

Stalling free trade

by The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

The compromise struck by the White House and congressional Democrats on trade last month is the kind of bipartisan effort that most Americans would like to see.

Led by Rep. Charles Rangel, D-N.Y., the Democrats would get environmental and worker protections in several pending trade pacts. And the Bush administration would get the ability to move swiftly ahead with the deals. To his credit, Rangel fought tighter and unnecessary controls sought by his party's protectionist labor wing.

While it's possible the compromise Rangel brokered could become a template for other agreements and perhaps even a worldwide accord, hopes are dimming. Deals with Panama and Peru are still held up, as are harder-to-reach pacts with Colombia and South Korea. In a sign of the Democrats' concerns, presidential candidate Sen. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y., last week indicated she would oppose the South Korea deal.

The new protections worked out by Rangel for foreign workers and the environment are sensible and not overly burdensome. They would guarantee workers the right to organize, ban child labor and prohibit forced labor in trading-partner countries. Trading partners also would have to enforce environmental laws already on their books and comply with international environmental agreements.

Congress should insist on such protections. But it shouldn't try to put up a stop sign. Free trade benefits American workers by opening new markets to American products. The goal should be a global agreement as well as bilateral deals. But with presidential politics already playing a role, it's looking less likely that the sensible middle is going to win on this issue.

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