

House Debate Oman Labor Rights in U.S. FTA

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WASHINGTON, DC-- Amidst rising anti-trade sentiment in Congress, House Republicans and Democrats wrangled over labor rights issues Wednesday demanding that a U.S. free trade deal with the Omani government include stronger provisions to protect workers rights.

Democrats have routinely raised the issue of labor rights in previous free trade compacts negotiated by the Bush administration including deals with the Andean countries of Peru, Ecuador and Columbia. The issue of labor rights also brought on heightened contention during the Central America Free Trade Agreement negotiations with Democrats arguing that labor provisions included in the deal would not be enforceable based on the current government's laws.

Now with the Oman agreement on Capitol Hill for consideration, members of Congress are once again challenging the merits of labor provisions included in the U.S.-Oman free trade deal. Democrats questioned the administration on Wednesday during a House Ways and Means Committee hearing on whether reformed laws would actually be enforceable under a U.S. free trade deal.

Ways and Means Trade Subcommittee Ranking Member Benjamin Cardin, D-Md. said he would not endorse the free trade deal until outstanding labor laws were brought into compliance under international labor standards.

"t this time Oman's labor laws do not meet these standards," said Cardin. "If we are being asked to vote on this FTA, why can't Oman bring its laws into compliance with international standards immediately?"

The Omani government promised last month to reforms its laws by Oct. 31, after its government conducts extensive consultations from July through September. It has also undergone a series of labor reforms earlier this year to bring its laws into compliance by International Labor standards, a defense the administration has consistently used. In order to prevent any block of the trade deal, the Omani government responded to questions posed by members of Congress last month through an exchange of letters detailing plans and promises it intends on fulfilling before the full implementation of the agreement.

While Cardin acknowledged the exchange of letters between the two governments over raised concerns on labor rights as a "positive step," he said several other steps would need to be taken before the deal would have broad congressional support.

High-profile Democrats like Rep. Charles Rangel of New York, Rep. Sander Levin of Michigan and Cardin have repeatedly been open with their pursuit of trying to reach trade

deals with bipartisan support, but said repeated offenses by the administration to not include enforcement in labor provisions was scaling back support.

“The ILO makes clear there are violations across the board today and what’s being suggested here that the government will do so. We are supposed to move ahead and we’re supposed to move on a statement on what a government will do and that is vague,” said Levin. “We don’t do that on any other provision of a trade agreement. We don’t take a statement of intention.”

Ranking member of the committee, Rep. Bill Thomas, R-Calif. refuted claims made by Democrats who argued that assurances for reform by the end of October were inadequate. Pointing to the latest trade deal which pushed through Congress with the Bahrain government, Thomas argued that compared to the Bahrain agreement, the Omani government offered more concrete commitments to reforming its law.

“We don’t have a conclusion in the agreement with Bahrain,” said Thomas. “We had a promise that they would introduce legislation.”

Thomas argued that the commitment by the Omani government to reform the law by the October deadline gave him a “higher comfort level” due its “certainty.”

Democrats also challenged why the administration did not have a set of criteria in place in which to assess overall labor rights with governments interested in launching a free trade deal with the United States.

“The reason you don’t have a simple, easy, 100 percent agreed upon checklist is because everybody deals with it in different ways,” said Thomas. “What we are looking for is a fundamental core commitment because then it makes all kinds of sense because if you can see what they have done, what we consider basic we can require them to match their laws.”

The administration rebutted claims arguing that already agreed upon labor provisions will be “legally binding commitments” that the United States will enforce.

“We are pleased with the commitments made under the FTA,” said Susan Schwab, Deputy U.S. Trade Representative, in her remarks before the committee. “It is important to know the current law in Oman the law that would be enforced under this free trade agreement made some dramatic improvement in Oman’s laws that affect worker’s right.”

According to the administration, under Oman’s new labor laws workers have the right to associate, bargain collectively and strike, all of which will be enforceable under the free trade deal.

“These are laws on the books that are effective and that are enforceable,” said Schwab.

A free trade deal with the Omani government will be of strategic importance to the United States, as it embarks on its fifth set of negotiations with a Middle East country, all part of its Middle East Free Trade Agreement.

The administration has touted its plan of a Middle East free trade zone as a vehicle for democratic and economic prosperity, something it hopes to accomplish by 2013.

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