

Obama says no trade pacts without restoring aid for workers

WASHINGTON, D.C. (PAI)—The Obama Administration is telling backers of so-called “free trade” treaties with Colombia, Panama, and South Korea, that the president will not submit the pacts to lawmakers unless they first restore aid for workers who lose their jobs to imports.

And while the White House has begun talks with key lawmakers on legislation to implement the treaties, the pacts have yet to be formally sent to Capitol Hill.

The most-controversial pact, and the one that draws unanimous labor ire, is with Colombia. In recent years 2,580 unionists there have been assassinated, virtually all by right-wing paramilitaries. The latest attack the week of May 13 was of labor lawyer Hernan Dario in downtown Cali. There has been little prosecution in Colombia.

The biggest pact in economic terms is with South Korea. It’s the largest since the North American Free Trade Agreement more than 15 years ago. But unions are split on that pact.

After the United Auto Workers (UAW) and Michigan lawmakers won up to eight years more in U.S. tariffs on imported Korean cars and trucks — while lifting Korean tariffs on U.S. cars and parts — UAW supported the pact.

So does United Food and Commercial Workers.

But the AFL-CIO and most other unions oppose the Korean pact, saying

it would give too much power to multinationals and does not adequately protect workers’ rights in either country.

All three pacts are hung up because the Republican-controlled House let the expanded aid for workers who lose their jobs to imports, called Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA), lapse. Now the Obama Administration wants TAA renewed and expanded, first.

“This administration believes that just as we should be excited about the

prospect of selling more of what we make around the world, we have to be equally firm about keeping faith with America’s workers” by renewing and expanding TAA, Obama’s U.S. Trade Representative, Ron Kirk, told trade beat reporters.

Until an expansion included in the stimulus law, TAA was restricted to workers who could directly prove they lost their jobs to below-cost imports. In the stimulus law it was expanded to

suppliers and also to workers whose jobs depended on business from workers who had lost their jobs to imports.

In other words, TAA used to be just for workers who could prove their plant closed due to foreign competition. The stimulus law expanded it to include suppliers of parts for that plant — and to the nearby diner where plant workers ate.

Those new sections of the law lapsed in February. Obama and Kirk want

them reinstated before they send the Korea, Colombia and Panama pacts to Congress.

Some top congressional Democrats have told the White House they may not support the trade pacts unless the expanded TAA is renewed. That’s important: The pacts were negotiated under now-dead presidential “fast track” trade authority, so Congress can’t attach conditions to them, but must vote the pacts up or down as they are written.

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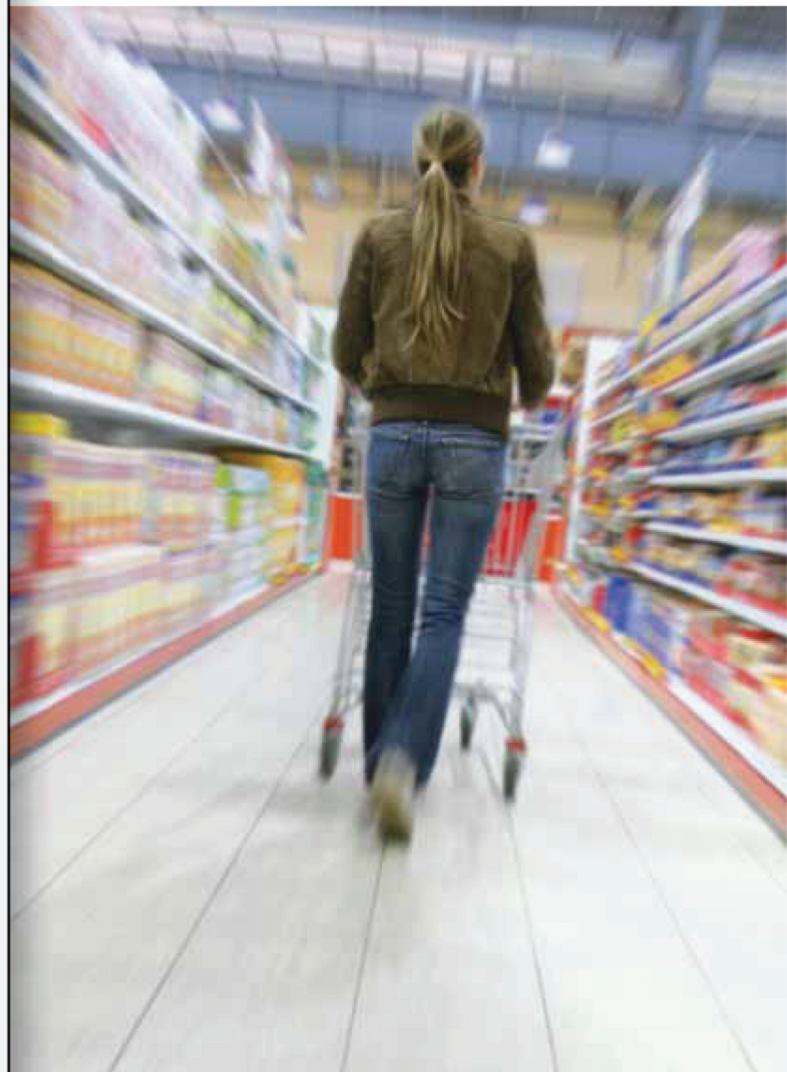
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Summer School set Aug. 5-7 in Eugene

EUGENE—The Oregon AFL-CIO Summer School is scheduled Aug. 5-7 at the University of Oregon.

In addition to workshops, classes, and entertainment, this year’s guest speaker will be Wisconsin AFL-CIO Legislative Director Joanne Ricca.

“Come ready to learn, share experiences, get to know other union brothers and sisters from Oregon, and enjoy the solidarity,” said Helen Moss of the Labor Education and Research Center at UO, which co-hosts the event with the state labor federation.

Registration is \$230 for commuters. Rates are available for lodging at university dorms.

For more information, call Moss at 503-412-3722 or by e-mail at hmosse@uoregon.edu.

N.J. workers first in nation to ratify Comcast contract

Seventy-five installation repair technicians at Comcast in Fairfield, N.J., made history again May 9 by becoming the first Comcast worksite in the country to ratify a first contract. Last year, the workers were the first Comcast employees to form a union, voting for Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 827. Comcast is the nation’s largest cable company.