Pro-business as usual

By Steve Thorngate
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So Obama and the Republicans hope to fast-track a couple of international trade deals, and some Democrats aren't pleased. This "has scrambled the usual political alignment in Washington," says NPR's Scott Horsley, "putting the president at odds with many of his usual allies in organized labor." It has "all made for dizzying change of tone," adds Jonathan Weisman of the *Times*.

I suppose it's a little unusual, if your lens on politics is pure partisan math, all red votes here and blue votes there. *Dizzying* it is not. Labor union staffers aren't happy about this, but they aren't exactly reeling in shock. They've come to expect this sort of thing, from presidents of whichever party.

That's because when it comes to trade policy, the U.S. doesn't have a pro-business party and a pro-worker party. It has a steadfastly pro-business party and a more ambivalent but still substantially pro-business party. To find a political party that offers labor its full-throated support, you have to look beyond the two major ones.

To be sure, there's a strong populist-progressive streak among some Democrats of late, in evidence in both houses of Congress. This is why the president faces considerable opposition within his own party on this. But the sort of Democrats who win presidential nominations, to say nothing of general elections, tend toward the center on labor issues—which in our context basically means that while they might not seek to dismantle unions altogether, their primary loyalty is to management. This has been true for my whole life, and more so since Bill Clinton's ascendancy in the 90s.

Yes, organized labor is a Democratic president's "usual ally"; they agree about plenty of things and are certainly on the same team come general election time. But it's not out of unbridled enthusiasm that unions spend time and money electing Democratic presidents; it's because it's the lesser of two evils. Meanwhile, corporate interests give piles of money to both sides, knowing they can work with either party. For them, Republicans are the greater of two goods.

I'm not saying there are no meaningful differences between the two major parties. There are—but less so in this area, where more-or-less unbridled free trade has consensus support among the neoliberals in both parties.

It's a shame, because these trade deals are stinkers. Robert Kuttner sums it up:

> Basically, ever since the North American Free Trade Agreement of 1993 (NAFTA), trade policy has been on autopilot. Tariffs are now quite low, and these deals are mainly about dismantling health, safety, consumer, labor, environment, and corporate regulations.

What's more, as Lee Fang reveals, the people negotiating these deals on our behalf aren't exactly disinterested parties.

One industry that's excited about all this: American livestock, which stands to increase exports. And why not take our big-time meat habit and spread it far and wide? It's profitable, and profit rules. Never mind how unsustainable it is to eat that much meat in a time of environmental crisis. Never mind the irony of the most powerful nation on earth going out of its way to serve as manure lagoon to the world .

It's widely understood that U.S. politics is increasingly polarized along partisan lines. But this polarization is largely about structural incentives (for elected officials) and tribalism (for voters). Actual policy differences look comparatively small, especially from the wide angle of global or historical perspective. The gap between each party's mainstream is fiercely felt but not all that terribly wide.

Exhibit A is trade, where industry's drive to grow, grow, grow is so often at odds with workers' welfare here and abroad. For Democratic presidents and Republican legislators alike, leaning toward business is mostly just business as usual.