

## **US labor seeks to stop Oman, Colombia, Peru pacts**

**March 17, 2006**

**By Doug Palmer**

WASHINGTON - U.S. labor groups, which have been unable to block any free-trade agreement since President George W. Bush took office five years ago, still hope to defeat pacts this year with Oman, Peru and Colombia.

"We think we have a real shot at it," said Thea Lee, policy director for the AFL-CIO said on Friday. "We are planning a major battle."

A lot of things have changed since 2005, when the House of Representatives narrowly approved the U.S.-Central America Free Trade Agreement, or CAFTA, after a bitter and divisive battle mostly along party lines, Lee said.

The recent controversy over a state-owned Arab company that purchased the rights to manage major U.S. ports showed Republicans were more willing to defy Bush before this year's congressional elections.

Many Democrats also are disappointed U.S. trade officials did not incorporate core international labor standards into the text of the agreements after Peruvian President Alejandro Toledo publicly stated he would be willing to do that.

"I think President Toledo's comments really resonates with Democrats. It brings home that (U.S. Trade Representative) Rob Portman said he was going to take a new approach after CAFTA, he was going to reach out to Democrats, and we haven't really seen any evidence of that," Lee said.

In a letter sent this week to every member of Congress, the AFL-CIO provided what it called "troubling examples" of the conditions workers face in the three countries.

"In Colombia, 200 unionists were killed in 2004, making it the most dangerous country in the world for workers seeking to exercise their freedom to form unions," the group said.

U.S. trade officials say provisions of the three agreements that require countries to enforce their existing labor laws are consistent with the guidelines that Congress set in 2002.

They argue increased prosperity as a result of the trade agreements will also give the countries more resources to improve conditions for workers.

Rep. Gregory Meeks, a New Yorker who was one of only 15 Democrats who voted for CAFTA last year, said on Thursday he expected tough fights to win approval of the Peru and the Colombia agreements, although less so for Oman.

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