

NAFTA-style deal with Colombia taken off fast track

It was a stunning victory for foes of NAFTA-style trade and investment treaties: On April 10, the U.S. House of Representatives voted to eliminate a requirement that they give the U.S. Colombia Free Trade Agreement an up-or-down vote within 45 legislative days.

Three days before, President Bush had announced plans to force a vote on the controversial Colombian treaty — against the wishes of some leaders of the Democratic majority in Congress. The Democrat-led Congress let “fast track” trade authority expire last year, but the president had negotiated the Colombia deal while fast-track rules were in effect.

Fast track, which Congress has periodically imposed on itself, gives the president wide latitude to negotiate trade treaties and then send them to Congress for ratification on his own timetable. Once the president presents the treaties to Congress, fast track requires a quick vote, with limited debate and no ability to amend the deals. Fast track paved the way for Congress to approve the treaty that created the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the 1993 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with Canada and Mexico. NAFTA became the template for 10 other treaties Congress has approved, under fast track, with 16 other countries.

U.S. union leaders blame the NAFTA model for ongoing and severe U.S. manufacturing job losses. And they’re especially opposed to the agreement with Colombia, which is the most dangerous country in the world for labor union organizers. Armed right-wing groups, some with connections to the Colombian military, have a decades-long record of threatening, kidnapping, and assassinating union supporters. More unionists are killed each year in Colombia than in the rest of the world combined. And few perpetrators are ever prosecuted by the government.

Colombia’s human rights record, plus voter anxiety about a recession in the U.S. economy, emboldened House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) to turn the tables on the president. A previous Congress wrote the fast track rule requiring a quick vote; this Congress could unwrite it. And so the House voted 224-195 to eliminate the ratification timetable for the Colombia treaty, very largely on party lines: 218 Democrats and 6 Republicans voted to dump the fast track rule,

while 185 Republicans and 10 Democrats voted to keep it. All Oregon and Washington House members voted with the majorities of their parties.

In the debate before the vote, Oregon Democrat Peter DeFazio delivered a fiery rebuttal to Republicans who’d argued that Congress shouldn’t change the way it has handled all trade treaties since 1974.

“In 1974, we were the manufacturing colossus of the world,” DeFazio said. “We ran trade surpluses. We had a robust middle class in America. But after 34 years of bad trade policy, our manufacturing’s cut in half; the middle class is losing ground, and we’re borrowing \$2 billion a day from the rest of the world, including communist China, to buy things that we used to make here in America.”

This rule change, DeFazio said, signals the beginning of a new trade policy for the American people.

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The rule change puts the fate of the U.S. Colombia Free Trade Agreement in doubt. Polls show the NAFTA-style trade deals are unpopular with working people, who see them as job-killers. But the deals are supported by business groups like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Republicans have had few qualms voting for the NAFTA-style treaties, but Democrats have been divided, with roughly a third voting for the most of the deals in the past.

Even the Colombia treaty has divided Democ-

rats. House Majority Whip James Clyburn (D-South Carolina) is for it. House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-Maryland) is undecided. And Speaker Pelosi has been critical of it, but not categorically: She wants Colombia to make more progress cracking down on violence against la-

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U.S. Rep. Peter DeFazio

bor organizers, and she wants some kind of deal to give more government aid to American workers who lose jobs because of trade.

Oregon representatives have the same division. Only DeFazio and fellow Democrat David Wu have said unambiguously that they will vote against the Colombia treaty. Democrat Darlene Hooley is undecided. Republican Greg Walden is for it. Democrat Earl Blumenauer said the deal “isn’t ready” because not enough has been done to end the violence on labor leaders, but seemed to signal that if something were added to the treaty, it could get support.

“If [President Bush] shows a willingness to work with Congress and the Colombian govern-

ment to strengthen and improve the agreement,” Blumenauer said in an April 7 press statement, “I expect that he would find willing and interested partners on Capitol Hill.”

In Southwest Washington, Democrat Brian Baird remained undecided, saying he’s “studying the agreement closely.”

“Overall, the agreement has a number of positive elements,” Baird said in a press statement, “but serious concerns about the safety of labor and political leaders are not yet sufficiently addressed.”

With the April 10 vote, the 45-day fast track timetable was eliminated. But other fast track rules, such as the limits on debate and amendment, would still apply to the Colombia agreement if Democratic leaders bring it up for a vote. So the treaty’s fate is likely in the hands of Pelosi. Given how difficult the trade issue is for Democrats, and the fact that both remaining Democratic presidential candidates are critical of NAFTA and the Colombia deal, it’s unlikely Pelosi would hold a vote before the November election.

But after that, treaty supporters could push the lame duck Congress for a vote while Bush remains in office, sweetening the deal with aid to displaced workers and some sort of labor side agreement with Colombia. Treaty backers have argued that the human rights situation has been improving, and that the government is an ally in the region against drug traffickers, leftist guerrillas, and U.S. critics like Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez.

Union leaders won’t be taking any chances, however. The AFL-CIO, along with the Change to Win labor federation, wants to be sure members of Congress to hear from union constituents that passing another NAFTA-like trade deal with a country like Colombia is unacceptable.



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