

Pa. Groups Prepare For a Peru Free Trade Vote

By Joe Murray
The Bulletin
November 2, 2007

With a vote on the pending Peru Free Trade Agreement anticipated next week, a number of Pennsylvania fair trade organizations are turning their eyes to Washington to see how the Keystone State's four freshman congressman and one freshman senator vote on the issue.

"Fair trade was a significant issue in Pennsylvania in 2006," stated Phila Back, coordinator for Pennsylvania Fair Trade Coalition. While Mrs. Back noted Americans displeasure with the war in Iraq has received the majority of the credit for ushering in Democrat leadership in the House, the fair trade advocate stressed Pennsylvania's freshmen were not elected on the war issue alone.

In their campaigns, Reps. Chris Carney, Joe Sestak, Jason Altmire, Patrick Murphy and Sen. Bob Casey all ran on platforms favorable to fair trade. Mrs. Back pointed to Pennsylvania House Furniture to illustrate free trade's effect on the region.

Pennsylvania House had been making high-end, colonial furniture in Pennsylvania for more than a century. The furniture manufacturer had found it increasingly difficult to compete with cheap Chinese imports, most of which was made possible by Beijing's currency manipulation. Thus, the company had to close its doors, leaving 425 Pennsylvanians without jobs. Ironically, the company transferred the jobs to China.

"Under the agreement, tariffs on approximately 80 percent of U.S. exports will be eliminated immediately. This will help to level the playing field, since over 97 percent of our imports from Peru already enjoy duty-free access to our market under U.S. trade preference programs," President Bush told Congress in promoting the agreement. Some question how level the playing field will be.

Peru has a population roughly equivalent to New York and New Jersey, but a vast majority of the Peruvian population lives below poverty levels. Trade analysts, therefore, question whether Peruvians will be able to purchase the American imports.

"Peru has very little wherewithal to purchase our goods," stated Larry Breech, president of the Pennsylvania Farmers Union. Mr. Breech contends such trade agreements result in a declining standard of living and a growing dependency on foreign nations for essentials, such as food.

With Congress' vote pending next week, the fair traders have pledged they will remember how their representatives vote.