

Free trade must be fair trade

By Rep. Phil Hare
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In baseball, if the pitcher on one team must throw off of a mound 90 feet from home plate while his opponent is allowed to stand 30 feet closer, that is an uneven playing field.

And if the umpire refuses to enforce any of the rules of the game, you have an all-around flawed process.

The same fundamental principle goes for our trade policies — with much more serious consequences for the failure to require fairness.

As such, Congress cannot support unfair trade agreements destined to outsource more American jobs to countries that systematically violate human rights.

And we cannot defer to an administration unwilling to hold any of the key players accountable for their actions.

I certainly support free trade. But trade must also be fair. Unfortunately, the pending trade agreements with Peru, Panama, Korea and Colombia follow the same flawed NAFTA model that resulted in the hemorrhaging of good paying jobs in America and a race to the bottom in Mexico.

I have seen the effects of unfair trade policies in my home state. The manufacturing sector, historically a key component of a once-thriving Midwest economy, has seen 3 million jobs lost to NAFTA. And our trade deficit has gone from \$100 billion to over \$700 billion since its passage.

The four pending free trade agreements will only make this problem worse.

NAFTA's dreadful record of job loss makes it clear that American workers will suffer if these carbon-copy agreements are enacted.

But our trade policies have become a global problem, as illustrated by worker protests in Peru, Panama, Korea and Colombia against their pending agreements, in addition to objections by countries with which we already trade, such as Mexico.

While the agreement reached between congressional Democrats and the White House regarding labor and environmental standards sounds good on paper, there is little evidence that the Bush administration will change course and enforce these rights for the first time.

In addition, I remain concerned that improved labor and environmental standards will be made a part of side deals, which have historically been ignored.

The Peru and Panama deals look ominously similar to the Jordan free trade agreement, which also was hailed for including improved labor and environmental standards.

But a year after the free trade agreement was enacted, the White House trade representative sent Jordan a letter informing them that the U.S. would not enforce those standards.

Jordan is now home to extensive slave labor and human trafficking, and the Bush administration has sat on its hands in response.

We cannot let history repeat itself. I am particularly troubled by the pending agreements with Colombia and Korea. As the Houston Chronicle reported this summer, “Colombia is the most dangerous place for labor unions — over the past 15 years, some 2,000 union members have been assassinated in Colombia, more than the rest of the world’s nations combined.”

The Korean agreement gives automakers unfettered access to the U.S. market without requiring Seoul to dismantle barriers that have kept the Korean market virtually closed to U.S. products. Last year, Korea exported 700,000 cars to the United States while U.S. carmakers sold only 4,000 cars in Korea.

The president has fast-tracked these agreements, which means Congress cannot submit amendments to create enforceable labor and environmental standards. Therefore, we have no alternative but to vote up or down on entire agreements.

I am pleased that President Bush’s fast-track authority expired at the end of June. At this critical moment in history, Congress must reassert its constitutionally mandated authority over crafting our trade policies.

I campaigned on the issue of trade. And I was elected because I pledged to come to Washington and protect American jobs. Democrats won majorities in the House and the Senate in large part because of the failed trade policies pursued by President Bush and his allies in Congress.

Average working Americans, still reeling from the economic devastation caused by NAFTA, CAFTA, and other unfair trade deals, expect this Democratic Congress to change course now.

As one of eight freshmen in the House Trade Working Group, I am committed to fighting for a new direction on trade that protects American jobs while promoting labor and environmental standards. Fortunately, these two goals reinforce each other.

If we enforce labor rights and environmental protection abroad, international wages and

environmental standards will improve, giving American corporations less reason to send their jobs overseas.

The American people are demanding that we reject the flawed NAFTA model that is devastating workers in all participating countries. We can rebuild our once-thriving manufacturing economy. And we can stop the outsourcing of U.S. jobs once and for all.

I urge my colleagues on both sides of the Capitol, Republican and Democrat, to find the courage to do so.

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