

Fight against Peru trade pact shifts to Senate

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WASHINGTON - Over the objections of freshman Democrats elected on "fair trade, not free trade" platforms, the Democratic-run House passed legislation to implement the U.S.-Peru Free Trade Agreement.

Attention now shifts to the Senate, where Minnesota's senators – Republican Norm Coleman and Democrat Amy Klobuchar – have not yet stated positions, according to the Minnesota Fair Trade Coalition.

The House vote on Nov. 8 was 285-132, with Democrats opposing the measure by a 116-109 margin and Republicans supporting it 176-16. The Democratic leadership in the House, including Speaker Nancy Pelosi, supported the trade bill.

Three Democrats in Minnesota's Congressional delegation – Keith Ellison, Collin Peterson and Tim Walz – voted against the pact while Democrat Betty McCollum and Republicans Michele Bachmann, John Kline and Jim Ramstad voted for it. James Oberstar also opposed the pact but did not vote.

The Minnesota Fair Trade Coalition thanked Ellison, Oberstar, Peterson and Walz for their opposition and said, "We are very disappointed in the remaining Minnesota House delegation -- Democrat and Republicans alike -- who voted in favor of the NAFTA expansion to Peru, even though no labor or environmental organization supported the agreement."

Even though the bill was passed, "a great victory was won with a majority of Democratic members who voted against the trade deal," the coalition said. "In Minnesota we strongly applaud the representatives who stood with their districts and voted in opposition to Peru, deflecting major pressure from the Bush administration, corporate lobbyists and the Democratic pro-NAFTA leadership."

The Peru FTA and more controversial FTAs pending with Colombia, Panama and South Korea replicate the same NAFTA-style trade rules that hurt working people, small farms and the environment, the coalition said. These problems include:

- Agriculture rules that pit farmer against farmer in a race to the bottom for the cheapest products;
- Foreign investment rules which open state and local laws or policies to challenge by foreign companies and provide incentives for U.S. companies to move their operations overseas. As of 2002, more than 30,000 jobs have left Minnesota due to bad trade agreements such as NAFTA.
- Inadequate food and product safety measures that will continue to flood unsafe and harmful food and products into the consumer market.

Democrat Max Baucus, chair of the Senate Finance Committee, said he expects the legislation to sail through the Senate. But fair trade groups, including the Minnesota Fair Trade Coalition, plan to keep the pressure on Coleman, Klobuchar and other lawmakers.

"We look forward to working closely with their offices in the coming days and urge them to stand with Minnesota workers, farmers and consumers and oppose the Peru Free Trade Agreement," the coalition said.