

... 'Fast-track' trade provision comes to end

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has opposed every trade deal bargained under fast track.

So union leaders rejoiced June 30 when fast track expired without being reauthorized by Congress. It expired once before — in 1994 — and wasn't renewed until 2002. But fast track still restricts how Congress deals with four treaties it hasn't yet approved — the treaties with Colombia, South Korea, Peru and Panama.

Union leaders in Washington, D.C., were alarmed May 10 when Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and House Ways and Means Chair Charles Rangel announced they'd reached a deal with the White House on trade — the Bush Administration would work to add labor and environmental commitments to the Peru and Panama deals, and the Democrats would work to pass them.

Teamsters General President Jimmy Hoffa Jr. called it a sellout. The Teamsters are an affiliate of the Change to Win labor federation.

But the details of the compromise weren't yet spelled out, and when Pelosi and Rangel clarified the deal June 29, it was the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's turn to cry betrayal. The deal Rangel worked out with Bush went like this: Bush would go back to the four countries and get them to amend the treaties by adding labor and environmental standards as enforceable commitments on par with the

treaty commitments to trademark, patent and other investor protections. Only then would the Democratic leadership give the treaties a vote. Because fast track was scheduled to expire June 30, the Bush Administration raced to amend the treaties, and was able to conclude all four in the last three days of June.

In each case, the countries committed to abide by five "core" labor standards of the International Labor Organization — workers' freedom of association and right to bargain collectively, and prohibition of forced labor, child labor and workplace discrimination. If the countries fail to live up to those commitments, the United States could file a trade complaint, which would be judged by a three-member panel, and then could impose punitive tariffs if the panel agreed. That's the same process the treaty has for other kinds of commercial disputes, like cases where the trading partner discriminates against foreign companies or infringes patents or trademarks.

But it still wasn't enough to win support for the Korea or Colombia treaties from Democrats in Congress or from labor unions.

South Korea's economy is the world's 13th largest — bigger than Mexico's — so the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement would have been the biggest since NAFTA. And the treaty didn't do enough to open South Korea to U.S. imports, union leaders said.

Thus it would harm U.S. industry, especially the auto industry. South Korea and the United States have a heavily one-sided trading relationship: South Korea exported more than 700,000 cars into the U.S. last year, while the United States exported fewer than 5,000 to South Korea. Also of concern was the possibility that Korea could be used as a transshipment point for duty-free export of goods made in China or North Korea.

"Our battered manufacturing sector simply cannot withstand another flawed trade deal," said AFL-CIO President John Sweeney in a statement to the press.

The Colombia treaty failed to win support for other reasons — ongoing serious human rights violations. Colombia's human rights record didn't stop the Bush Administration, but members of Congress felt uncomfortable entering into economic marriage with the most dangerous country on earth for union organizers. Last year, 72 Colombian trade union leaders were assassinated by paramilitary death squads. Witnesses say the government is involved.

The United Steel Workers — which helped survivors of murdered Colombian unionists sue for damages against U.S.-based multinationals — is leading the opposition to the Colombian trade pact and on June 28 testified before Congress about Colombia.

Peru and Panama aren't beacons of workers' rights, but they're in a different league from Colombia. Rangel intends to lead a bipartisan delegation of members of Congress to Peru and Panama this August to press those countries to improve their labor laws. The vote on the treaties is expected in September.

AFL-CIO trade policy specialist Thea Lee says with the enforceable labor rights provisions added, the Peru and Panama treaties are actually better than the 2000 treaty with Jordan, which the AFL-CIO lauded as a step in the right direction. But the AFL-CIO is still debating what stance to take on the treaties because other problems remain — like restrictions on government buy-American mandates and the danger that American agribusiness exports could displace Peruvian farmers.

The AFL-CIO also questions whether the Bush Administration would enforce the labor rights protections. Still, Lee said, Bush is only in office for another year and a half, and a future activist president who wanted to improve workers' rights in those countries would be able to use the trade agreement to do that.

Lee said the AFL-CIO is unlikely to endorse the treaties, and will probably either take no position or else nominally oppose them. Meanwhile, Change to Win and its affiliate Teamsters plan to oppose the two treaties.

Union rights for airport screeners stripped from bill

WASHINGTON, D.C. (PAI) — Yielding to a promised veto by President Bush, congressional Democratic leaders dropped a provision in a Homeland Security bill that would have allowed some 45,000 federal airport security workers to unionize.

The provision was strongly pushed by government worker unions after Bush used the legislation establishing the Homeland Security Department five years ago to ban unionization of the airport screeners on "national security" grounds.

Bush reiterated that stand in his veto threat, saying unions are a security risk. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nevada) and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), anxious to get the 9/11 legislation passed and force Bush to improve overall U.S. security, backed down.

The Democratic retreat was part of an agreement Reid forged with Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Kentucky) to appoint negotiators to hammer out a final version of the 9/11 bill. Both the House and Senate versions of the legislation said the screeners could unionize.

Reid told his colleagues on July 9 that he and Pelosi had committed to dropping the collective bargaining provision. He asked for (and got) unanimous consent from the Senate.

American Federation of Government Employees President John Gage, whose union has been trying to organize the screeners, later said, "the fight is not over." He added that the Pelosi-Reid decision "only makes us more determined to get rights for workers who were wrongly denied."

McConnell, husband of Labor Secretary Elaine Chao, could not resist crowing. "I am encouraged to see Republicans were able to ensure our national security is a higher priority than special interest provision for Big Labor," McConnell said in a press release.

In a prior statement covering the Homeland Security Department money bill, the Office of Management and Budget declared: "The Administration strongly opposes any attempt to deny the president authority to manage executive branch employees when faced with national security concerns." That's the rationale Bush used against unionizing the screeners.

The ban covers only federally-employed screeners, not private contract screeners. Screeners at five airports can unionize, including Pelosi's home airport in San Francisco.

Carpenters, Electricians, Laborers, Glaziers, Sheetmetal Workers, Floorcoverers, Bricklayers, Cement Masons, Roofers, Asbestos Workers, Family, Mill Wrights, Painters, Elevators, Plasterers

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