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Colombia Trade pact: Deal could hurt workers

By Thomas Wyka

Rep. Rodney P. Frelinghuysen, R-Harding, spoke of his recent trip to Colombia in his email newsletter last week, praising a plan promoted by the Bush Administration to establish a Free Trade Agreement. The Democrats in Congress decided to call a time out on such deals over concerns that there are not adequate considerations for protection of workers, which makes sense given our economic state.

We haven't had a great track record when it comes to these agreements, and the results have damaged the credibility of "free trade" proponents.

Years ago, the Department of Labor certified that over a half million U.S. workers had to apply for extensions of benefits in the mid 1990's under the Clinton administration when their jobs left the country as a result of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Ross Perot famously described this debacle as the "great sucking sound."

The actual U.S. job loss number may have been even much higher because of workers unaware of the availability of the special extension provision. The results weren't much better to the south where it's reported that millions more Mexicans entered the ranks of the impoverished, even when it was thought that the jobs from the north would fill the void.

The net loss of jobs in Mexico increased immigration north to this country in a peculiar cycle of degrading labor opportunities. In regard to the current agreement on the table with Columbia, even as China and India are popular destination for outsourced jobs, South America is also becoming a new viable location as well.

The public all over the globe is becoming distrustful of these deals, which aren't just about simply opening the gates in the name of a free flow of goods. They are sometimes about manipulating rules for maximizing multi-national corporate profits and not providing enough protection for workers and the environment.

A BBC world service poll noted this distrust, citing that, "In 22 out of 34 countries around the world, the weight of opinion is that economic globalization, including trade and investment, is growing too quickly."

But there are moral issues at stake here as well, as we rush along to put these deals in place. The leadership in Columbia has a disturbing track record of human rights violations.

Just being involved in a labor union in Columbia means taking your life in your hands. In 2007, 39 trade unionists were murdered.

While Frelinghuysen praises the Columbian government for "improving its human rights record," Rep. Earl Blumenauer, D-Oregon, a member of the Ways and Means Subcommittee on Trade, noted "news reports of the 'demonization' of human rights defenders as supporters of the FARC (a South American Terrorist group) and allegations of cover-ups of extrajudicial killings by the Colombian government have only reinforced my belief that this trade agreement is not ready for consideration."

Blumenauer further observed that "the prism through which I view the pending agreement with Colombia is whether it will advance our moral responsibility to help put Colombian society back together again after years of civil war and human rights abuses."

I tend to think this is consistent with how a majority of Americans view our moral standing as a country. Why should we rush to reward those who have not sufficiently proven a basic respect for human rights?

For now -- the Democratic Congress has put the breaks on these deals, as it considers their worth to our economic goals and our moral standing. As much as President Bush and maybe even Frelinghuysen might complain, it's the right thing to do.
