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Labor labels Congressmen Meeks, Towns sellouts over CAFTA

by Allen, Zita

Comments

Labor unions, community groups, and the Working Families Party have targeted Congressmen Gregory Meeks (D-Queens) and Edolphus Towns (D-Brooklyn) for supporting the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) recently passed by Congress.

In a letter to House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, New York labor leaders charged Meeks and Towns with not acting "on behalf of workers here in the United States and across Central America." Instead, they charged the two sided with "multinational corporations that want to sell off U.S. jobs to the lowest bidder" and asked that they be removed from prime congressional committees.

That letter is just one mechanism that the labor movement around the country is using to lash out at the 15 Democrats in the House of Representatives and 10 in the Senate who voted for CAFTA.

"They need to hear there are consequences for sellout votes like this," said John Sweeney, president of the AFL-CIO.

Critics say Meeks' and Towns' votes on CAFTA will speed U.S. job loss and plant closings triggered by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports New York has lost 219,700 manufacturing jobs since NAFTA. Of those, 61,435 were caused by manufacturers relocating overseas.

Brian McLaughlin, head of the 1 million member New York Central Labor Council, says Pelosi is not the only one who will be getting a letter from labor leaders. In the next few weeks, area labor unions plan to send letters to their members who live in Meeks' and Towns' districts. Those letters will inform them that their elected representatives passed up an opportunity to support "working families in New York and across the United States."

In an interview with the Amsterdam News, Meeks defended his CAFTA vote, saying it was the result of "a long deliberative process" that included talks with American labor, business, and congressional leaders, and heads of state in Central and South America.

Outraged at the charge that his vote was motivated by personal gain, Meeks pointed to his overall 92 percent approval rating from the AFL-CIO.

"Even when I voted for labor's issues it was because of what I believe in. I'm not for sale to anyone," he said.

Meeks pointed to high unemployment among Black men in his district, saying conversations with employers convinced him that CAFTA will result in "a net gain of jobs for New York." To counter labor's letter-writing campaign, Meeks says he plans to explain his vote to his own constituents.

Machinists Union's Joseph Conigliano is one of the labor leaders who thinks Meeks and Towns "betrayed" his members. Conigliano says that when it comes to future campaign contributions, both congressmen can both "fuggedabout it."

United Auto Workers Political Director Dwight Loines cites the imminent closing of Cooper Independent, a Brooklyn plant where members of his union work. Loines said they are watching their jobs being shipped off to Mexico as a result of the North American Free Trade Agreement.

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