

EU free trade a hard sell

CETA: The Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement would link trade between Canada and the European Union

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The national battle over a pending trade deal between Canada and the European Union hit London Friday.

Federal Labour Minister Lisa Raitt took the shop floor at Lamko Tool and Mold to sell the controversial Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA).

The proposed deal is fuelling opposition among municipalities as well as labour and community groups worried over lack of transparency and its potential effect on health care and communities.

"It will be a big win for municipalities and provinces as we eliminate tariffs for manufacturing," Raitt said. "I know we can compete. I'm looking forward to an aggressive, all-encompassing agreement."

The federal government sent 18 ministers Friday fanning out across the country to sell the agreement that Ottawa hopes will be completed by year end.

But Ottawa has to give it a hard sell because concern is rising about how different this trade deal is from others, said Gary Brown, a Council of Canadians official picketing Lamko Friday.

"NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) exempted municipalities, hospitals and education from free trade. CETA targets those things. Municipalities will not buy local."

The deal also would push cost of prescription drugs up \$3 billion because of changes to patent laws, Brown warned.

More than 50 municipalities have asked to opt out of the deal, and the issue is on the agenda Tuesday for London city council.

London West Conservative MP Ed Holder is involved in negotiating the deal.

He played down criticism, saying he "will not sign an agreement that is not in the best interests of Canada."

The federal government has overwhelming support from manufacturing, exporters and the agricultural sector, who want access to the world's largest integrated economy, Holder said.

"There will be enough protection around procurement," he said. "It means international companies will do business in London and they will use local workers for that."

Organized labour is also rallying against the deal, saying it would give foreign corporations power to challenge decisions made by federal, provincial and municipal governments and sue for compensation.

The Canadian Union of Public Employees said the agreement could kill as many as 150,000 Canadian jobs and called for transparency, saying many details remain hidden.

What is known, said CUPE, is European multinationals would get unconditional access to government purchasing and contracting, particularly at the provincial and municipal levels, and prohibit spending that aims to create local jobs or boost local economies, stated a CUPE release.

But Raitt called the deal "the most ambitious trade plan in our history," saying it's all about creating jobs.

"The economy is our No. 1 priority."

The deal has overwhelming support from business and agriculture, who attended the event.

"We strongly stand behind these negotiations. We see this as a new NAFTA," said Joy Nott, chief executive of the Canadian Association of Importers and Exporters.

Coun. Paul Van Meerbergen, who is also business development manager at Lamko, said his company relies "100%" on exports and sees the deal as a way to expand his business.

"Without export markets we are sunk. When I hear that people have closed minds about trade, I just want to say, 'Sorry, that train has left the station.' "