

For Immediate Release:
March 9, 2011

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USTR Kirk at Senate Finance Committee: Bad Policy, Bad Politics

Labor, Environmental, Consumer, Faith and Family Farm Groups Oppose the Three Leftover Bush Free Trade Agreements

Washington, DC — A coalition of labor, environmental, consumer, faith, family farm and other organizations escalated their national campaign to build public and Congressional opposition to three Bush-negotiated free trade agreements as U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk appeared before the Senate Finance Committee today to discuss plans to move the Korea, Colombia and Panama pacts. Kirk requested that Congress approve the Korea Free Trade Agreement this spring, and told senators that his office was working to resolve remaining issues with the Colombia and Panama agreements this year.

“Free trade’ policies designed to protect multinationals have not helped working families and have facilitated the transfer of work and jobs overseas,” said **R. Thomas Buffenbarger**, president of the International Association of Machinists. “The U.S. needs to change these flawed trade policies and take significant action to support our manufacturing base, the bedrock of the real economy.”

"We desperately need to reverse direction and protect our economy instead of giving it away to our diplomatic partners. The last thing America's middle class needs right now is 'Son of NAFTA,'" said **Jim Hoffa**, general president of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters.

"It is long past due that common sense be applied to the issue of international trade. For the better part of two decades Americans have been told that free trade is good for workers and consumers. In reality, trade policies have benefited multi-national corporations and their top executives," said **Edwin D. Hill**, president of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers.

Kirk testified that his office is ready to work with Congress to draft implementing legislation for the Korea FTA now. He also said that it is working to prepare the Colombia Free Trade Agreement for Congressional approval this year, implying that significant progress on the human rights catastrophe there can be made that quickly. At least 42 Colombian trade unionists were murdered in 2010 alone, with documented death threats made against nearly 300 — most with complete impunity.

“We came to the conclusion that the Korea Free Trade Agreement would undermine U.S. economic interests and damage the manufacturing sectors where our members work, and we oppose its passage,” said **Leo Gerard**, president of the United Steelworkers. “We continue to oppose the Colombia Free Trade Agreement based upon the continuation of anti-union violence and impunity in Colombia. Despite a new Administration in Colombia, mere statements of intent are not enough to make Colombia eligible for the privilege of a free trade agreement. Promises can be broken as easily as they are made.”

“Both workers rights and Afro-Colombian human rights organizations have outlined minimal specific steps that must be taken to resolve the outstanding issues. It is the assessment of our partners that such minimum requirements have not been met,” said **Nicole Lee**, president of TransAfrica Forum. “Labor and human rights violations, as well as forced internal displacement, continue unabated.”

Citizens Trade Campaign is a coalition of fair trade advocates with a combined membership of more than 11 million Americans. The coalition points out that the pending free trade agreements will not only have significant policy ramifications, but political ramifications, as well.

“Members of Congress need to think ahead to 2012 before jumping off the cliff in support of any of these trade agreements,” said **Arthur Stamoulis**, executive director of Citizens Trade Campaign. “These types of policies are extremely unpopular with Democratic, Republican and Independent voters alike. Supporting any of them comes with serious political risks attached.”

"Of course Republicans are chastizing the administration for not moving quickly enough to pass Bush's NAFTA-style trade deals with Korea, Colombia and Panama because they know doing so will do horrible political damage to the Democrats while benefitting GOP campaign donors in the banking and securities, agribusiness and manufacturing offshoring sectors," said **Lori Wallach**, director of Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch.

“We need fair trade deals that hold foreign companies accountable to our laws and benefit workers, public health and the environment,” said **Erich Pica**, president of Friends of the Earth. “The Korea trade pact replicates some of the worst aspects of NAFTA. It offered a chance to usher in a new era of trade policy, but it fails that test.”

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Citizens Trade Campaign is a national coalition of labor, environmental, consumer, faith, family farm and civil society organizations working together to improve trade policy.

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