

Obama, Republicans push anti-China trade pact

Patrick Martin
23 April 2015

Both the US Senate and House of Representatives have begun action on legislation to grant President Obama Trade Promotion Authority, also known as “fast-track” authority, which would enable the US government to finalize the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a trade agreement with 11 other countries in Asia and the Americas.

The Senate Finance Committee on Wednesday, in a 20-6 vote, approved the measure and sent it to the Senate floor, where it will likely face stronger opposition in advance of a vote in the coming weeks. Five Democrats and one Republican on the committee voted “no.”

The Finance Committee vote followed an agreement last week between Republicans and a section of committee Democrats on the terms of the TPA legislation after protracted talks between the committee chairman, Orrin Hatch of Utah, and the ranking Democrat, Ron Wyden of Oregon.

The House Ways and Means Committee was to begin work on the legislation Thursday, its chairman, Paul Ryan of Wisconsin, announced. Ryan participated in the talks with Hatch and Wyden and signed off on the deal.

The bill would give the president authority to negotiate trade agreements under provisions for fast-track congressional approval--the House and Senate would each have up-or-down votes without amendments or procedural delays--for the next three years.

As a practical matter, congressional approval of Trade Promotion Authority is both necessary to reach a trade deal and tantamount to approval of it. No country will sign a trade agreement with the United States if Congress can amend it at will or filibuster it. Congress has never rejected such an agreement in a straight up-or-down vote.

The Trans-Pacific Partnership is an economic and trade component of the Obama administration’s pivot to Asia, which involves the mobilization of US military, political and economic assets against the rising power of China. The 11 other nations now engaged in the TPP talks include Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, Chile, Peru, Mexico and Canada.

If the 12-nation trading area is established, it will be the world’s largest; comprising 40 percent of the world’s economy-- a bigger proportion than is covered by the European Union. Other Asian countries are expected to sign on if the TPP materializes. South Korea has indicated interest and the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia are also potential candidates.

Discussion of TPP in official Washington has proceeded on two separate tracks, one for the corporate elite and its military-intelligence apparatus, and one for those posturing demagogically--and entirely falsely--as defenders of American workers.

Within decisive circles of the ruling elite, the main discussions have revolved around the strategic value of TPP as a means of putting pressure on China and forestalling its rise to a preeminent economic position in the Asia-Pacific region. The central question is the incorporation of Japan, the world’s third-largest economy, into the future bloc, since without Japan the TPP would be little more than an expanded NAFTA: the US, Canada and Mexico, plus a handful of second-tier Asian economies.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is due in Washington April 28 for talks at the White House. He will also address a joint session of Congress. The Obama-Abe talks are expected to deal with the main roadblocks to completion of the TPP, particularly US-Japanese conflicts over agricultural and automobile trade.

The *Washington Post*, in an editorial that left no doubt about the real purpose of the TPP talks, called on the Obama administration to make sure the deal is finalized with Japan and Congress. The newspaper declared that “the TPP is about geopolitics as well as economics.” It added, “The key here is Japan. Aging and economically troubled, the Asian giant is looking to forge a deeper political and security commitment with the United States to offset a rising China.”

The editorial concluded with this warning: “If the TPP fails, there won’t be much left of the Obama administration’s pivot to Asia.”

Vice President Joseph Biden made a similar argument

April 17, addressing a group of 29 right-wing congressional Democrats, most of whom are expected to back Trade Promotion Authority. “China is a gigantic force sitting on top of all nations smaller, except India, in the region and is able to do what Russia is able to do in Europe with regard to oil,” he said. “They have significant economic power to deny access to their markets or open access to their markets for all of those regional powers.”

Promotion of the TPP is thus tied to the increasingly frenzied efforts of American imperialism to provoke regional conflicts with China and North Korea, effectively a client state of Beijing: with Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyou islets; with the Philippines and Vietnam, among others, in the South China Sea; on the Burmese border with China; and between India and China.

In the media coverage of TPP, however, such considerations have been overshadowed by the fake-populist posturing of a large section of the congressional Democratic Party, along with Democratic Party-aligned groups, including the AFL-CIO, environmental groups, the *Nation* magazine and the pseudo-left International Socialist Organization.

These forces are opposing the trade pact on the basis of anti-Chinese chauvinism and American nationalism, seeking once again to promote the lie that US workers’ jobs and wages can be defended at the expense of the jobs and conditions of workers of other countries. Their attempt to divert working class anger over unemployment and wage cuts along reactionary nationalist channels is linked to the promotion of militarism.

On April 15, four congressional Democrats addressed a rally of more than 1,000 union officials and their supporters, chaired by United Steelworkers President Leo Gerard, fresh from his betrayal of the strike by oil refinery workers.

Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts performed her fist-pumping ritual, shouting into the microphone, “No more secret trade deals! Are you ready to fight? No more special deals for multinational corporations! Are you ready to fight?”

Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, who may carry out a token challenge to Hillary Clinton for the Democratic presidential nomination, declared that Congress was “totally owned by billionaires and their lobbyists.”

AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, another veteran of countless betrayals of struggles of the working class, both as president of the nearly defunct United Mineworkers of America and now as head of the labor federation, testified against the trade agreement at a hearing Tuesday before the Senate Finance Committee.

Trumka had previously announced a “massive” six-figure ad campaign to lobby Congress against fast-track authority.

“We can’t afford to pass fast-track, which would lead to more lost jobs and lower wages,” he declared. “We want Congress to keep its leverage over trade negotiations- not rubber-stamp a deal that delivers profits for global corporations, but not good jobs for working people.”

This demagogic rhetoric covers up the AFL-CIO’s long record of helping corporate America impose “lost jobs and lower wages” on millions of workers. The unions are not defending the interests of the working class, but rather the profits of less competitive sections of the American capitalist class, particularly in manufacturing, which fear they will lose out to foreign rivals in Japan, Mexico and other countries in the TPP talks.

As for the opposition by congressional Democrats, it is largely for show, to keep the campaign dollars flowing from the unions. When push comes to shove, a sufficient number of Democratic votes will likely be found in both the Senate and the House to offset any potential Republican defections.

Obama is playing his part in the charade, highlighting opposition among congressional Democrats while declaring them wrong on the issue. Like Warren and Sanders, Obama claims to be defending the interests of working people. “I would not be doing this trade deal if I did not think it was good for the middle class,” he said in an interview Tuesday with MSNBC.

He went so far as to claim that his six-year record in office was proof that any trade deal would be good for working people--as though the slashing of wages in the auto industry, the destruction of millions of decent-paying jobs, and an economic “recovery” based on low-wage, part-time labor, enforced by drastic cuts in social benefits, had never happened.

Both factions in the ruling class “debate,” the advocates of “free trade” and the advocates of protectionism, represent sections of the capitalist class. Both are implacably hostile to the interests of working people.



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