

US Senate Gives Votes to Give President Power to Sign Trade Treaty Without Congressional Debate

On 22 May the US Senate voted to give President Obama Trade Promotion Authority, the so-called 'fast-track' authority to sign international trade deals without Congress having the right to scrutinise the deal. Congress could then only vote yes or no. The President won the vote by a substantial majority of 62-37. This vote refers explicitly to the treaty being negotiated with the Pacific rim countries (Japan, Malaysia, Vietnam, Singapore, Mexico, Chile and Peru), the Trans-Pacific Partnership. The assumption is that this fast-track authority would then automatically extend to TTIP, the trans-Atlantic deal.

Opposition to the free-trade deal came mostly from Democratic Party senators who are worried about the effect of the treaty on US business and jobs. The majority of Republican senators strongly support the trade deal which is powerfully promoted by Wall St and US corporations.

This is not the end of the story, however. The debate must now go to the House of Representatives where it will be voted on in June or July. Although some Democrats are influenced by the opposition from trade unions and environmental groups, corporate money has immense sway on Capitol Hill. According to a report in the *Financial Times*, the big question in the House of Representatives will be 'how many conservatives will vote against it based on their opposition to granting Mr Obama what they see as additional powers'. (*FT*, 23 May). Many conservatives on the Tea Party right oppose the deal.

In the United States, for the trade unions as well as for the supporters of the Tea Party right, the free-trade deal with Mexico and Canada (NAFTA) has been a sobering experience. In the decades following the NAFTA agreement, over 800,000 industrial jobs were lost in the US while in Mexico over 1 million *campesino* farmers were displaced leading to a doubling of desperate immigration from that country.

Bernie Sanders, the Vermont senator now staging a run for the 2016 Democratic presidential nomination, said "It is wrong to ask American workers to compete against Vietnamese workers where the minimum wage is 56 cents an hour . . . That is not what a trade policy should be".

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