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With N.Y. Jobs at Risk, and Dominican-American Constituents Opposing, Did Rep. Gregory Meeks Trade Deciding Vote for CAFTA-NAFTA Expansion in Exchange for Corporate Campaign Cash, Pork Barrel Funds or Other Empty Promises?

Public Citizen Launches CAFTA Damage Report to Track Results of Misguided Meeks Vote

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Against the grain of his self-proclaimed concern for economic justice for New York workers and Afro-Latino interests, Rep. Gregory Meeks (D-N.Y.) voted in favor of the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), casting a deciding vote as the controversial trade agreement eked past the U.S. House of Representatives 217 to 215 on July 27. CAFTA was opposed by all but 15 Democrats in the U.S. House of Representatives, including New York’s senior Democrat, Rep. Charlie Rangel, who represents Harlem.

As *Newsday* reported, shortly before the vote Meeks told International Brotherhood of Teamsters representatives that he had “serious concerns about this bill, concerns about losing jobs in America,” before turning his back on those concerns with his eventual vote.¹ A senior Democratic aide said of Meeks’ and other Democrats’ pro-CAFTA vote, “there are members who don’t seem to have any sort of reason for voting the way that they did.”² New York working people have been hard-hit by the NAFTA model that CAFTA will expand. Since NAFTA, 219,700 New York manufacturing jobs have been lost,³ and under just one narrow assistance program, the Department of Labor certified at least 61,435 New York workers as having lost their jobs to plant relocation overseas or import floods.⁴

“Given the strong opposition to NAFTA expansion in his district, the known threat to New York jobs and the unwillingness of any businesses related to JFK airport to pledge that CAFTA would increase jobs there, many people were disgusted by his deciding vote for CAFTA and now wonder, for what could he have traded this important vote that could possibly make up for the damage NAFTA expansion will do?” said Lori Wallach, director of Public Citizen’s Global Trade Watch.

To track the damage Meeks’ flip-flop vote will cause his constituents, Public Citizen announced today a new initiative, the CAFTA Damage Report, to monitor CAFTA’s effect on working families, consumers and the environment in the United States and CAFTA target countries. Among the issues the CAFTA Damage Report will track include:

- **The implausibility that CAFTA will increase employment levels at JFK airport.** Meeks claimed that a vote for CAFTA would be a vote for workers in his district, thanks to increased volume of trade through JFK airport, which is in the 6th District. Transportation experts had questioned this Meeks’ claim *before* the vote, given that JFK handles little shipping from Central America. Almost all high-value traded goods coming in and out of JFK are moving to and from Europe, not Central America. The sorts of goods traded to and from CAFTA target countries are minimal in volume and value, and more likely to be shipped by sea to Florida ports than by air to New York. Thus, CAFTA is not expected to have a substantial effect on trade and employment at JFK.
- **Did Meeks get corporate campaign funding pledges for his CAFTA vote?** “Some of my friends cast their votes for special interests,” said Rep. John Lewis (D-GA), Democratic Senior Chief Deputy Whip.⁵ Meeks received significant

campaign contributions during the last election cycle from Pfizer Inc. – part of the pharmaceutical lobby that made passing CAFTA a major legislative priority, because CAFTA contains intellectual property rules that would cut off access in Central American and the Dominican Republic to cheaper generic drugs. The pharmaceutical companies hope that eliminating competition from generic drugs will force more purchases of expensive brand name anti-retrovirals for treating HIV-AIDS, and antibiotics used for treating malaria and tuberculosis, which also plague Central America. However, according to Doctors without Borders, Oxfam and ACT-UP, CAFTA's patent provisions would simply make it much more difficult for impoverished Central Americans and Dominicans to obtain affordable medicine, including dooming the hundreds of thousands who have HIV-AIDS to avoidable deaths. CAFTA Damage Report will track and publicize Meeks campaign contributions from corporations who were pushing CAFTA.

