

The New York Sun

N.Y. Lawmaker Pushes To Scrap Tariffs on Low-Priced Shoes

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June 13, 2007

WASHINGTON — A leading House Democrat from New York wants to give consumers a break on footwear by scrapping an import tariff that he says drives up prices for sneakers.

[Rep. Joseph Crowley](#) of [Queens](#) is introducing a bill to remove duties on most low-priced shoes — what he calls an unfair tax that results in mark-ups of nearly 40% for some footwear, particularly those for children. The tariffs originated in the 1930s but have become outdated, Mr. Crowley said, because the American shoe manufacturing industry they were designed to protect has long since moved overseas.

"What we're trying to do is to fix something that should have been done long ago," the congressman said. He added later: "We shouldn't be protecting something that doesn't exist anymore."

Mr. Crowley, who is chairman of the Queens Democratic Party and sits on the influential House Ways and Means Committee, announced the bill yesterday at a Capitol Hill press conference during which he held up a small child's sneaker as an example of how the legislation might aid consumers.

Dubbed the "American Footwear Initiative," the legislation has both Democratic and Republican cosponsors, along with the support of the [American Apparel](#) and [Footwear Association](#), a trade group. The effort is in its early stages, however, and Mr. Crowley acknowledged that its cost, which he estimated at \$1.7 billion, had not been fully studied.

A spokesman for the chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, [Rep. Charles Rangel](#) of Harlem, said he was considering the legislation but had not taken a position on it.

The move comes as the broader issue of international trade has emerged in the Democrat-controlled Congress. Mr. Rangel served as the party's chief negotiator on a deal last month on trade policy between Congress and the Bush administration that could lead to approval of pending free trade agreements with Peru and Panama, and possibly with Colombia and South Korea.

That accord, which some Democrats may oppose, hinged on negotiations over labor and environmental standards, among other issues.

Mr. Crowley has drawn some criticism from constituents over his position on trade, but he praised Mr. Rangel yesterday. "I think that the chairman did a great deal," he said after the event. "I think he cut the best deal he possibly could."

He sought, however, to keep the emphasis on his proposal to eliminate footwear tariffs, a change that he said would affect many Americans directly.

As for why he chose to focus on shoes instead of other goods that carry tariffs, his reason was simple: Everyone wears them.

"It's like food. People have to eat. People have to wear shoes. Whether you're rich or poor, you still have to wear shoes, and that's why it's important," Mr. Crowley said.

The tariffs apply largely to low- and moderately-priced shoes produced primarily in China, Indonesia, and Vietnam — not designer labels.

"The more expensive shoes, people could afford to pay more for them to begin with," he said. "But it's ironic that they have a smaller, or no duty on those shoes. Yet for the shoes that the average American child or person wears, there are incredible duties, and there's an inequity there."

The lawmakers said that in 2006, importers paid \$1.9 billion in footwear duties, leading families to pay an additional \$4 billion to \$5 billion.

The president of the American Apparel and Footwear Association, Kevin Burke, praised the proposal, saying "the elimination of this unfair 'shoe tax' is long overdue."