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Bush seeks fast-track renewal

Pursuing his determination to create "free trade" pacts without worker rights, anti-worker GOP President George W. Bush on Jan. 30 asked the Democratic-run 110th Congress to renew his "fast track" Trade Promotion Authority. He got a cautious reaction from Congress and outspoken opposition from union leaders.

TPA, which expires June 30, would let Bush bargain trade pacts and then subject legislation implementing them to up-or-down votes in both houses of Congress, with no amendments. That lets Bush bar labor standards from the pacts and the legislation. Fast track will be one of the major fights between Bush and Congress this year.

Bush and his predecessors used TPA to push through the job-losing trade treaty NAFTA, along with Chinese accession to the World Trade Organization and—most recently—CAFTA through Congress. He has sent proposed trade pacts with Colombia, Peru, Bolivia and South Korea to Con-

gress. All lack labor rights.

Bush's fast track renewal demand drew some flak from Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus (D-Mont.), but less from House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.). Their panels will handle the bill. AFL-CIO President John J. Sweeney and Teamsters President James Hoffa blasted Bush.

Hoffa said Bush's fast track proposals "showed workers everywhere that he remains out of touch with their reality.

"Bush highlighted Caterpillar"—the president made his demand at a Cat plant in Illinois—"as reaping the benefits of U.S. trade policies. But for a majority of Americans, jobs have been destroyed, wages and benefits are stagnant, and communities have been stressed and terribly impacted," Hoffa said. He called Bush "blind to this reality."

Sweeney said Bush's fast track proposal shows he "isn't listening to the real or serious concerns" of the country on trade, and ignoring the message of the November election.

Prominent foes of unfettered free trade—meaning Bush's fast track pacts without labor rights—won Senate seats in Ohio, Vermont and elsewhere, and picked up 33 House seats, according to Public Citizen's Trade Watch.

"Extending fast track would hamstring Congress' ability to fix our broken trade policy at a time when working families are in dire need of a correction in course," Sweeney added. "Misguided trade policies exac-

erbated stagnant wages and growing insecurity. We have lost more than 3 million manufacturing jobs since 2001, many to offshore outsourcing, while an increasing number of white-collar service-sector jobs are also at risk," he stated.

Sweeney called for "a strategic pause" in all trade treaties "to assess the real and significant costs of our trade policy" to workers. Hoffa said the Teamsters "are mobilizing to fight against extending fast track...and pushing for a new trade model that will truly uplift all workers.

"Fast track has proven to be nothing more than a mechanism to rush through a patchwork of bad, rubber-stamped free-trade agreements to fill the pockets of multinational companies with the profits made by taking advantage of cheap and exploitable labor," Hoffa declared.

Fast track and the rest of Bush's policies "may be great for corporate executives. But for millions of workers who lost their jobs or who live in fear of theirs being shipped overseas, who are without health care and retirement security and who are struggling to keep their families afloat, Bush's so-called 'strong' economy is a joke," he concluded.

But the Democratic leaders of the two panels that will vote on fast track were much less critical of Bush's plan.

Baucus called fast track "vital to U.S. trade," then added that renewing it "is a legitimate opportunity to address Americans' legitimate concerns

on trade": More enforcement against nations that break trade treaties "and better labor and environmental standards." The Montanan did not say whether labor rights should be written into fast track or into all trade treaties, as Sweeney demanded in his statement.

Rangel called fast track "a valuable tool" but warned "it requires a great deal of trust," which has been lacking between Congress and the White House. "Congress must be an active partner in trade negotiations to ensure we truly craft agreements in the best interest of the American people," he added.

Lori Wallach, director of Public Citizen—labor's longtime ally in trade pact fights—caustically noted that even when lawmakers in 1988 told presidents to include labor rights in trade pacts, presidents ignored that in crafting CAFTA and the China deal. Since President Nixon first got fast track through Congress 34 years ago, she said, "the average worker is making only a nickel more an hour" adjusted for inflation.

"Were it not for trade agreements that pit U.S. workers in a race to the bottom with poverty-wage workers worldwide, U.S. workers' wages would better track productivity increases and workers in developing countries could fight to raise their wages, too," Wallach added. Sens. Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio), Bernie Sanders (Ind.-Vt.), Robert Byrd (D-W. Va.) and four other senators wrote Bush on Feb. 1 to oppose fast track.