

**Editorial**

## Selling to Colombia

**March 1, 2008**

The U.S. House this week approved an extension of the Andean Trade Preference Act, which reduces duties on goods imported from Latin America. If the Senate concurs, that would keep such favorable trade treatment in place until the end of the year. Nothing new there -- this has been U.S. policy since 1991.

So almost all goods from, say, Colombia, would continue to come into the U.S. duty-free. But U.S. goods still face stiff tariffs in Colombia. A bill that would help American exports and workers, the U.S. Free Trade Agreement with Colombia, has languished on Capitol Hill for more than a year.

The Colombia trade deal would remove duties on all U.S. farm exports and 80 percent of other U.S. exports to the South American nation.

Yes, we're talking about opening up markets for U.S. goods. So what's not to like?

Well, a lot of Democrats don't like the trade deal and don't like Colombia. The deal has run into particularly stiff opposition from organized labor in the U.S.

Labor says the U.S. shouldn't open more trade to Colombia until that nation cracks down on an array of human rights violations and more aggressively pursues those responsible for killing Colombian labor leaders.

It's time to recognize, though, that Colombia under President Alvaro Uribe has accomplished a great, great deal. Violence has declined, including violence aimed at labor leaders. Uribe and his allies are making progress on the economy, drug trafficking, social services and the judicial system.

"These guys have shown they can deliver, and they have delivered," said U.S. Trade Representative Susan Schwab in a recent visit to the Tribune editorial board.

If you don't want to take the word of the Bush administration on this, listen to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a non-partisan Washington research group that focuses on defense and security.

CSIS, evaluating Colombia's progress since 1999, said: "While many countries in Latin America have made strides in one or more areas in past decades, few have achieved gains over such a broad range and none in the face of the adverse circumstances confronting Colombia. At the same time, daunting challenges to the well-being of Colombians and to democratic governance remain in place."

CSIS cites the work of an independent Medellin labor organization, the Escuela Nacional Sindical. That group reported that attacks on labor leaders rose steeply in the mid-1990s, then fell, rose again in 2003-04, but have since declined.

The "general decrease in the principal indices of violence against unionized workers constitutes one of the most positive factors in 2005 ... the year with the least amount of anti-union violence in the last five years," ENS reported. That downward trend continued in 2006 and 2007.

In May, the Bush administration and Democratic leaders negotiated a groundbreaking pact to include protection for workers' rights and safeguards for the environment in this and other pending free-trade agreements. That agreement answers the other key concerns about the Colombia deal.

Approving this trade agreement would help solidify the progress made by the Uribe government, help U.S. farmers and create jobs right here at home.