

... Schrader: Still reading up on it

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the labor federation began running ads against Democrats who voted for fast track. At a private meeting between Schrader and NOLC's executive board Dec. 14, things were reportedly

heated, and the Feb. 17 breakfast was a follow-up to that.

Schrader showed up in cowboy boots, jeans, and an oversized belt buckle, and opened the breakfast meeting with a run-through of Congress' recent accomplishments. Under re-

cently-deposed Speaker John Boehner — “a good man who tried to get things done” Schrader said — Congress passed a government budget and highway fund extension, ended some punitive features of No Child Left Behind, and fixed a cost-of-living-increase problem for Social Security beneficiaries.

“I’m bullish on America,” Schrader told the several dozen labor officials. “You look at the basics, and most of you all are at work, which is a great thing. ... You can’t get a home, can’t build them fast enough these days. Car sales are going great, and the country looks pretty god-dang good.”

Then it was time for questions. Nearly every question and comment was about trade policy, particularly the pending Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) deal. If approved by Congress, the TPP would eliminate tariffs and expand the rights of foreign investors in 11 other Pacific Rim nations — including Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei, where workers lack basic labor rights. Schrader voted against a NAFTA-style trade deal with Colombia, but he voted for similar deals with Korea, and Panama, and there’s every expectation he’ll vote for the TPP.

“I feel like you turned your back on American workers,” Teamsters Joint Council 37 rep-

resentative Mark MacPherson told Schrader at the breakfast.

The text of the secretly-negotiated TPP was released to Congress and the public Nov. 5. Schrader said he’s currently reading through the TPP’s labor chapter, but he spoke of the deal as if it’s still unknown what’s in it: “For me to vote yes on a trade agreement, the trade agreement would have to show significant progress on the issues you talked about This new agreement has to have core labor standards in it.”

Union trade policy experts say the TPP’s labor rights provisions are stronger than any previous trade deal, but are still too weak. For example, under a side agreement, Vietnam is committing to allow independent unions within five years, but if it doesn’t keep that commitment, there would be up to two years of consultations, and only then could there be a return to tariffs — and that’s only if the U.S. president at the time chooses to enforce Vietnam’s commitment.

Schrader didn’t get into those specifics.

“It’s a win-win,” Schrader said of the TPP. “Our brothers and sisters around the world have better opportunities to earn a decent wage, and in so doing, they’ll be risen into the middle class of their respective countries, and we can sell them our stuff that we make here in America.”

What about the trade deficits that have followed nearly every trade agreement going back to NAFTA? Oregon Fair Trade Campaign director Michael Shannon asked Schrader to think about that, and the impact on American jobs if Congress approves more such agreements.

Schrader said NAFTA “clearly took American jobs and workers to Mexico,” but he blamed America’s trade deficit on the strong dollar and bad economic conditions overseas — not on past trade agreements — and said Oregon blueberry, small fruit and vegetable farmers think the Korea agreement is a good deal.

After 40 minutes, Schrader said he had to go. As he made his way out of the room, I asked him if he still thinks the national AFL-CIO president is a bully. [In June, he referred to Trumka as “the bully” in an interview with the blog Roll Call]

No, Schrader said: Trumka has since softened his tone and apologized.

“Do you think it’s wrong for labor to run ads critical of Democrats who voted for fast track?” I asked.

“Not wrong, just foolish,” Schrader said — given the risk of losing seats to Republicans.

After Schrader left, several labor leaders gave him credit for appearing before them and listening. But none thought he’s likely to vote against the TPP.



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