

HOUSE DEMOCRATS UNDER PRESSURE AFTER VOTES FOR DR-CAFTA

Several of the 15 Democrats who bucked party leaders and voted in favor of the Dominican Republic-Central American Free Trade Agreement late last month are coming under heavy pressure from organized labor and other groups. In some cases, these critics are calling on Democratic leaders to withdraw committee assignments from pro-DR-CAFTA Democrats, and in others they are actively supporting candidates to challenge them in Democratic primaries.

Two New York House Democrats, Reps. Gregory Meeks and Edolphus Towns, appear to be under the most scrutiny, as both were widely seen as being able to vote against DR-CAFTA without any repercussions in their heavily Democratic districts, according to congressional and industry sources. The two also were the subjects of an Aug. 7 rally in New York sponsored by the Working Families Party (WFP), which announced an information campaign targeting their constituents.

WFP also released an Aug. 7 letter to House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) signed by representatives of several New York labor and community groups urging Pelosi to remove Meeks and Towns from their seats on, respectively, the Financial Services and Energy and Commerce committees.

A source with the Working Families Party said the group endorsed Meeks for Congress in 2000, 2002 and in 2004, and that it endorsed Towns in 2004. It did not support Towns in 2002, and it supported another candidate in the primary election against Towns in 2000. The source said no decision has been made yet on whether to support or oppose either candidate in 2006.

Both Towns and Meeks are in solidly Democratic districts, and would be expected to win general elections against Republican opponents. They also face criticism because by voting for DR-CAFTA, they allowed two GOP House members to vote against it, sources said.

But singling out Meeks and Towns for criticism would be difficult given that both are members of the Congressional Black Caucus, a powerful group of House Democrats, two Democratic sources said.

Separately, Henry Cuellar (D-TX) faces primary opposition from the Democrat he defeated in 2004, who is being supported by several labor groups including the United Steelworks of America. USAW's field political director, Chuck Rocha, said Cuellar is the group's number one target in the Democratic primary because of his support for DR-CAFTA as well as other legislation opposed by the union. Rochas said USAW wants to make an example of Cuellar to other Democrats.

Other Democrats that have come under criticism for their DR-CAFTA votes include Reps. Melissa Bean (D-IL), Jim Cooper (D-TN), Steve Latourette (D-OH) and Jim Matheson (D-UT), union officials said. The 15 Democrats who voted for DR-CAFTA are Bean, Cooper, Cuellar, Matheson, Meeks, Towns, Norman Dicks (D-WA), Ruben Hinojosa (D-TX), William Jefferson (D-LA), Dennis Moore (D-KS), Jim Moran (D-VA), Solomon Ortiz (D-TX), Ike Skelton (D-MO), Vic Snyder (D-AR) and John Tanner (D-TN).

Pelosi and other Democratic leaders met on July 28, a day after the House approved the DR-CAFTA by a vote of 217-215, to discuss why 15 Democrats decided to support the agreement, sources said. These sources said that meeting ended without conclusions and mostly served as an opportunity for Democratic members to let off steam about the disappointing vote.

One private-sector source said the purpose of the meeting was to figure out how to impose more discipline on members in key votes.

But other sources said it would be difficult to punish any members for voting for DR-CAFTA, particularly given the fact that Democratic leaders chose not to formally whip against it. This strategic decision was made, sources said, because Democratic leaders believed formal whipping would backfire by turning the vote into even more of a partisan issue. This might have led more Republican opponents of DR-CAFTA to vote for it, these sources said.

At the same time, while there was no formal whipping, the Democratic leadership was working hard to shore up opposition to the deal, sources said.

Another reason it will be difficult for leadership to punish any of the CAFTA-15 is because Democrats themselves are drawing distinctions between DR-CAFTA supporters. Some of them warned leaders months in advance of the vote that they would be supporting DR-CAFTA because it was popular in their districts, they said. Other members, such as Meeks and Towns, had no good local district reasons to vote for the agreement, these sources charged.

In addition, trade votes have historically not been seen as party-line votes, leaving Democratic members free to

vote their conscience, a congressional aide said.

Punishing members who voted for DR-CAFTA could also anger the business community, a Democratic business source said. "I think Pelosi needs to understand that trade is a losing issue for Democrats," said this source, who added that punishing Democrats who voted for the deal would "alienate and infuriate" the business community. "The anti-trade Democrats have lost this issue and they need to let it go," this source said.

Meeks defended his vote for DR-CAFTA in a number of public statements, including on Aug. 7, one day after the rally against him and Towns in New York. He said the agreement would benefit his district, which includes John F. Kennedy Airport. He said his vote would increase the economic opportunities for tens of thousands of people employed or doing business with the airport.

But the advocacy group Public Citizen, which opposed DR-CAFTA, disputed this argument in an Aug. 1 release, arguing that employment at JFK was unlikely to rise as a result of an increase in shipping from Central America countries.

Meeks also said his vote reflected the desires of constituents from the Dominican Republic and five Central American countries to see economic conditions in their native countries improve. He also defended his overall record as positive toward labor and working families.

"CAFTA is just one issue where my friends in organized labor and I respectfully disagree," Meeks said in the Aug. 7 statement. "It is my hope that we will come together as we have on so many other issues in the past and work side-by-side for the working families of our nation," Meeks concluded.

Separately, Central American countries are unlikely to accept demands for changing the sock provisions of the DR-CAFTA that the administration has promised to seek in a letter to Rep. Robert Aderholt (R-AL) to garner his vote for DR-CAFTA, according to private-sector sources. So far, the administration has not raised the issue with Central American governments, they said.

The administration told Aderholt it would seek a change that would have tariffs on socks phased-out over 10 years instead of being eliminated immediately, as would presently happen under DR-CAFTA. As an alternative, the administration said it would seek a rules of origin change that would require that the rules revert back to current rules under a preference agreement with the six countries. Under those rules, knit-to-shape socks can be sewn shut in the region and then sent to the U.S. duty-free. DR-CAFTA would allow the entire production of the socks to be done in the region.

Regardless of whether the Central American countries and the Dominican Republic agree to these changes, the administration also pledged to look favorably on the use of a safeguard on socks in the DR-CAFTA that would bump tariffs to most-favored-nation level for a maximum of three years.

One private-sector source predicted two changes the administration is seeking are important enough that the six countries might choose to simply not agree to them and live with the possible use of the safeguard. They may ask for concessions unrelated to textiles and apparel, this source said.

Hood Harris, Aderholt's chief of staff, said the Bush Administration would not have made the commitments to Aderholt in writing if they did not believe they could get the six countries to agree to them.