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Statement of AFL-CIO President John Sweeney on Bush Administration, CAFTA, and Labor Proposal June 9, 2005

Working families in the U.S. and Central America were deeply disappointed today by the Bush administration's attempts to sell an anti-worker trade agreement with more half-truths and empty promises about workers' rights. Yet again, the administration has shown that protecting workers' rights comes dead last on its list of trade policy priorities.

In an attempt to defend the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) today, U.S. Trade Representative Rob Portman blatantly mischaracterized previous trade agreements and existing trade laws that set a higher standard than CAFTA, and he contradicted the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the administration's own State Department in his rosy assessment of Central American labor laws.

Ambassador Portman claimed that lackluster enforcement is the only problem with Central America's labor regime, not inadequate laws. Yet the ILO report he cited and our own annual State Department reports detail dozens of serious deficiencies in Central American labor laws (for a detailed critique, see a report on workers' rights in Central America, at: http://www.aflcio.org/issuespolitics/globaleconomy/cafta_ftaa_main.cfm). And regardless of how bad Central America's labor laws are today, the basic fact remains that CAFTA offers no protection against weakening, gutting, or eliminating those laws in the future. This alone should be sufficient grounds for rejecting this flawed deal.

The administration's own record on labor rights assistance demands a healthy dose of skepticism towards any promises of enhanced assistance in the future. The \$20 million in bilateral assistance that Ambassador Portman lauded in his speech today was appropriated last year by Congress, but eliminated from the administration's own budget request this year. The administration also asked Congress to slash funding of the Labor Department's international programs by more than 80 percent this year - a fact the Ambassador failed to mention in today's speech.

Workers in Central America who fight every day for a voice at work need real rules to protect their basic rights, not more empty promises. There is only one way to make CAFTA work for workers in the U.S. and abroad - and that is to send it back to the negotiating table.