

Lawmakers, citing Obama, urge US redo trade deals

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WASHINGTON, June 4 (Reuters) - The United States would review and potentially renegotiate all existing U.S. trade deals under a bill introduced on Wednesday by Democratic Party lawmakers as a marker for next year.

Ohio Sen. Sherrod Brown and other speakers from a coalition of labor, farm and environmental groups said they looked to Barack Obama, who clinched the Democratic presidential nomination on Tuesday, to provide leadership for a new direction in U.S. trade policy.

"I think the public ... has spoken so loudly and clearly we will see a different trade policy" no matter if Obama or Republican candidate John McCain is elected, said Brown, one of several lawmakers whose criticism of trade agreements helped them win office in 2006.

"President Obama will take it faster, will move in the direction the public is absolutely crying for. President McCain will need to be dragged into a very different trade policy, but I think he's going to have to listen," Brown said.

The bill lays out new labor, environmental, food safety, investment, intellectual property, anti-dumping and other standards for trade agreements.

It also sets a June 2010 deadline for the U.S. Government Accountability Office to review existing trade deals — including the North American Free Trade Agreement, the 1994 pact that created the World Trade Organization and more recent accords with Central American countries.

The president would be required to submit a plan for renegotiating existing trade pacts at least 90 days before starting talks on any new trade deal or submitting an already-negotiated trade deal for congressional approval.

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Brown acknowledged it was too late for the bill he crafted with Rep. Mike Michaud, a Maine Democrat, to pass this year.

But lawmakers opposed to NAFTA, and newer trade deals negotiated by President George W. Bush, want to begin early to influence trade policy in the next administration, he said.

Obama has shored up support among labor groups and other trade deal critics by promising to renegotiate NAFTA to include stronger labor and environmental provisions and by opposing pending trade deals with Colombia and South Korea.

In a conference call with House of Representatives Democrats, Obama “made it very clear if he’s elected president he will want to establish his own trade policies,” Michaud said. “He understands the devastation that trade has caused to the American people and how flawed these trade deals are.”

Labor groups joined the Sierra Club, the National Farmers Union and Public Citizen in backing the legislation. They blame trade deals for millions of lost manufacturing jobs by encouraging U.S. companies to move overseas.

“I’ve been out campaigning for Barack Obama and I have talked to people, thousands of people, who’ve lost their jobs because of trade agreements,” said James Hoffa, president of the Teamsters union.

Defenders say technology and productivity gains account for most U.S. job losses and the trade deals help the U.S. economy by boosting exports.

“If this legislation becomes law it would be extremely harmful, I think, and it would slow down any advances we want to make on the trade front,” said Christopher Wenk, director of international policy for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

(Editing by Xavier Briand)

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