



Dem Trade Aide Touts TPP As Way To Improve Vietnamese Labor Rights

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The chief trade adviser for Democrats on the House Ways and Means last month argued that the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations provide an opportunity for the U.S. to press for improvements to labor rights in Vietnam, putting him in line with the Obama administration ▼ but at odds with some House Democrats and unions who have raised questions about Vietnam's participation in the trade talks due to reported labor rights violations there.

"In the case of Vietnam, a lot of people question whether we should be negotiating a free trade agreement with a country that has a pretty poor record on labor rights, human rights," Jason Kearns, chief trade counsel for Ways and Means Democrats, said at a Sept. 20 event at the **Cato Institute**. "I think, again from our perspective, we see this as an opportunity to make progress on that issue, where we wouldn't otherwise have that opportunity as well."

House Education and Workforce Committee Ranking Member George Miller (D-CA) has questioned whether Vietnam would be able to comply with the high-standard labor obligations in TPP, given its history of labor violations. In a July 24 letter, Miller asked Froman to assess whether Vietnam is "currently in compliance with the obligations under the basic labor standards described in the Bipartisan Trade Agreement of May 10, 2007."

Among other things, the "May 10" agreement raised the labor standards in the most recent U.S. trade deals by requiring countries to uphold, in their laws and regulations, the basic labor rights enshrined in the 1998 ILO Declaration on Fundamental Rights and Principles at Work.

Froman responded in an Aug. 14 letter that, by including Vietnam in the TPP negotiations, "we have an additional mechanism to improve adherence to labor rights and working conditions in Vietnam that would not exist otherwise." He also said the administration would work with Vietnam to ensure it undertakes reforms needed to comply with its TPP obligations on labor.

Some unions and non-governmental organizations, including the Teamsters, have gone even further than Miller and called on the Obama administration ▼ to suspend talks with Vietnam in TPP until it can meet basic labor and human rights standards (Inside U.S. Trade, July 26).

Kearns serves as chief trade adviser to House Ways and Means Committee Ranking Member Sander Levin (D-MI) and other Democrats on the committee.

After the Obama administration ▼ first announced it would go forward with participating in TPP in November 2009, Levin said he supported the possibility that Vietnam -- which was then only an observer

-- could eventually join TPP. But he said it was important that Vietnam was handled in the right way because its participation could pose particular problems with respect to labor rights and intellectual property protection (Inside U.S. Trade, Nov. 20, 2009).