



# International Labor Rights Forum

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## Questions We Wish the Candidates Would Answer

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As our friends around the world have doubtless noticed, the US presidential election season is upon us once again and as ever, politics is largely local. As the candidates prepare for their second debate tonight, on this World Day for Decent Work, we fear that once again the immediate and insular questions will take precedence over those addressing far-reaching implications of future US policy around the globe. To ILRF's international audience of friends and supporters, we would like to suggest a few questions we wish the candidates would answer, and welcome our international allies to let us know what questions you might ask, as well. (We'll tell you what we think, too- we are advocates, after all!)

*Q. Will there be a new framework for international trade? If so, what will it look like? Will it be US-led or multilateral?*

Why this is important: Under the Bush Administration we have seen aggressive promotion of so-called bilateral (though in spirit unilateral) free trade deals, and death by a thousand cuts to programs intended to strengthen international worker rights protections through trade or development. We have also seen the 'outsourcing' of labor rights diplomacy to none other than corporate America, through the aggressive promotion of 'corporate social responsibility' substituting for effective enforcement of legislative protections for international worker rights. If we intend to protect the idea of decent work for workers around the world, we need enforceable language mainstreaming this support into our trade and development policies.

What they might say: We predict, based on what we have read of both the Republican and Democratic platforms, that a Republican McCain-led administration would continue the trend toward minimizing corporate taxes and protecting corporate tax shelters, and promoting the outsourcing of industries. It would aggressively promote future free trade agreements and seek to minimize enforcement of existing labor and environmental protections in such agreements.

A Democratic Obama administration would have to honestly admit it would not be able to undo two decades of free trade agreements and overseas investment policies (many aggressively promoted by former president Bill Clinton), claims to "renegotiate NAFTA" notwithstanding. It would, however, be importantly and substantially different in its objectives for trade, seeking to balance promotion of investor interests with a vision of "democratic, equitable, and sustainable growth around the world." We might thank former presidential candidate John Edwards for raising this latter vision of America's economic role in the world.

Importantly, a Democratic administration is also far, far more likely in its trade policy, as well as its overall foreign policy, to favor multilateralism over unilateralism. These things matter; on to the next question on that important subject.

*Q. Do you support 'preemptive' warfare, in any circumstance? What if any role is there for multilateral agencies such as the UN Security Council? Also what are your views on existing international human rights instruments and treaties and their meaning for US action and US law?*

Why this is important: Our friends around the world need no explanation, we fear, for this question. For eight years we have opposed the flagrant disregard of the Bush Administration for the Geneva Conventions, the contempt for UN agencies and the appointment of a UN Ambassador who publicly opposed US support for the UN, and the violations by our own military of international human rights norms. Recently, Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin was questioned about her support for the Bush Doctrine, and appeared to support the continued use of unilateral aggression, as well as the unchecked expansion of executive powers. From a worker rights perspective solely, we have witnessed the Administration's efforts year after year to eliminate any support for the International Labour Organization (ILO); without such engagement we have little hope for effective action on labor rights globally.

What they might say: We fear that our read of the Republican platform, and candidate McCain's recent comments, suggest the continuation of a my-way-or-the-highway approach to foreign policy. Would a McCain Administration oppose torture? Would it support respect for international human rights treaties and instruments? The record is murky. The Democratic platform is far more clear, stating support for international human rights instruments and, as above, a commitment to return to multilateralism.

*Q. At a time of rising global food prices and what many are calling a global food crisis, what are the implications of your position on this year's US Farm Bill? Would you support the Bush Administration's programs to provide ethanol subsidies to US corn growers?*

Why this is important: Again our friends around the world need less explanation than a US audience might for the importance of US agricultural policy to global production and consumption of basic food commodities. There has been much made in this year's debate about subsidies to US farmers, and the extent to which this leads to dumping of basic commodities on vulnerable world markets, and undermines food sovereignty in developing countries. ILRF allies around the world have also struggled with the biofuels issue, which threatens to pit environmental advocates against advocates for the world's most destitute communities. From a worker rights perspective, ILRF and allies have exposed the exploitative labor conditions in the production of agricultural commodities worldwide; we support broader efforts by farmer organizations and environmental justice allies to rein in unchecked corporate power in this sector.

What they might say: At least as far as the US Farm Bill is concerned, the positions of the candidates are clear. Senator Obama, hailing from an agricultural state, voted for the Farm Bill; Senator McCain voted against it. In his opposition, McCain supported the position of President Bush (who vetoed the bill) and stated his blanket opposition to agricultural subsidies, including ethanol subsidies. Obama, in a lengthy interview, admitted the flaws in the program but cited several programs included in the thousand-plus page bill including programs intended to foster better nutrition for US schoolchildren and conservation efforts in farm states. He has made strong public statements in support of biofuels.