

Why the Rush on Trade?

By Harold Meyerson
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The House is set to vote today on a free-trade pact with [Peru](#). What's not clear is why.

The Bush administration, of course, supports trade deals with just about anyone, as it has made clear by promoting an accord with [Colombia](#), where murdering a union activist entitles the killer to a get-out-of-jail-free card. But Congress is run by the Democrats now, and some of its leaders have sought to craft a different kind of trade bill -- one that takes workers' rights and the environment almost as seriously as it does the right of global companies and investors to do what they will anywhere they roam. In particular, House Ways and Means Committee Chairman [Charles Rangel](#) and trade subcommittee Chairman [Sander Levin](#) have taken it upon themselves to devise these new-model trade bills.

How successful they've been is open to interpretation. "For the first time," Levin wrote in a letter to his Democratic colleagues, "the U.S.-Peru FTA incorporates international labor standards in the trade agreement, enforceable like all other provisions." This could be a breakthrough, since the enforcement of labor standards has generally been relegated to explicitly unenforceable side agreements in our trade pacts.

But Mark Barenberg, a [Columbia University](#) law professor who has drafted petitions for the [AFL-CIO](#) protesting the lack of labor rights in [China](#), questions whether the Peru accord signals a breakthrough at all. The agreement, he argues in a paper released yesterday by groups opposing the pact, "does not require the Parties to comply with core labor rights" but rather with "vague, undefined, and unenforceable labor 'principles' and with their own domestic labor laws." Rangel and Levin have won a pledge from the Peruvian government to toughen its labor laws, but, writes Barenberg, the agreement actually imposes lighter sanctions for labor standard violations than current trade law does.

The pact has created a rift in the labor movement. Some unions, led by the Teamsters and Unite Here (the hotel and clothing workers union), staunchly oppose the bill. Others are holding their fire in the hope that their non-opposition now will position them better to defeat upcoming pacts -- with Colombia and [South Korea](#) in particular -- that they feel pose a more direct threat to their members or to labor generally.

Democrats have reverted to their accustomed divisions on trade as well, after mustering near-unanimous opposition to the [Central American Free Trade Agreement](#) -- the last accord to emerge from the Bush administration without Democratic input -- in 2005. [Barack Obama](#) supports the pact while [John Edwards](#) opposes it. [Hillary Clinton](#) has yet to take a position, though she has suggested the nation may need a little "timeout" from

new trade agreements pending a review of the effects previous pacts have had on American workers.

In the House, some longtime opponents of these trade accords, such as [Toledo's Marcy Kaptur](#), oppose the Rangel-Levin effort. Particularly striking, however, is the opposition from Democratic freshmen. When they swept into office last November, [Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch](#) division counted 27 of the 30 new members as critics of free trade.

Today, a number of those new House members who took previously Republican seats last year will vote against the pact.

In general, House Speaker [Nancy Pelosi](#) and Senate Majority Leader [Harry Reid](#) have avoided votes on issues that divide their party -- but not, evidently, when the issue is trade. The party's [Wall Street](#) backers, who always have friends on the Ways and Means Committee, want those votes to go forward, while many in labor adhere to the idea Clinton floated: that a strategic pause is needed to reassess the effects of such pacts and to implement some offsets to the leveling effects that globalization has had on the incomes of American workers.

In essence, the calls for a timeout on trade pacts are the corollary of demands for a timeout on immigration. Both proposals arise chiefly from working-class Americans whom our more-pro-business-than-business government has left at the mercy of every downward pressure on incomes. Democrats have an advantage over Republicans, since they support policies that would mitigate these trends, such as universal health insurance and protections for workers who wish to form unions, while Republicans have no incomes strategy.

[The Republicans](#) will probably counter by ratcheting up their war not just on illegal immigration but on immigrants themselves.

But why the Democratic rush on trade? Globalization does pose real challenges to working- and middle-class Americans. Democrats should wait until they're in a position - say, in 2009 - to begin to restore some security to Americans' economic lives before they return to cutting trade deals. Their electoral prospects, and the nation's economic prospects, demand no less.

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