

Chairman Russ Carnahan
Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights and Oversight

Opening Statement
“International Worker Rights, U.S. Foreign Policy and the International Economy”

March 10, 2010

I want to thank Chairman Sherman for leading this hearing today and all the witnesses for donating their time to address the critical issue of international worker rights, U.S. foreign policy and the international economy. We have two panels of distinguished witnesses with different, valuable perspectives on this that we look forward to hearing.

In the wake of the unprecedented financial and economic crisis, coordinating a speedy recovery and creating sustainable job opportunities has been a matter of utmost concern for many Members of Congress since 2007. The countless stories of hardworking American citizens suddenly struggling during these difficult times are troubling and painful.

Additionally, the millions of jobs lost globally threaten to precipitate a dangerous race to the bottom in labor standards, in which quality employment opportunities have also suffered severely. This feeds a cycle of declining living standards, diminishing purchasing power, increasingly shrinking markets, and further economic decline.

The Administration, Congress, and many others are doing much to turn this around. As part of that process, we have taken many measures to address our national economic recovery. We must also look beyond our borders and increase our efforts to coordinate significant policy reforms worldwide that will yield concrete benefits to Americans at home by strengthening U.S. trade agreements and trade preferences.

Despite these favorable trade relationships, countries still have not consistently adhered to the agreed upon labor provisions, and U.S. agencies have been lax in enforcing them. This ultimately undermines the American worker, undermines potential for economic growth, and undermines the respect for basic human rights.

From Toyota vehicles to Chinese drywall and children’s toys, I also remain concerned about the lack of product safety and enforcement in our trade relationships. This gives unfair market advantage goods that may end up harming American consumers, which is simply unacceptable and unsustainable.

In April, Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis will host the first G20 Employment and Labor Ministers’ meeting in an effort to pool individual experiences and try to coordinate a collective policy response to restore the global economy. I believe this is a courageous step with potential to further enhance America’s leadership on economic recovery efforts. It is my hope that the

meeting will give serious focus to job creation in line with more robust labor rights protection and transparency.

This year I launched the bipartisan American Engagement Caucus, and last week hosted a Congressional briefing on America's image abroad. I believe it is also important for America to continue to be a leader in promoting worker rights and advancing labor standards to foment healthy economies and prosperous societies moving forward.

Also, last month I released a Regional Jobs Plan aimed at expanding trade opportunities and creating a level playing field to help boost the economy in the St. Louis region and across the country, focusing on promoting regional strengths. One of the greatest strengths to any region—any economy—is its work force. It is the bedrock of any economy. We must take care not to miss the forest for the trees and forfeit labor within broader-reaching economic reform plans and stimulus packages.

It is imperative that we act now to level the playing field so that everyone can have access to quality, sustainable work opportunities and participate fully in the global economy, helping to strengthen and expand it. This will provide tangible, immediate benefits to our domestic economies as well, ensuring strong markets for our exports and giving power back to workers and consumers.

As we work to revitalize the American economy and create jobs here at home, we must aggressively seek new opportunities for U.S. companies to gain free and fair access to foreign markets. A critical component to that effort is rigorous enforcement of international trade laws to help level the playing field for American workers and protect human rights around the world.

Once again, I thank our witnesses, and Members, for joining us to address this important topic.