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HEADLINE: Obama Trade Agenda Stresses Enforcement

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BODY:

U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk chose an apt setting in U.S. Steel's Mon Valley Works to pledge a more aggressive posture against international trade practices he considers unfair, saying he wanted workers there to know "this administration has their backs in the global trading system."

But the chief trade emissary's June 16 message to steel workers and executives was meant to carry much farther than Pittsburgh, where the once-dominant industry has shrunk and evolved over the past two decades amid competition from China -- and long-running battles over whether Beijing unfairly dumps its steel products in the United States.

By intensifying its focus on the enforcement of trade laws, while putting a lower priority on further action on new trade agreements, the Obama administration is aiming a message directly at Congress, where the prevailing attitude toward free trade is hesitancy.

The emphasis on enforcement comes as stakeholders on all sides of the trade debate wait to see how the administration sketches out a broader picture of its agenda and whether President Obama will reshape and rebuild support for trade liberalization, particularly by addressing such broader labor-related concerns as the enforcement of U.S. trade laws.

But the president's attempt to placate varying views on trade is leaving both ardent free-traders and skeptics dissatisfied.

The chief trade negotiator's role -- brokering trade deals, which are subject to congressional approval, and assuring that U.S. trade laws written by Congress are adhered to -- means that his or her success depends on paying close attention to Congress, even more than is the case with some other Cabinet officials.

Since his confirmation in March, Kirk has been getting an earful from members of Congress on their desire to see U.S. trade laws enforced. Many lawmakers accused the George W. Bush administration of foot-dragging when it came to filing or pursuing trade complaints on behalf of American companies and unions.

In his speech last week, Kirk promised that his office would work to identify and deal with trade barriers abroad that affect the U.S. agricultural industry, such as sanitary measures or technical barriers put up by countries to keep out American goods.

He promised to increase his office's coordination with the State, Labor and Commerce departments to respond to trade barriers, and he pledged more proactive scrutiny of other countries' labor practices that put American workers at a disadvantage.

"To date, we have enforced our trading partners' labor obligations only on a complaint-driven basis. Well, no longer," Kirk said, adding that his agency, along with the State and Labor departments, would "immediately identify and investigate labor violations . . . before they can disadvantage American workers."

Kirk hit many of the right buttons with influential members of Congress. Senate Finance Chairman Max Baucus, D-Mont., immediately praised him for mentioning the need to take a hard line against Canada in a softwood lumber dispute affecting the Montana timber industry.

Buying Time

Focusing on enforcement allows Kirk leeway as the administration figures out whether, and when, to deal with trade pacts with Panama, Colombia and South Korea left over from the Bush administration. His pledge earlier this year to quickly deliver the Panama deal to Congress drew criticism from many House lawmakers who want a wholesale reshaping of U.S. trade policy, and that particular matter appeared to return to the back burner.

The House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Trade, chaired by Sander M. Levin, D-Mich., will hold a hearing Tuesday morning on the system of private sector advisory committees that advise U.S. trade negotiators on trade-related issues. Levin advocates a new negotiating approach that places a greater emphasis on labor rights and environmental standards.

Groups advocating a strong free-trade agenda have been supportive of Obama's public free-trade sentiments -- particularly his opposition to a border tariff in House climate change legislation -- but frustrated with a lack of actual movement on the long-stalled trade deals. The generally pro-business Democratic Leadership Council released a study Monday praising Obama's early free-trade moves but calling the administration's approach to the leftover trade deals "tentative and perhaps internally divided."

With support for free trade diminishing significantly in Congress in recent years, Obama and Kirk have sent mixed messages.

Daniel Griswold, director of the Center for Trade Policy Studies at the libertarian Cato Institute, argued that Kirk's approach was misguided.

"All this talk about enforcement is a political dodge to avoid the hard questions about trade expansion," Griswold said. "By and large, our trading partners and us are following most of our trade commitments."

Other free-traders were generally supportive of Obama's stance but circumspect.

"We look forward to hearing about the other legs of the administration's trade policy soon," said William A. Reinsch, president of the National Foreign Trade Council.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce notes that the United States does not always meet its trade obligations, citing U.S. restrictions on Mexican trucks crossing the border -- a practice that drew trade retaliation from Mexico.

Even House members pressing for a greater focus on enforcement were not impressed with Kirk's comments, illustrating the level of discontent with trade policy in regions dependent on manufacturing, a sector that has experienced significant downsizing in the past two decades.

"Ambassador Kirk's words sound fine, but we've heard all of this before, and nothing is ever done for workers," House Rules Chairwoman Louise M. Slaughter, D-N.Y., said in a statement. She called for a fundamental change to the

way the government negotiates trade pacts.

Slaughter raised the case of Buffalo Color, a Buffalo, N.Y., firm that made indigo dye and was pounded by Chinese dumping, according to a ruling by the International Trade Commission (ITC). She accused the Bush administration of inadequately pursuing the matter, leading the company to go out of business.

Echoing that theme, Phil Hare, D-Ill., called for "throwing out the three pending Bush-negotiated trade agreements" and passing stronger trade enforcement legislation.

Members of Congress will be closely observing whether -- and how -- the administration keeps its vow to enforce trade laws.

Last week, 11 senators wrote to Obama, asking him to put restrictions on imports of passenger and light-truck tires from China, following a June ruling by the ITC that import surges had hurt U.S. tire industry workers. The lawmakers said it would be a signal "that you intend to keep your promise to enforce trade laws fully."

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