

Trading Secrets

Posted on May 22, 2007

By **Amy Goodman**

The Democratic Party leadership is stabbing its base in the back with secret “free trade” deals made behind closed doors with the White House. Now congressional Democrats may be on the verge of a significant split. While Democratic leaders and President Bush do the hard sell on bipartisan immigration reform, they are now pushing secret, anti-worker, anti-environment trade agreements that will only exacerbate U.S. immigration problems.

The contentious agreements are bilateral trade deals between the U.S. and Peru, Panama, Colombia and South Korea. The deals were announced in a bipartisan press conference May 10, with principal credit going to Rep. Charles Rangel, D-N.Y., the chair of the House Ways and Means Committee (long dubbed by some as the “Ways to be Mean” Committee). According to Inside U.S. Trade, as noted by blogger David Sirota, House Democrats admit that the White House is drafting the legal language of the trade deals.

Rick MacArthur, publisher of Harper’s Magazine and author of the book “The Selling of ‘Free Trade’: NAFTA, Washington, and the Subversion of American Democracy,” calls these agreements “a fundraising gambit by the House leadership.”

He told me: “Rangel and [Speaker Nancy] Pelosi are saying, ‘Well, we’re gearing up for the 2008 election. We’ve got to raise a lot of money.’ They’re closer to the Clinton wing of the party, which is the pro-so-called-free-trade wing of the party, the pro-NAFTA, pro-permanent-normal-trade-relations-with-China part of the party. And this is a way of saying to the corporate community—Wall Street, Wal-Mart—that we’re open for business, we want to raise money from you.” In order to compete for campaign money, the logic goes, the Democrats have to cater to big corporate donors.

MacArthur points out that the agreements with the four small countries are not key. The big money, he says, lies with China. This is where Hillary Clinton comes in. She served on the Wal-Mart board of directors for six years when her husband was the governor of Arkansas (where Wal-Mart is based). Wal-Mart, MacArthur says, “depends on dedicated factories in China, where you cannot form a labor union. Wildcat strikes are met with violence. You get your head busted or you get thrown in jail.”

The corporate Democrats and their Republican allies are promising labor and environmental protections. But 13 years after NAFTA passed, with President Clinton orchestrating pork-barrel payouts to buy the vote, promised safeguards have proved unenforceable: Workers, especially in Mexico, earn low wages with little or no security, while companies crush union-organizing efforts and pollute with impunity. As jobs move to Mexico, China and other low-wage havens, the U.S. is the loser. Sen. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, knows it all too well: “We see that kind of job loss in the thousands ... devastates communities. It hurts the local business owner, the drugstore, the grocery store, the neighborhood restaurant. It hurts communities. It hurts schools. It hurts police forces. It hurts fire departments.”

Sen. Russ Feingold, D-Wis., also slammed the trade deals, saying it was as if “the foxes and wolves had reached a deal on guarding the henhouse.” He went on: “I wish I could lay the blame at the feet of our colleagues in the other party. But members of both parties have aided and abetted these flawed policies.”

Feingold pointed out that the trade deals have not been endorsed by any union or environment groups, but they have been endorsed by three of the most powerful organizations representing corporate interests: the Business Roundtable, the National Association of Manufacturers and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

If the Washington power brokers are betting on Americans not understanding or caring about arcane trade policy, they should recall the Battle of Seattle. In late 1999, when the World Trade Organization tried to meet in Seattle to impose global corporate trade policies, it was met by tens of thousands of protesters, from Teamsters to environmentalists, healthcare workers to students to farmworkers. The meetings were shut down. Compound this potential backlash with the millions of hardworking immigrants now staring down the barrel of another bipartisan agreement. These are the people who took to the streets in the millions last year.

When the rules are rigged to allow money to move freely across borders, then people will follow. Falling wages south of the border, caused by “free trade,” drive people north—no matter how high the wall or how many detention facilities are built to contain them. Make no mistake about it—trade and immigration are linked.

Amy Goodman is the host of “Democracy Now!,” a daily international TV/radio news hour airing on 500 stations in North America.