

House vote deals setback to Obama trade bill

Patrick Martin
13 June 2015

The US House of Representatives voted Friday by 302-126 to reject a key component of trade legislation sought by the Obama administration and backed by the congressional Republican leadership.

Majorities of both Democrats (144-40) and Republicans (158-86) voted to defeat a bill extending Trade Adjustment Assistance for workers who lose their jobs because of foreign competition, although they did so for opposing reasons. The impact of the vote on TAA is to effectively block passage of the larger legislation, Trade Promotion Authority (TPA), also known as “fast-track” authority.

Under TPA, President Obama and his successor would have the authority for the next five years to negotiate trade deals and submit them to Congress for a straight up-or-down vote, with no amendments or delaying tactics permitted. All previous trade legislation, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement, has been passed using such fast-track authority.

The first trade deal set to be concluded by the Obama administration is the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a free-trade agreement with 11 other countries—seven in Asia, plus Canada, Mexico, Peru and Chile.

The most important feature of the TPP is that it includes Japan but excludes China, making it a key economic component of Obama’s “pivot to Asia,” directed at undermining China and reasserting US dominance of the Asia-Pacific region. As the *New York Times* noted in its account Friday, “The Pacific accord specifically will form a bulwark against the rising power of China in the region.”

The opponents of “fast-track,” particularly the AFL-CIO unions and the so-called “Progressive Caucus” of the Democratic Party, portrayed Friday’s vote as a historic victory for American workers. This is a cynical lie.

Both factions in the trade debate represent sections of big business. The White House and the Republican congressional leadership speak for Wall Street and the biggest US exporters like Boeing, Caterpillar, Microsoft and Apple. The congressional Democrats and the AFL-

CIO represent the interests of sections of corporate America that have been bruised by lower-cost foreign competitors. These include the auto companies and other manufacturing industries.

Friday’s vote was a defeat for both the House Republican leadership—particularly House Speaker John Boehner and Paul Ryan, chairman of the Ways and Means Committee—and for Obama and his top aides, who lobbied furiously for the bill and openly threatened that if the trade bill were defeated, there would be no separate effort to extend TAA benefits for the two million workers who now receive them.

This threat to treat two million jobless workers as hostages for passage of the trade bill was spelled out by White House spokesman Josh Earnest. He declared, “If you’re a member of Congress, and you vote against Trade Adjustment Assistance this week, you are adding your name to the death certificate of Trade Adjustment Assistance because it will go away.”

The linkage between the two issues—income support and retraining for jobless workers, and trade negotiating authority for the president—was established in the bill that passed the Senate last month, as the price of winning the support of Democratic and Republican senators from industrial states like Pennsylvania, Ohio and Wisconsin.

The House Republican leadership then split the bill in two as part of a cynical parliamentary maneuver. They counted on the near-unanimous support of Democrats to assure passage of the Trade Adjustment Assistance portion of the legislation. Meanwhile, a huge majority of Republicans would back the main bill to give Obama “fast-track” authority.

Instead, despite pleas from the White House, including a Friday morning appearance by Obama himself before the House Democratic caucus, the vast majority of Democrats voted against the renewal of Trade Adjustment Assistance. While the Republicans were able to narrowly pass the “fast-track” legislation, by a 219-211 margin, the bill must go back to the Senate for a new vote because it no longer contains the TAA provisions.

Without TAA, it is unlikely that Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell would be able to find the 60 votes needed to bring the bill to a vote. White House officials and congressional Republicans indicated that they would not seek a new Senate vote, but would push for reconsideration of TAA by the House next Tuesday. This vote could be the last chance for “fast-track” legislation in the current congressional session.

The AFL-CIO mounted a frenzied campaign against the trade bill, in contrast to its disinterest when it comes to the attacks on the jobs, living standards and conditions of life of working people. It was reportedly the AFL-CIO that conceived of the tactic of killing Trade Adjustment Assistance for two million workers in order to block passage of the larger bill.

Significantly, in the course of this campaign the union federation formed a de facto bloc with the Tea Party wing of the Republican Party.

The *Wall Street Journal* noted, “Unions and progressive groups are emphasizing arguments that also appeal to conservative organizations, accusing the Obama administration of undue secrecy, stretching the limits of executive power and undermining US sovereignty.”

“There are some areas where the guys on the left—unions and others—get it right, and this is one of those issues,” Judson Phillips, head of Tea Party Nation, told the *Journal*.

The outcome of the process, whether Obama eventually gets “fast-track” authority or not, will likely be the elimination of TAA benefits for millions of auto, steel and other manufacturing workers displaced from their jobs. In other words, the result of this legislative process, in which the AFL-CIO has played its most prominent public role in the last decade, is a deepening of the attacks on the working class.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact