



Business

Langevin weighs in on trade, security

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CRANSTON — The United States can hugely increase its inspections of shipping containers without jeopardizing international trade, U.S. Rep. James R. Langevin said yesterday.

Speaking to a group of local business leaders, Langevin said the technology for scanning containers for nuclear material was rapidly improving, potentially reducing the incidence of false alarms from 200 per day to 20 at a typical port.

U.S. officials also hope to deploy additional staff and equipment to foreign ports to inspect cargo before it reaches American shores, part of an effort to scan 100 percent of containers for nuclear material by 2012, Langevin said.

“The technology is now mature enough, and we’ll be acquiring it soon,” said Langevin, a Democratic member of the Homeland Security Committee and the chairman of a subcommittee on emerging national security threats.

“We can’t get that equipment deployed soon enough,” Langevin told members of the Coalition of New England Companies for Trade, including representatives of CVS Caremark Corp., GTECH Holdings Corp. and APC-MGE. “But we have to be able to prove it’s not going to slow commerce.”

Manufacturers that rely on imports for components have expressed alarm about increased inspections at U.S. ports. Yesterday, Langevin said Congress was addressing those concerns, in part by pursuing a program that would place electronic seals on cargo leaving foreign ports to reduce the need for intensive inspections here.

(Langevin has also advocated increased inspections of cargo transported on passenger aircraft or trucked across the Mexican and Canadian borders.)

Though he was addressing trade advocates, Langevin said international trade also has the potential to damage domestic businesses.

In planned negotiations over free trade agreements with Peru and Panama, Langevin said he would try to “level the playing field” on labor and environmental regulations to help American manufacturers.

“I have always supported fair trade agreements,” Langevin said yesterday in response to a question. “But we have to protect our workers and companies.”

His chief of staff, Kristin Nicholson, said Democrats in Congress would renew the U.S. Department of Labor's Trade Adjustment Assistance program this fall, when it expires.

That assistance, recently extended to former employees of the Quaker Fabric Corp. in Fall River, helps workers hurt by international trade find new jobs.

"The Democratic leadership has talked a lot about expanding it," Nicholson said.

Yesterday's meeting was hosted by heating- and cooling-equipment maker Taco Inc. at its Cranston plant.

Robert A. Sinclair, the company's international sales manager, challenged Langevin to justify unilateral trade embargoes, arguing that they hurt U.S. companies while having little impact on the targeted nations.

"Is there any proof that these embargoes work?" Sinclair asked. "The justification for embargoes is something I've never been able to understand. It just seems like a waste of time."

Langevin, who has been touring the state at the start of this month's legislative recess, defended the policy.

Singling out Iran and North Korea, he said limiting access to the U.S. producers and consumers helped slow the development of nuclear weapons.

But when it comes to Cuba, Langevin said, he was uncertain about the benefits of isolation. That skepticism, he said, is spreading in the capital.

"It hasn't worked. We'd do better to have constructive dialogue," Langevin said. "There's mounting support in Congress to change course."

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