

Congress passes trade pacts with Korea, Colombia, Panama

By DON MCINTOSH
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

By lopsided margins, Congress on Oct. 12 approved trade deals with Korea, Colombia, and Panama. The agreements were opposed by labor groups, but passed with the support of nearly all Republicans and up to a third of Democrats.

The Korea agreement is the most economically significant since the 1992 passage of North American Free Trade Act (NAFTA), which brought the United States and Canada closer to Mexico.

The Colombia treaty is symbolically important to labor because it fosters closer U.S. business ties to a country where more unionists are assassinated each year than the rest of the world combined: 2,680 in last two decades, including 51 last year and 23 so far this year. Only 6 percent of the murders have resulted in prosecution.

U.S. labor unions object to the Panama deal chiefly because of that country's role as a haven for money laundering and tax avoidance by U.S. corporations.

The three trade agreements were signed by President George W. Bush in 2007, but then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) refused to allow a vote to ratify them. But President Barack Obama announced in his 2011 State of the Union address that he would ask Congress to approve the treaties. And last month, the White House began touting the NAFTA-style treaties as part of the president's jobs plan.

The AFL-CIO argued the opposite: that the treaties — the Korea deal especially — are job-losers. The AFL-CIO made clear its opposition to the three treaties in an Oct. 11 letter to Congress.

"Members of Congress will be held accountable for their votes on these trade deals," said AFL-CIO President Rich Trumka Oct. 12. The trade votes are likely to be included when the AFL-CIO produces its annual score card which rates members of Congress. As for Obama, AFL-CIO trade policy specialist Celeste Drake likened the differences over trade to a disagreement



FINAL APPEAL: Two days before a scheduled vote in Congress, fair trade activists gather outside the office of U.S. Rep. Earl Blumenauer (D-Ore.) to urge him reject NAFTA-style trade agreements with Colombia, Korea, and Panama. Blumenauer ended up voting against the Colombia treaty, but for the other two.

among friends and family.

In four-and-a-half hours of debate in the Republican-controlled House, again and again supporters said the treaties will create jobs in the United States, while opponents said they will destroy them.

"We are number one in exporting jobs to foreign lands over the last 20 years," said Peter DeFazio (D-Ore.) "Every day we lose 1,370 manufacturing jobs because of our failed trade policies. And guess what? These agreements are duplicates of all the failed

past trade agreements."

"Like all the other free trade agreements we've entered," DeFazio said, "these are designed to benefit multinational companies seeking cheap labor and fewer restrictions in terms of the environment and labor protections."

The United States has run trade deficits since the 1980s, and those deficits have averaged half a trillion dollars in recent years.

Polls show the public thinks U.S. trade policy is a failure. A September 2010 poll commissioned by NBC

News and the Wall Street Journal found that 69 percent of Americans think that "free trade agreements between the United States and other countries cost the U.S. jobs." And 53 percent said free trade agreements hurt the United States — a substantial increase from the 32 percent who thought that in 1999.

"The working people and the middle class don't want these trade agreements, not with Panama, not with Korea, and not with Colombia," said U.S. Rep. Mike Michaud (D-Maine) during the House debate. Michaud, a former millworker, introduced himself as a proud card-carrying member of the United Steelworkers.

"They want the hope and change that they voted for. How much clearer could the American people be? They want policy written by citizens, not by chief executives."

In the House, the Korea agreement passed 278-151, supported by 91 percent of Republicans and 31 percent of Democrats. The Panama agreement, passed 300-129, had support from 97.5 percent of Republicans and 35 percent of Democrats. And the Colombia deal, which passed 262-167, had the support of 96 percent of Republicans and 16 percent of Democrats.

In the Senate, the Korea deal passed 83-15, supported by 96 percent of Republicans and 72.5 percent of Democrats. The Panama deal passed 77-22, supported by 98 percent of Republicans and 59 percent of Democrats. And the

Colombia deal passed 66 – 33, supported by 94 percent of Republicans and 41 percent of Democrats.

In Oregon's House delegation, Republican Greg Walden voted for all three treaties; Democrat Peter DeFazio voted against all three; and Democrats Earl Blumenauer and Kurt Schrader voted against the Colombia treaty but for the Korea and Panama treaties. U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) voted for all three agreements, while U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.) voted against all three agreements.

Southwest Washington Republican Representative Jaime Herrera voted for all three agreements. Washington's U.S. Senators Maria Cantwell and Patty Murray, both Democrats, voted for all three agreements.

A tradeoff to secure Democratic votes for the trade deals was renewal of the Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) program. Republicans wanted to scrap the program entirely, but negotiated with the Obama Administration on a scaled-back version in order to move the votes on the trade pacts.

TAA ensures that workers who lose their jobs as a result of trade, and through no fault of their own, have access to resources, benefits and job training. However, under the new TAA, public-sector workers will no longer be eligible, and unemployment benefits and a health insurance tax credit were reduced.



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