

Congress passes anti-worker trade law

WASHINGTON, D.C. — As one of its last acts before adjourning, the Republican-controlled 109th Congress passed a detailed trade law in its lame-duck post-election session — one day after it was introduced.

The 213-page bill, sponsored by Rep. Bill Thomas (R-Calif.), covers trade and tariff policy with dozens of nations. It was approved Dec. 8 by the House in a 212-184 vote, then added as an amendment to an even larger tax and health care bill that had passed the Senate by unanimous consent Dec. 7.

The AFL-CIO opposed the bill because of several provisions, including one which granted “permanent normal trade relations” to Vietnam. With little time to spare, AFL-CIO legislative director Bill Samuel sent a letter to members of Congress urging a “no” vote.

“Our trade relations with Vietnam should remain governed by existing agreements until Vietnam takes meaningful steps to bring practice and law regarding workers’ rights into compliance with international standards,” Samuel wrote.

The bill exempts Vietnam from a 1974 requirement that communist countries undergo an annual human rights review before trade with the United States can be approved.

It also eliminates import tariffs on over 500 products, including industrial metals and chemicals, aircraft parts, electric pencil sharpeners, coffee makers and juicers, camera lenses, footwear ... the list goes on for 100 pages.

The bill changes U.S. trade policy with Haiti, allowing companies to import into the United States tariff-free clothing assembled in Haiti that is made with fabric from third countries. Previously, tariff-free imports from Haiti had to be made with U.S.-manufactured fabric.

And it extends low tariffs to imports

from four South American countries — Peru, Colombia, Ecuador and Bolivia — if trade agreements with those countries are ratified within six months. Ecuador and Bolivia aren’t currently negotiating any such trade agreement, while deals reached in 2006 with Peru and Colombia are strongly opposed by U.S. unions. All four countries are considered to have poor records of protecting workers’ rights.

Both political parties split over the bill, with a slight majority of Democrats voting no, and three-fifths of Republicans voting yes.

Southwest Washington Congressman Brian Baird (D) voted for the bill, as did Oregon’s Darlene Hooley (D) and

Greg Walden (R). Voting against it were Oregon Congressmen David Wu (D) and Peter DeFazio (D); Earl Blumenthal (D) didn’t cast a vote.

Many of the issues addressed by the bill are important to U.S. workers and domestic producers, said Thea Lee, chief international economist at the national AFL-CIO, but the bill was passed without debate or serious consideration.

“It was a typical Bill Thomas maneuver to try to cram a whole bunch of things into a bill and try to rush it through without giving members of Congress time to look at it,” Lee said.

Thomas, who headed the Ways and Means Committee, did not seek re-election in 2006.

Oregon AFL-CIO joins Manufacturing 21 group

The Oregon AFL-CIO Executive Board on Dec. 14 approved joining the Manufacturing 21 Coalition, a business-based organization trying to recruit more workers to the industrial sector. The group, which includes union shops such as Boeing Co., Freightliner and Cascade General, says a looming worker shortage will leave their businesses unable to fill jobs with skilled workers.

“We have a lot of common interests,” said Barbara Byrd, secretary-treasurer of the state labor federation. “It’s good that we will be at the table to discuss those interests.”

The Manufacturing 21 Coalition was formed several years ago because of a growing difficulty finding skilled workers. A spokesman said over the next 10 years Oregon is expected to lose 50,000 to 60,000 skilled workers to retirement — the vast majority of them from the Portland metropolitan area.

The state’s manufacturing industry supplies about 208,000 jobs to the economy — the fourth-highest number of jobs in the state behind trade, government and education.

Byrd wants to see a push to recruit more high school graduates into manufacturing and other skilled blue-collar jobs.

One of the Manufacturing 21 Coalition’s objectives is to educate school counselors on the opportunities for training and family-wage jobs in manufacturing. Its primary goal, however, is to create a Center for Manufacturing and Infrastructure Engineering. The \$25 million center would be a shared facility to educate and train workers for careers in industrial manufacturing. Funds for the building would come from the coalition’s private-sector members, government, and private grants and economic development money.

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