

Labor groups differ on Peru free trade deal

By Ian Swanson
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A coalition of labor groups that split from the AFL-CIO several years ago is urging members of Congress to oppose the Peru free trade agreement (FTA).

The Change to Win coalition, which includes the Service Employees International Union, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters and the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America announced its opposition to the Peru FTA in letters sent Tuesday to every member of Congress and the Senate.

While the announcement was unsurprising, it does formalize a split in organized labor over the Peru deal. The AFL-CIO is not supporting that deal, but nor is it vocally opposing it. The Peru FTA is supported by House Democratic leaders such as Ways and Means Committee Chairman Charles Rangel (N.Y.) and Rep. Sandy Levin (Mich.), a leading Democrat on trade.

Representatives of both Change to Win and the AFL-CIO, however, rejected suggestions they were split on the Peru trade deal or a similar agreement with Panama that might also be considered by Congress this fall.

Yvette Pena Lopes, legislative representative for the Teamsters, suggested that structural differences between the two groups account for the difference. Change to Win decided to oppose the Peru FTA because a majority of its unions oppose the deal, she said. "If a majority of our unions ... want opposition, we'll follow it," she said.

Unions making up the AFL-CIO have taken different stances on the Peru FTA. "If we have unions split on a deal, we won't be as active on that issue," AFL-CIO Policy Director Thea Lee said.

Both groups also must figure out how to balance their positions on the FTAs with their relationships with key members of Congress. Rangel and Levin are supporting the Peru FTA, but both oppose deals the administration negotiated with Colombia and South Korea. The AFL-CIO also is opposing those two trade agreements, and neither is expected to receive a vote under the current Congress.

The Democratic Party itself is split on the issue of trade. While Levin, Rangel and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) have hailed a deal on a trade template with the Bush administration as a significant breakthrough, some rank-and-file Democrats are critical of the deal.

Despite the Change to Win opposition, Pena Lopes said the Peru FTA likely will be

approved by Congress, but probably with only a minority of House Democrats voting to support it. Business lobbyists echoed that viewpoint.

The public Change to Win opposition does create a potential headache for the posse of Democratic senators chasing their party's presidential nomination, and the valuable union endorsements that could earn them that prize. A vote for the Peru FTA could allow a candidate to portray him- or herself as amenable to free trade deals prized by business, but that becomes more difficult with formal union opposition to the deal.

The letter was sent one week before the Sept. 25 Change to Win convention in Chicago, where Sens. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) and Barack Obama (D-Ill.) and former Sen. John Edwards (D-N.C.) are tentatively scheduled to appear, according to Change to Win spokesman Greg Denier. So far, the Carpenters, who support Edwards (D-N.C.), are the only one of the group's unions to offer an endorsement.

In its Sept. 17 letter, Change to Win charges that it provided a list of minimal changes to the pending trade deals negotiated by the administration, including Peru, that had to be met if Change to Win was to support any of the deals. "Most of our concerns were not addressed in any way," the letter said.

The letter also criticizes the new template on trade, hailed as a breakthrough by some Democrats, as insufficient. While the letter said Change to Win was pleased with improvements to the labor and environmental chapters of the Peru deal, it said those changes did not go far enough. It also said the deal left other parts of the FTA unchanged, such as the pact's investment rules.

Approving the FTA, the groups said, would just effectively extend damaging FTAs with Canada and Mexico (NAFTA) and Central American (CAFTA). "We have seen the impact NAFTA, and even now CAFTA, have had on workers, and it's not good," the letter said.

Other Change to Win unions include UNITE HERE, which represents hotel and garment workers, the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union and the Laborers' International Union of North America.