

Labor, greens denounce trade policy

By Steve Hirsch
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Labor and environment groups and their allies yesterday lashed out at the Bush administration's trade policy, criticizing both the administration's move to extend the president's trade-negotiating authority and its efforts to negotiate a free-trade agreement with South Korea.

The move came a day after business groups joined with the administration in pushing for renewal of "trade-promotion authority," which allows President Bush to submit trade agreements to Congress for an up-or-down vote without amendments.

Major business groups and the administration say extending the authority past June 30 is critical for the administration to be able to negotiate free-trade agreements.

The criticism came as the administration is trying to make progress in talks on a trade agreement with South Korea.

Sierra Club Executive Director Carl Pope told reporters that "TPA," often used to refer to trade promotion authority, stands for "trust the president always."

Bruce Raynor, president of Unite Here, a union representing hotel, apparel, food service and other workers, said the soaring U.S. trade deficit is "intimately linked" to failed U.S. trade policies and said the trade policies of recent years have been "a proven failure."

Leo Gerard, president of the United Steelworkers, said it is "disgusting that Wall Street is making money on both ends of trade deals where plants are closing in America and moving to one of the trading partners."

"I don't think now is a time in America's history that we ought to cede Congress' authority to a president who clearly has no commitment to having an industrial base in this country," he said. "It's time for this Congress to ... recognize the reason there's a Democratic majority today is because almost every one of the freshman senators and House members ran on a campaign against these kinds of trade deals and for replacing this failed trade policy."

Tom Buis, president of the National Farmers Union, said agriculture exports used to be the "golden boy" of U.S. trade efforts. Now, though, U.S. farm exports have plummeted from \$27.5 billion a year to \$3 billion, and he predicted that the U.S. soon would be a net agricultural importer.

Young Koo-heo, vice president of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, said during a briefing on the South Korean trade agreement that Seoul does not address basic labor rights.

AFL-CIO labor federation global economic policy specialist Jeff Vogt said before the briefing that the U.S. trade representative (USTR) "has ignored the concerns of working people here in the United States and around the world."

"Unfortunately," he said, "USTR appears to be taking the same failed approach to trade -- weak protections for labor and the environment and excessive rights for corporations."

He said such an agreement is unacceptable and said opponents will fight to see that the trade pact with South Korea is not ratified by the Senate if signed.