

Mexican, U.S. Publics Strongly Support Labor and Environmental Standards in Trade Agreements

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Share Lukewarm View of NAFTA

By Steven Kull

The prospect of a Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) has stirred up a theme that regularly arises in debates about U.S. trade agreements with developing countries. On one hand labor unions, human rights groups, and environmentalists argue that trade agreements should have provisions ensuring that developing countries enforce their labor and environmental standards so as to prevent them from undercutting U.S. labor by having lax standards. The American public in numerous polls has also supported them by overwhelming majorities. On the other hand the Bush administration, most Republicans in Congress, and most international corporations have generally resisted this idea, though they have shown some willingness to negotiate on the issue.

Leaders of developing countries have also tended to resist such provisions based on sovereignty principles, though it is widely assumed that their concern is that enforcing such standards will drive up labor costs in their country. It is also widely assumed that publics in developing countries stand behind their leaders in an effort to make their labor more competitive, though there has been no evidence to support this assumption.

Polls show, however, that Mexicans as well as Americans largely favor including labor and environmental standards in trade agreements.

A poll conducted in July 2004 by the Centro de Investigacion y Docencias Economicas of the University of Mexico (CIDE) found that 67 percent of Mexicans support including labor standards in trade agreements, and 76 percent support including environmental standards.

This is consistent with other polling showing a high level of Mexican concern about worker's rights and the environment. In a 2004 poll by GlobeScan 64 percent of Mexicans viewed "violations of worker rights" as a "very serious" problem, and another 29 percent said that it was somewhat serious. In the same poll 79 percent said that "pollution and environmental problems" were very serious problems, with another 16% saying that it is somewhat serious.

Mexicans on Labor and Environmental Standards in Trade Agreements

Do you think that countries that are part of international trade agreements should or should not be required to:

Maintain minimum standards in the working conditions of its workers



Maintain minimum standards for protection of the environment



CIDE 7/2004

These attitudes are part of a broader concern: whether globalization is helpful to Mexican workers. When GlobeScan asked about the effect of globalization on "worker's rights, working conditions and wages in Mexico," only 41 percent said that globalization will make them better, while 36 percent said that it will make them worse.

Also, when asked about the effect of globalization on "environmental quality in the world," a plurality of 44 percent said that globalization will make it worse. Just 34 percent saw globalization making it better.

These lukewarm views may help explain the low level of enthusiasm for NAFTA. In the CIDE poll only 44 percent of Mexicans said that NAFTA is good for the Mexican economy, only 41 percent said it was good for their standard of living, and only 39 percent said it was good for the environment.

Mexican views are strikingly parallel to those of Americans. As mentioned, the American public overwhelmingly supports including labor and environmental standards in trade agreements. For example, in a June 2005 PIPA-Knowledge Networks poll 90 percent favored having labor standards and 93 percent favored having environmental standards in trade agreements. These are approximately the same numbers that PIPA and the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations have been getting in response to this question for some years now.

American support for such standards is not surprising. From the perspective of American workers, they make it more difficult for foreign workers to undercut American labor by having more lax standards.

But for many Americans there is also a moral dimension to the issue. In a June 2005 PIPA-Knowledge Networks poll that asked Americans to choose between two statements, 74 percent said that "if people in other countries are making products that we use, this creates a moral obligation for us to make efforts to ensure that they do not have to work in harsh or unsafe conditions," while just 24 percent said that "it is not for us to judge what the working conditions should be in another country."

Parallel to Mexicans, Americans also show lukewarm support for NAFTA. In the June 2005 PIPA-KN poll 46 percent said that NAFTA has been good for the United States while 40 percent said it has been bad.

This parallels American attitudes about the prospect of a Central American Free Trade Agreement or CAFTA. In the June 2005 PIPA-KN poll 50 percent favored it while 39 percent were opposed. However, if CAFTA were to include greater enforcement of labor standards Americans say they would be more supportive. When PIPA asked respondents who were opposed to CAFTA or unsure to "suppose the US government were to commit to make sure that Central American countries enforce health and safety standards for their workers" 31 percent shifted their position to favoring CAFTA. Thus with a commitment to greater enforcement of such standards support for CAFTA could well exceed six in 10.

With this consensus between publics in the United States and Mexico in favor of labor and environmental standards being part of trade agreements, it is striking how much the leadership in both countries have resisted and continue to resist them.