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UNIONS SAY THEY WILL PUNISH DEMOCRATS FOR SUPPORTING DR-CAFTA DEAL

The leaders of 24 unions this week warned the House Democratic Leadership they would penalize any member of the caucus voting for the Dominican Republic-Central American Free Trade Agreement by withholding financial support for vulnerable incumbents known as “frontline candidates.”

“We expect that House Democratic Leadership will convey very strongly to all wavering Democrats, and particularly to Frontline Candidates, that voting for CAFTA against our strong, clear, and loud objections, would signal to the labor movement that those Frontline Candidates do not want our support,” the unions said in a July 25 letter.

It was sent to House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), House Democratic Whip Steny Hoyer (D-MD), Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee Chair Rahm Emanuel (D-IL), and frontline program chairman Rep. Mike Thompson (D-CA).

The letter criticized the leadership for failing to formally whip the issue, in contrast to the Republican leadership, which has put enormous pressure on members to support the deal. Democrats never began a formal whip operation, even though Pelosi publically urged members to oppose DR-CAFTA.

The letter said the unions would not support at-risk members even if the Democratic leadership urged them to do so. “Simply put, there must be real and measurable consequences for opposing labor on this issue,” the letter said. “We cannot and will not give any Democrat a pass on CAFTA.”

A Democratic leadership aide said the letter was “not helpful” because it conveyed the notion that the unions were blackmailing members when the Democratic leadership was trying to build opposition to the deal based on substantive reasons.

The letter identified three Democrats that benefited from labor’s “substantial support” and that were considered likely to support DR-CAFTA. They are Reps. Melissa Bean (D-IL), Jim Matheson (D-UT) and Dennis Moore (KS), and all three of these members voted for the deal on July 27. Bean is a freshman who defeated Rep. Phil Crane (R-IL), and Matheson and Moore were considered by business groups supporting DR-CAFTA as core Democratic trade votes, since they supported the 2001 fast-track bill in the House.