeney called CAFTA a "deeply flawed agreement" that fails to protect Central American workers from long hours and unsafe conditions or union organizers from threats. Democratic presidential candidate Rep. Dick Gephardt said Mr. Bush was "selling out American workers with a bad trade deal."

It's going to be a hot campaign issue considering that the U.S. manufacturing sector has lost 2.8 million jobs over the past 40 months. The door can't be shut on the globalization of trade but more needs to be done to insure better working conditions and environmental protections in these agreements.

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