NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

CRAIN'S, DECEMBER 17-23, 2001

Partisan votes strangle free trade

NO CITY IN THE COUNTRY BENEFITS MORE FROM FREE trade than New York. Given that, how can the city's entire congressional delegation, with the exception of Republican Vito Fossella of Staten Island, oppose legislation to give President Bush expanded authority to negotiate trade agreements? The answer, regrettably, is that New York City Democrats give more weight to the campaign contributions they receive from organized labor than to the interests of their own constituents. It is a cause of great embarrassment.

The numbers go something like this. New York state exported $34 billion in services alone in 2000, supporting about 195,000 jobs. Almost all of those are in the city and downstate. Shipments through the Port of New York and New Jersey exceeded $80 billion, and accounted for another 74,000 jobs. JFK International Airport handled 1.4 million tons of cargo. Most of its passenger traffic was international, as well. The jobs created—207,000.

With the exception of a few remaining manufacturers, virtually all businesses in New York benefit directly from freer trade.

It is true that many of the city's most liberal Democrats are unlikely to buck the AFL-CIO on any issue of importance. But three Democrats in particular ignored their constituents' needs.

Manhattan Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney voted against free trade authority. She represents most of midtown, which is almost certainly home to more companies with international operations than any other district in the country.

Queens Congressman Greg Meeks, whose district includes JFK, where thousands of his constituents hold jobs, voted no.

Manhattan Congressman Charles Rangel, who could have delivered important Democratic votes and who has helped push through free trade bills in the past, instead cast a vote that reflects his increasing partisanship. As a result, one of his cherished accomplishments, a free trade arrangement for African textiles, will be gutted, hurting both African countries and entrepreneurs in Harlem who could have built businesses on such trade.

The House passed free trade authority by one vote. But other votes loom. Local businesspeople need to again explain the economics to their representatives.

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