

# Spanking The CAFTA 15

Jonathan Tasini

July 29, 2005



*Jonathan Tasini is president of the Economic Future Group and writes his "Working In America" columns for TomPaine.com on an occasional basis. His blog [Working Life](#) chronicles the labor movement and other issues affecting American workers.*

**Enough is enough.** The 15 so-called Democrats who voted for the Central American Free Trade Agreement must pay a heavy price for turning their backs on labor: None of them should receive a dime from labor unions and each one should face a labor-backed primary challenger next year. And the recruitment of good candidates should start now. If the CAFTA 15 do not suffer the political consequences for their vote, labor will look weak and the march of so-called "free trade" will continue.

In 1993, after a small group of Democrats defected to support the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), unions threatened to get even. But virtually nothing was done. The message this sent to each elected representative was that labor would make a lot of noise but eventually the waters would grow calm—and no one suffered for casting a vote that hurt workers here and abroad.

And so, as each trade vote loomed, Democrats could contemplate wandering off the reservation, either to protect campaign contributions from large corporate donors or to [extort some promise](#) from supporters of so-called "free trade" to build a highway, fund a pet project or place a federal research center in a wavering politician's district. Votes were for sale.

Here are the CAFTA 15...drumroll, please...: Melissa Bean, Illinois (8th District); Jim Cooper, Tennessee (5th District); Norm Dicks, Washington (6th District); Henry Cuellar, Texas (28th District); Ruben Hinojosa, Texas (15th District); William Jefferson, Louisiana (2nd District); Jim Matheson, Utah (2nd District); Gregory Meeks, New York (6th District); Dennis Moore, Kansas (3rd District); Jim Moran, Virginia (8th District); Solomon Ortiz, Texas (27th District); Ike Skelton, Missouri (4th District); Vic Snyder, Arkansas (2nd District); John Tanner, Tennessee (8th District); and Edolphus Towns, New York (10th District).

The arguments against taking down the CAFTA 15 go something like this: Trade is only one policy arena and labor can't pillory politicians just for voting wrong on CAFTA; doing so would tar labor with the dreaded "single-issue" constituency label. According to this line of thinking, many union members care about a broader set of issues; they need politicians who will vote right on other issues, even if those same politicians stray here and there on a vote or two. And, some would argue, trade only hurts a particular slice of the unionized workforce. Finally, going after Democrats in "swing" districts makes it harder to take back the Congress from Republicans.

Here's the fallacy with that political pragmatism. Trade is not just a single issue. So-called "free trade" is shaping the economy, here and abroad—it is the central issue upon which other economic policy issues revolve. To overlook a politician's vote on trade means turning a blind eye to the legislative tool most responsible for shifting the power of self-determination from the hands of citizens to the corporate boardrooms of global capitalism.

Compared to a decade ago, a broader segment of unions and their leaders are starting to see how so-called "free trade" hurts them. A [July 25th letter](#) to the House Democratic leadership raising concerns about possible Democratic defections on CAFTA was organized by none other than Harold Schaitberger, president of the International Association of Fire Fighters who was the most visible early supporter of John Kerry. He could have argued that his members aren't directly touched by CAFTA—you can't get firefighters from another country to put out the fire in your house here. But to his credit, Schaitberger sees this as a huge fight, hitting his members hard as deals like CAFTA help push down wages and benefits throughout the economy. As he told me at the AFL-CIO this past week, "this is a bright line...We can no longer give a pass on these issues."

I am not unsympathetic to the political calculation of the balance of power in Washington. But one of my favorite political axioms is that if you give voters a choice between a Republican and Republican-lite, they will

always choose the real thing. No other issue can, and should, distinguish the two parties. But if some Democrats cannot understand, or, worse, do not care that so-called “free trade” is eviscerating the dreams of millions of people, they shouldn’t serve in Congress. They are hurting the party’s long-term prospects, not to mention the future for workers.

I have argued for a long time that labor should stop pouring money into politics—at least at the federal level—and instead pour union resources into organizing millions of new workers. *Then* they can return to the political arena, when labor’s vote can carry more weight. But, for God’s sake, shouldn’t we at least cut off money to people who won’t stick up for the future economic livelihood of millions of workers?

Labor must declare immediately that unions will deny the CAFTA 15 their support. That means that, come campaign season, the CAFTA 15 will not find a single check in their mailboxes, nor receive an endorsement to grace their campaign literature, nor count on union members to make the thousands of phone calls or house visits that turn out voters. Let’s find primary opponents for each one.

Few politicians are guided by deep principle. Most understand one thing: power. And, just as important, once tasted, the absence of power is an enormously effective motivator. Nothing focuses the mind of a politician more than the thought of losing his or her seat. If labor had taken out one or two Democrats who voted for NAFTA more than a decade ago, I suspect that the CAFTA 15 might have numbered two or three—or maybe none.

The time for hardball politics is now.

**Lost Your Job  
To Free Trade & Offshoring  
*Yet?***