- **Did Meeks buy a meaningless promise from the Bush administration in exchange for his CAFTA vote?** In a statement issued by his office following his vote for CAFTA, Meeks claimed that CAFTA would improve worker rights in Central America,⁶ thanks to a promise from the Bush administration that Meeks called “a very definite step in the right direction.”⁷ The independent labor unions in the Dominican Republic and Central America opposed CAFTA because it would roll back existing labor standards now in effect under existing U.S. trade law with these countries. Meeks noted that the Bush administration promised to provide \$40 million per year for labor and environmental capacity building in the six affected nations. Yet, the actual funding behind this promise has not been appropriated in the Senate spending bills that are being finalized now, nor does such a commitment appear in the CAFTA's implementing legislation, much less the CAFTA text itself. However, even if \$40 million per year were to appear, \$6 million per CAFTA country per year for labor *and* environmental capacity building has been dismissed by development experts in the United States and Central America as insultingly inadequate. For example, \$6.25 million is set aside in the House transportation bill for *graffiti removal* in the New York City metropolitan area, including Meeks' Queens County. If \$6 million cannot even pay for graffiti removal in a single city, it is ridiculous to think that it could substantially improve both labor and environmental conditions in an entire country.

“We will track and publicize how Rep. Meeks has helped inflict damage on his district and his state by voting for CAFTA,” Wallach said.

Meeks has a long history of interest in Afro-Latino and Caribbean nations, particularly Haiti, calling for humanitarian aid and civil and human rights reforms. However, his vote for CAFTA goes directly against these interests, as the agreement is opposed broadly in the Dominican Republic and Central America, where mass opposition rallies and marches have been suppressed by the governments with increasingly violent tactics. CAFTA is also opposed by all major U.S. African-American and Latino civil society organizations, who have concluded that CAFTA would be an economic and social disaster for Afro-Latinos, especially since Afro-Latinos suffer disproportionately from HIV-AIDS, the treatment of which will become prohibitively costly under CAFTA. In his post-CAFTA press statement, Meeks claimed that a quote from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. guided him in his decision to cast the crucial vote to pass CAFTA.

“One wonders if Dr. King would really have approved of a vote in favor of a trade agreement that will disproportionately hurt minorities,” said Raul Islas, Public Citizen's chief organizer for New York City.

Background:

Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch has studied over 90 deals taken by members of Congress for trade votes during the period 1992-2004, and found that over 80 percent of promises on such deals were not kept or were reversed by subsequent events. We divided these deals into pure pork barrel promises, of which 70 percent were broken; and ameliorative policy fix promises, of which 90 percent were broken. For our full report, “Trade Wars – Revenge of the Myth: Deals for Trade Votes Gone Bad,” please visit <http://www.citizen.org/documents/tradewars.pdf>

¹ J. Jioni Palmer, “Meeks in the middle,” *Newsday*, July 17, 2005.

² Erin P. Billings, “Pelosi Calls Steering Meeting to Review Defectors' Votes for CAFTA,” *Roll Call*, July 28, 2005; Susan Davis, “House Dems Take Stock After CAFTA,” *Congress Daily*, July 29, 2005; Josephine Hearn, “Reverberations from CAFTA vote are still being felt on Hill,” *The Hill*, Aug. 3, 2005.

³ Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Employment Statistics Survey, All Employees, Manufacturing Super Sector.

⁴ Bureau of Labor Statistics Trade Adjustment Assistance numbers, available on Public Citizen's website.

⁵ Erin P. Billings, “Pelosi Calls Steering Meeting to Review Defectors' Votes for CAFTA,” *Roll Call*, July 28, 2005.

⁶ Rep. Gregory W. Meeks (D-N.Y.), “U.S. Representative Gregory W. Meeks Supports the DR-CAFTA,” Congressional Press Release, July 28, 2005.

⁷ “Thomas Sees China Action Before Final House Vote on CAFTA,” *Inside U.S. Trade*, July 1, 2005.