

Despite Dem defections, House approves Peru deal

By Ian Swanson
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The Bush administration seized on Thursday's House passage of a free trade agreement with Peru to call on Congress to move forward on similar deals with Colombia, Panama and South Korea.

President Bush called on Congress to promptly consider deals with Colombia, Panama and South Korea, while U.S. Trade Representative Susan Schwab said she looked forward to "additional successes" on those three agreements, which all await congressional action.

Moving those deals could be difficult, however, as the Peru vote divided the Democratic majority. While the deal was easily approved in a 285-132 vote, more Democrats voted against the deal than supported it. Despite backing from House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (Calif.) and other Democratic leaders, 116 Democrats voted against the deal while 109 Democrats supported it. Eight Democrats did not cast votes.

After the vote, Rep. Stephen Lynch (D-Mass.), who spoke against the agreement during the debate, said he had inadvertently voted yes and asked that his vote be changed.

Most of the freshman class that provided the Democrats with their majority also voted against the deal. Thirty freshman Democrats, including Reps. Niki Tsongas (D-Mass.) and Laura Richardson (D-Calif.), who joined the House after this Congress began, voted against the Peru deal. Eleven freshman Democrats supported it, while two freshman Democrats did not vote.

Republicans were much more unified in supporting the Peru agreement. Only 16 Republicans voted against it, while 176 voted to approve it. The deal now goes to the Senate, which is expected to approve it.

Some business sources said they were encouraged that more than 100 House Democrats did support the Peru deal.

"It's a good sign," said William Reinsch, president of the National Foreign Trade Council. Earlier this week, Reinsch said he had heard speculation that as few as 75 Democrats would support the deal.

"This means there is a substantial number of Democrats that do not want to close the door on these agreements," said Reinsch. "I think it bodes well for the future."

The freshman vote, however, was “discouraging,” Reinsch said. He said it’s not surprising the freshman lawmakers would feel anxiety over supporting trade deals, and he held out the hope that some members could support deals in the future, particularly after having been reelected to subsequent terms.

Opponents of the deal highlighted the fact that only a minority of the majority caucus supported the Peru agreement, which is less controversial than pending deals with Colombia and South Korea. They also emphasized the freshman votes against the agreement, and some suggested Democrats could suffer politically for having a trade deal negotiated by the Bush administration pass a Democratic-majority Congress.

“In light of the 2006 elections, when Democrats took control of Congress after 37 freshman successfully campaigned against the Bush trade agenda and replaced 37 anti-fair traders, many Americans likely will wonder how President Bush managed to eke out this rare victory and get a NAFTA expansion agreement through the Democratic-majority Congress,” said Lori Wallach, director of Public Citizen’s Global Trade Watch.

NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement signed by the U.S., Mexico and Canada, has come under criticism from many Democrats since it passed in 1993.

AFL-CIO President John Sweeney said the vote reflected deep divisions and continuing anxiety over the issues of trade and globalization. He called on Congress to oppose pending deals with Colombia and South Korea.

The AFL-CIO did not lobby on the Peru deal, but it has drawn a line in the sand on the Colombia agreement because of violence against labor organizers in that country. The Bush administration has been making a concerted effort to build support for the Colombia deal.

The Peru deal is the first trade agreement Congress has considered since Democrats regained their majority after last year’s elections, and it includes tougher labor and environmental standards at the behest of Ways and Means Committee Chairman Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.) and other Democrats.

Rangel and others had been trying to build as much support for the Peru deal as possible in the hope that a majority of the Democratic Caucus might support it. A high level of support could make it easier to bring the other deals negotiated by the Bush administration to the floor.

Pelosi hailed the vote as an extension of President John F. Kennedy’s pro-trade legacy. She said the deal “represents a remarkable breakthrough because Democrats were able to secure enforceable, basic labor rights and environmental standards in the core text of a free trade agreement.”