

Colombia Free Trade Agreement expected to get vote in Congress

A NAFTA-style treaty with Colombia is expected to get a vote in Congress in the next few months, even though the Democratic House and Senate leadership have said they oppose it.

Normally, no bill sees the light of day unless congressional leaders allow a vote on it. But the Colombia deal was negotiated while the Bush Administration had so-called "fast track" authority. Fast track rules, which Congress imposed on itself, give the president the authority to introduce trade treaty-implementing legislation on his own timetable. Then Congress must approve or reject the treaty within several months, and cannot amend it.

Fast track expired last year without being renewed. That was a major victory for the union movement. Labor has fought the spread of NAFTA-style trade treaties, which are blamed for the loss of U.S. jobs.

Now the AFL-CIO, joined by unions in the Change to Win labor federation, is mounting a campaign to defeat the Colombia treaty.

"We've never won a trade vote yet" said Thea Lee, chief international economist at the national AFL-CIO. "But this could be the one. It's a very unpopular trade agreement, and it's not like George W. Bush and his trade agenda are very popular either."

More than any other issue, Colombia's record as the most dangerous place on earth for union organizers is making members of Congress uncomfortable. Last year, according to human rights organizations, 39 trade unionists were murdered in Colombia, and over 200 received death threats. Since 1986 there have been an estimated 2,500 murders of Colombian trade unionists, and only about 80 cases — around 3 percent — have resulted in convictions. Typically, the union activists are murdered by right-wing paramilitary organizations.

Last year, Congress passed a similar trade treaty with Peru. It was opposed by Change to Win unions but it got a

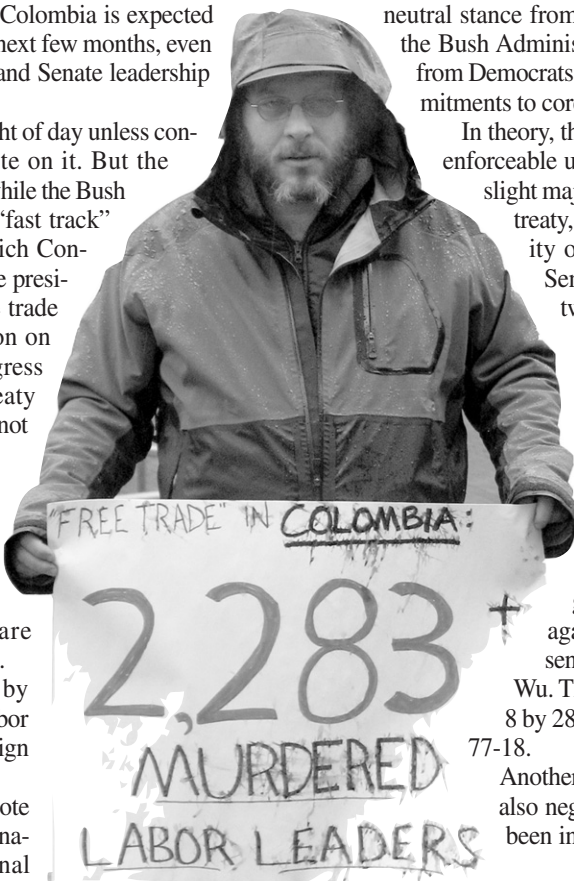
neutral stance from the AFL-CIO. That's because the Bush Administration, in order to get support from Democrats, went back and negotiated commitments to core labor standards.

In theory, the labor commitments would be enforceable under the treaty. In the House, a slight majority of Democrats opposed the treaty, while an overwhelming majority of Republicans in favor. In the Senate, all but one Republican and two-thirds of Democrats voted in favor. Most members of Congress from Oregon and Southwest Washington voted for it, including Oregon Reps. Earl Blumenauer (D), Darlene Hooley (D), and Greg Walden (R); Southwest Washington Rep. Brian Baird (D); and all four U.S. senators from Oregon and Washington. Voting against it were Democratic Representatives Peter DeFazio and David Wu. The treaty passed the House Nov. 8 by 285-132, and the Senate Dec. 4 by 77-18.

Another such treaty, with Panama, was also negotiated last year, but hasn't yet been introduced to Congress. And one with Korea may not end up being submitted to Congress because of concerns that it does too little to counter Korean restrictions on importing U.S. automobiles.

The Bush Administration plans to fight for the Colombia treaty, and has deployed the secretaries of Agriculture, Commerce, Labor, State, and Treasury and the U.S. Trade Representative to lobby members of Congress, lead congressional delegations to Colombia, and tout the agreement publicly. And the Colombian government is reportedly spending \$100,000 a month lobbying in the United States for the agreement's passage.

Lee, the AFL-CIO economist, said there has been behind-the-scenes discussion about whether Democratic leaders can use procedural rules to block a vote. But the AFL-CIO isn't going to count on that, and plans to lobby hard against the treaty.



AFL-CIO Country Watch List

Africa	Middle East	Americas	Asia	Europe
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Congo-Brazzaville	Iraq	Guatemala	Brunei	Tajikistan
Liberia	Kuwait	Haiti	Burma (Myanmar)	Turkmenistan
Somalia	Oman	Peru	China	Uzbekistan
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Sudan	Saudi Arabia			
Swaziland	Syria			
Zimbabwe	United Arab Emirates			

- * Do NOT recognize fundamental worker rights
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Source: AFL-CIO

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