United Steelworkers Union Blasts China's Trade Practices

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WASHINGTON (AP) — A major U.S. union is asking the Obama administration to crack down on various Chinese trade practices that it says are robbing American workers of jobs in the burgeoning field of clean energy such as solar and wind power.

The United Steelworkers union on Thursday filed a 5,800-page petition with the administration contending that China's central and provincial governments are giving Chinese companies unfair advantages over American firms through the use of government subsidies that are prohibited under global trade rules.

Under U.S. law, the administration will have 45 days to decide whether to accept the petition and launch an investigation that could lead to cases being filed against China before the Geneva-based World Trade Organization.

The deadline for the administration to decide the case will occur just a little over a week before this year's November congressional elections, a fact union officials hope will bring pressure on the administration to rule in its favor.

"We believe it is well beyond time that people started standing up to China's illegal practices and started standing up for American workers," Steelworkers president Leo W. Gerard told reporters during a conference call.

"Green jobs are key to our future. Right now, China is taking every possible step, many of them illegal under international trade laws, to ensure that it will control that sector," Gerard said.

In its petition, the Steelworkers contended that the subsidies the Chinese government was providing to Chinese manufacturers of wind turbines, solar panels and other clean energy equipment violated WTO rules.

The union asked the administration to begin formal talks with China. If those talks fail to convince China to drop the contested government support, the union said the administration should file cases against China before the WTO.

The Steelworkers' petition on clean energy comes at a time when the two countries are already fighting on a number of other trade fronts from Chinese tires to imported steel products.

The administration is also applying pressure to get Beijing to allow its currency to rise in value against the dollar as a way to reduce a yawning trade deficit, the largest with any country.

The Commerce Department reported Thursday that the deficit with China totals $145.4 billion through the first seven months of this year, 17.7 percent higher than the same period a year ago.

The rising deficit has produced increased calls from U.S. lawmakers for the administration to take a tougher approach with China on trade issues including China's currency regime, which American manufacturers contend has kept the yuan undervalued by as much as 40 percent, giving Chinese companies a competitive advantage over U.S. firms.

Nefeterius McPherson, a spokeswoman for U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk, said the administration would review the Steelworkers' petition and make a decision on whether to begin an investigation within the 45 days provided by U.S. trade law.

Various lawmakers issued statements praising the Steelworkers and urging the administration to launch investigations.

"There is no question that China is ignoring trade rules so that it can cheat its way to first place in the clean-energy manufacturing race," Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., said in a statement.

Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Oregon, said that a report prepared by his office showed that China's exports of green energy products had surged to $27 billion in 2008, an increase of more than 500 percent since 2004.

"The adoption of clean energy technology provides the opportunity for the United States to be energy independent and support millions of new jobs, but this can only happen if the Obama administration effectively combat's China's unfair trade practices," Wyden said in a statement.

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