



NORTHWEST

LABOR
PRESSVolume 115
Number 4
February 21, 2014
Portland

Fast-track fight: Tea Party and Harry Reid join labor's allies

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The old saying “politics makes strange bedfellows” rang true in the nation’s capital in early February when some Tea Party group leaders joined organized labor and other foes of President Barack Obama’s “fast-track” trade treaty scheme. Fast-track, formally called Trade Promotion Authority (TPA), would bind Congress to an up-or-down vote on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) “free trade” deal. Debate would be limited and amendments prohibited, thus undermining Congress’ ability to have a meaningful role in shaping the contents of the trade agreement, which has been in secret negotiations for several years between the United States, Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore and Vietnam.

“The widespread interest in ‘fast-track’ from across the political spectrum is no surprise,” said AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka after fast-track foes continued their e-mail, petition and phone call campaign against it earlier this month.

The anti-fast-track coalition was organized by the Communications Workers of America and the Steelworkers Union. It has grown to 120 groups, whose members have held 50 rallies, sent 600,000-plus e-mails and petitions, and made at least 40,000 phone calls to lawmakers.

Trumka said rising fast-track opposition is only more evidence of what workers have known for a long time: “America’s workforce deserves better than warmed-over trade deals, which will do nothing to raise wages or reduce our \$540 billion trade deficit.”

Trumka said the United States is long overdue for an overhaul of its trade priorities and trade practices. “That can only happen with an inclusive process that includes all our voices, not just the



Portland activists rallied Jan 31 against the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership at Portland State University.

disproportionate influence of the 1 percent,” he said.

Labor’s alternative trade law sets worker rights and environmental protection as pre-conditions, and tells Congress to pick

which nations to bargain with, among other provisions.

Worker rights and jobs weren’t the issues that prompted the Tea Party to oppose fast track. It opposes giving foreign corporations equal standing to sue to overturn any federal, state or local law, rule or regulation that could impact present or future profits from trade. The lawsuits would go before secret trade tribunals, not U.S. courts, and there would be no appeals from their decisions. All that together violates U.S. sovereignty, Tea Party leaders say.

“The last thing the Congress needs to do is to cede more power that constitutionally belongs to the legislative branch to President Obama,” Todd Cefaratti, president of TheTeaParty.net, told The Hill newspaper.

Earlier this month, the Oregon AFL-CIO helped coordinate a massive letter-writing campaign to Congress asking for transparency in trade negotiations, and thanking those lawmakers who have stood up to a fast-tracked TPP.

“After the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the World Trade Organization (WTO, the international body that controls and regulates trade between nations), we’ve had enough of these empty promises of jobs and economic prosperity. They don’t happen with big trade deals,” said Tom Chamberlain, president of the state labor federation. “Putting people to work in family-wage jobs, giving students the best training possible and bringing sectors like manufacturing back to this country — that is what will put the American worker and our economy ahead.”

In a press release, Chamberlain thanked U.S. Reps. Earl Blumenauer, Suzanne Bonamici and Peter DeFazio for their leader-

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City of Portland workers reject contract

Members of the District Council of Trade Unions (DCTU) voted down a tentative contract agreement with the City of Portland 462 to 635. Ballots were counted Feb. 10, three days later than scheduled, due to a snow storm that shut down the city and put many DCTU members to work clearing streets of snow and repairing water mains.

DCTU is a coalition of seven unions that represent nearly 1,600 city workers. The largest units are members of AFSCME Local 189 and Laborers Local 483. Others are Machinists District Lodge 24, Operating Engineers Local 701, Painters and Allied Trades District Council 5, Plumbers and Fitters Local 290, and IBEW Local 48.

Contentious bargaining had been ongoing for nearly a year when a tentative four-year deal was reached in January — just as union representatives and city managers prepared to submit their final offers. Members of the bargaining team recommended ratification, saying it was the best deal likely to be achieved without a strike. But members who opposed its terms mounted a grass-roots effort to get coworkers to vote no. The rejected deal would have provided modest cost-of-living increases and continued health insurance and retirement benefits, but it also would have made it easier to contract out members’ work, and it would have changed rules on accruing comp time — a change that drew fire from many members, particularly in maintenance and repair jobs.

With each union voting separately, majorities in four

of the seven rejected the deal. After the vote, City HR manager Julia Getchell told DCTU chief negotiator Rob Wheaton in a text message that the City would move to declare impasse a second time, but that had not yet happened as of press time.

Local 483 organizer Erica Askin, sworn in as interim business manager Feb. 18, said it’s still possible the two sides could reopen negotiations.

If the City does declare impasse, that would trigger a seven-day timeline for the two sides to exchange final offers. DCTU members would then have an opportunity to vote on the City’s final offer, but Local 189 President Mark Gipson said the next contract vote would likely be paired with a vote on whether to authorize a strike.

Gipson said the City would have three options in putting together a final offer.

“If they’re interested in driving a work stoppage,” Gipson said, “all they have to do is put together an offer worse than the tentative agreement.”

A second option would be for the City to submit a final offer identical to the one members rejected. It’s possible that could pass on a second vote, if members understood that rejecting the deal would mean a strike.

“[The rejected agreement] was far from a great offer,” Gipson said. “The question is, ‘Is it bad enough to strike over?’”

The smart move, Gipson said, would be a third option — an improved offer that would win support from some who voted “no” last time.

Teachers strike in Medford



MEDFORD — About 600 teachers struck Medford School District Feb. 6, and remained on strike as of Feb. 18, when this edition went to press. The two sides differ over wages, working conditions, pension benefits, and even the length of the contract, with the district seeking several changes and the union largely seeking to preserve the status quo. The district

wants a three-year contract with cost-of-living raises of 1.9, 2, and 2 percent; the union proposes a two-year contract with raises of 2.2 and 2.5 percent. The district also wants to increase teachers’ share of health insurance premiums to 17 percent, up from the current 5 percent. The district also wants to reduce an early retirement incentive, while the union wants the district to reduce high school teacher workload to 180 students or less.

Medford School District is Southern Oregon’s largest, with over 13,000 students. Schools closed the first three days of the strike, then were reopened by the district using several hundred substitute teachers. But they’re open only half the school day, and less than half of students are attending.

Since the strike began, the two sides have met three times, without reaching agreement. A fourth bargaining session was scheduled Feb. 18.

It was the first-ever teachers’ strike in the district. A Feb. 15 rally drew an estimated 600 teachers and community supporters.