

CAFTA Falls Far Short of a Consensus on Trade

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Our nation's economic and trade policy under President Bush has consistently failed to help workers both within the United States and internationally prepare for the challenges of the global economy.

Domestically, the Bush administration's fiscal irresponsibility with tax cuts and unnecessary spending priorities has crippled our ability to help workers retrain and compete on the international stage.

Globally, through its trade policy, this administration has done little to help workers overseas.

With the the Dominican Republic-Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), the administration missed an opportunity to craft a pact that balances the need to open more global markets to American workers and businesses with the need to ensure that our workers and businesses can compete and prosper in those global markets.

Our nation's trade policy is only one spoke in the wheel of economic policy. Yet, this administration has replaced that economic wheel with one spoke - trade.

With an active global-trade policy coupled with an inactive economic-competitiveness policy, our businesses and workers will be left in the dust of economic progress. Because of these and other concerns listed below, we will oppose CAFTA when it comes to the floor of the House of Representatives.

We support trade and know firsthand its critical importance to Washington state. That is why it is essential that we have a trade policy that provides American workers and businesses with real opportunities to grow and that expands and strengthens our economy. We must fight to ensure that our workers and businesses, in Washington and across the nation, are well equipped to compete and prosper in a global environment.

This administration absolutely must build a real consensus - one that does not currently exist - around the importance of trade and around the equal importance of international competitiveness. To accomplish this goal, trade agreements must be balanced and fair for American workers and companies as well as for the nations with which we seek to engage. Furthermore, we must have domestic policies in place that help Americans make the transition to the global economy. The administration has failed on both counts.

The Bush administration has, too often, chosen economic policies that damage our ability to have a sound policy on trade. For example, we must take strong steps forward with investment in research and development programs and allow governments to partner with universities and businesses in order to spur innovation. Yet, this administration has made cuts to vital technology and science programs.

To be competitive, we should invest in small businesses and give them the necessary resources to establish international competitiveness. Yet, this administration has slashed the Small Business Administration's loan programs, resulting in far fewer small businesses having the chance to successfully get off the ground.

We need to invest in education so that our children can become the next generation of American scientists, engineers, teachers and business leaders. Yet, the administration's spending and tax priorities have undermined our ability to invest in education and skills training.

Although progress has been made in recent years to improve the Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) program, we continue to be dismayed that the administration has pursued policies that leave many workers who qualify for TAA benefits without access to this program.

If this failure to invest in TAA and other critical domestic work-force programs can be said to be a problem now, it will only get worse if the 2001 and 2003 tax cuts are made permanent and the administration's fiscal irresponsibility is left unchecked. We cannot stand by quietly as the administration undercuts the domestic investments necessary for a broad national consensus on trade.

If we are to build a consensus on trade policy abroad, we must understand that workers' rights and effective labor and environmental enforcement mechanisms are crucial to ensuring that developing nations fully and effectively participate in the global economy.

CAFTA, as negotiated by the Bush administration, would actually weaken the existing workers' protections currently available under the United States' existing trade-preference programs with the region. Similarly, on environmental protection, rural development and public health, the agreement falls short.

The Bush administration has missed an important opportunity here. While CAFTA includes strong protections for the intellectual-property rights that are so important to the Puget Sound region's high-tech sector, the administration has failed to take such a serious approach on workers' rights and environmental protections.

The Bush administration has shown no willingness to engage with pro-trade Democrats in order to address our valid concerns, so that we might build a true consensus on trade in this country. Rather, the administration has shown far greater willingness to consider the parochial interests of protectionists than to address the concerns of free-trade supporters such as ourselves.

CAFTA - and indeed many of the administration's economic policies - falls far short of this goal.

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