

## Peru deal gaining momentum among Democrats

By Ian Swanson  
The Hill  
September 27, 2007

Democratic support for a trade agreement with Peru appears to be building despite spirited opposition from critics, who ripped into the deal at a Wednesday caucus meeting on trade.

The hour-long meeting was requested by the House Trade Working Group, which has complained that no hearing on the deal has been held since Democrats regained control of Congress. It asked for the meeting in a Sept. 21 letter to Democratic Caucus Chairman Rep. Rahm Emanuel (Ill.).

Founding member Rep. Mike Michaud (D-Maine) and other Working Group members exchanged arguments with Ways and Means panel Chairman Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.) and Rep. Sandy Levin (D-Mich.) on the merits of the agreement during the closed session. Both sides also have circulated detailed policy papers among the Democratic Caucus arguing their positions.

Backed by Democratic leadership, Rangel and Levin argue that the Peru free trade agreement represents a dramatic step forward because it includes enforceable worker rights and environmental standards. Opponents counter that the labor rules are still too weak and that the Bush administration won't enforce whatever rules are included.

Some initial signals suggest Rangel and Levin are winning the internal debate. On Tuesday, to some surprise, the Ways and Means Committee unanimously voted to support the deal in an informal markup in a voice vote. A formal meeting is expected in the next few weeks.

Some members may still vote against the deal on the floor, and there has been some speculation that Rangel asked members to allow the agreement to go through committee while voting their heart on the floor.

Still, the agreement has won some surprising supporters, including Rep. Bill Pascrell (D-N.J.), a longtime trade critic.

"I think I've voted for one trade deal since I've been here," said Pascrell, a six-term lawmaker who joined Ways and Means this year. At the time, Pascrell's appointment raised eyebrows from some in the business community since Pascrell is seen as a reliable vote against trade deals, not for them.

"Some of my friends say: 'What did you do when you got on Ways and Means? Did you drink the Kool-Aid?'" quipped Pascrell.

Pascrell said he had more to gain by voting against the Peru deal, but explained that he had been convinced to support it after months of conversation with Levin, who chairs the Ways and Means trade subcommittee.

“I have spent a lot of time with the subcommittee chairman,” said Pascrell, who added that Levin had answered every one of his 65 questions on the deal. While the Peru deal is imperfect, he said, the trade model on which it is based is much improved from previous trade agreements.

Fellow Ways and Means member Rep. Joseph Crowley (D-N.Y.) said Pascrell’s support for the agreement was critical. “He’s someone who follows these issues very carefully,” Crowley said.

After the caucus meeting, Levin was pleased.

“I think it was a very useful discussion, and it has always been my view that the more discussion there is on the Peru agreement, the more people realize it’s a major change in trade policy,” Levin told reporters afterward.

He did not predict when the deal would be considered on the floor, but stressed that members would have “ample time” to discuss it.

In contrast, Michaud seemed resigned to defeat. “I’m a realist. A Democratic administration gave us NAFTA. There’s going to be a Democratic Congress that will give us the Peru trade deal,” he said, adding that there was little time in the caucus meeting to discuss the deal.

Rep. Dale Kildee (D-Mich.) said he hoped the working group could just convince enough Democrats to oppose the deal so that if it were approved, it would be with minority support in the Democratic Party. Michaud wouldn’t guess as to how many Democrats would oppose the agreement.

Rep. Hank Johnson (Ga.), one of 41 Democratic freshmen who called for a shift in trade policy, has said trade was critical to Democrats regaining their House majority earlier this year. He said Wednesday he’s still making his mind up on Peru.

He also insisted there is not additional pressure to vote for the agreement because of Rangel, whose legacy will be shaped by whether he can rebuild a bipartisan consensus on trade.

“You can’t do that hard-pressing. I don’t sense that’s going on,” he said. “I see gentle persuasion taking place.”