

Freshman Dems revolt on free trade

By Jonathan E. Kaplan
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Many freshman Democratic lawmakers are expected to oppose a free trade deal with Peru this week despite pressure from House leaders

Although Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) has told her freshman class that they may “vote their districts,” Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) and Ways and Means Chairman Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.) lobbied Democrats over the weekend to support the measure, lawmakers said.

“There’s been a lot of pressure on the rank and file to support this deal,” said Rep. Mike Michaud (D-Maine), who opposes the deal. “It’s disappointing that Democratic leaders are not in sync with the American people.”

Fearful that trade agreements will further add to a poisonous political environment — like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which was passed before the GOP routed the Democrats in the 1994 midterm election — some Democrats are furious they are being forced to vote on the measure.

“We have a base that does not think we’re getting enough done. If we give them another dose of NAFTA ... I’m left to wonder what [that does],” freshman Rep. Phil Hare (D-Ill.) said in a phone interview.

David Sirota, a former Democratic staffer turned liberal activist and author, echoed Hare’s remarks.

“What is the political damage of a Congress perceived to be a do-nothing Congress simultaneously capitulating to George Bush and extending NAFTA? It just validates the power of big money over both parties in Washington,” Sirota said.

Hare’s feelings about the new trade agreement are shared by a sizable bloc of freshman Democrats, who have been at the forefront of pushing the new Democratic agenda. Many could vote against their leadership or sit out this fight.

The Peru pact marks the first trade vote of the 110th Congress and is seen as a test of Pelosi’s leadership. Observers will be watching to see whether she can persuade a majority of the Democratic Caucus to support the measure despite opposition from freshman lawmakers and several committee chairmen.

Pelosi and Rangel have touted the agreement because they forced the Bush administration to renegotiate the agreement’s environmental and labor standards.

The Ways and Means panel approved the legislation last week by a 39-0 margin, and the Senate Finance Committee signaled its support last month by voice vote.

Freshman lawmakers, however, have been skeptical all year.

Swept into office last year on a wave of voter disgust over the Iraq war and Republican corruption, many Democratic candidates campaigned against enacting more free trade agreements last year.

Reps. Brad Ellsworth (Ind.), John Yarmuth (Ky.), Heath Shuler (N.C.), Charlie Wilson (Ohio) and Zack Space (Ohio) ran anti-trade advertisements to distinguish themselves from their GOP opponents, according to a report by Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch, a liberal government watchdog group.

Wilson returns to work Tuesday after recovering from colon surgery. Space is opposed and the two other lawmakers did not return phone calls or e-mails for comment.

Rep. Betty Sutton (D-Ohio), a former labor lawyer, pressed Pelosi on the issue during last Wednesday's weekly breakfast with the freshman Democrats. She and other anti-trade Democrats will offer amendments to the deal in the Rules Committee on Wednesday before it heads to the House floor. Those amendments would kill the deal if approved since trade agreements cannot be changed under the fast-track law.

Hare, Sutton and Rep. Bruce Braley (D-Iowa) will vote against the measure. Democratic Reps. Keith Ellison (Minn.) and Steve Kagen (Wis.) are likely to oppose it, too, and Rep. Paul Hodes (D-N.H.) is leaning toward voting against it, his spokeswoman said.

Democratic Reps. Jason Altmire (Pa.), Tim Walz (Minn.), and John Hall (N.Y.) are undecided, according to their aides.

A few freshmen are expected to support the deal. Democratic Reps. Kirsten Gillibrand (N.Y.), Nick Lampson (Texas) and Ron Klein (Fla.) likely will vote for the trade deal, said aides to both lawmakers. On an unrelated matter, Pelosi held a fundraiser for Gillibrand in New York City on Monday.

The politics of the deal has also seeped into the presidential race. Former Sen. John Edwards (D-N.C.) has announced his opposition to the U.S.-Peru agreement. Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.), however, has said he will support the deal. Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) is undecided.

"Democrats could lose the presidency because of trade ... The American people feel there is no difference between a Democrat and Republican. [President Bill] Clinton brought us NAFTA and now a Democratic Congress will bring us Peru," said Michaud, chairman of the House Trade Working Group.

It is unclear how much of an impact a free trade agreement with Peru will have on the United States. Peru's economy is tiny compared to the U.S.'s and it is not a major trading partner.

But even free trade agreements with small economies have often been difficult to pass. Under the Republican majority last year, a trade agreement with Oman squeaked through by a narrow margin with little Democratic support. On the controversial Central American Free Trade Agreement in 2005, House GOP leaders often had to twist arms well after the 15-minute time limit had expired before they secured a victory.

With Democrats in the majority and charged with getting votes to pass the trade deal, Republicans from heavily unionized districts likely will not have to cast a tough vote for the measure this time.

Democratic aides expect the legislation to pass with little resistance given the new labor and environmental standards written into the agreement.

They also said Democrats were assuaged by last week's passage of a trade adjustment assistance bill, which delivers more aid to workers adversely affected by trade agreements, and labor unions are not actively opposing the deal. A much bigger fight is expected over a trade agreement negotiated with Colombia.

"Democratic votes will reflect the new reality of trade policy," a senior Democratic leadership aide said.