

POLITICS

GOP Lawmakers Embrace Obama Trade Push More Than Democrats

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS JAN. 27, 2015, 4:50 P.M. E.S.T.

WASHINGTON — It doesn't happen often, but Republican lawmakers on Tuesday gave more support to President Barack Obama than did Democrats on a key issue: trade.

Trade has long created strange politics, but the issue has languished on congressional back burners recently. Now it's heating up, as the administration tries to craft a new trade agreement with Japan and 10 other Pacific-rim countries.

First, however, Obama must win something every president since Franklin Roosevelt has enjoyed: enhanced negotiating powers that make it harder for critics on the left and right to torpedo proposed trade deals. It's called trade promotion authority, or TPA, or fast-track. It lets Congress ratify or reject -- but not amend -- proposed trade pacts.

Lawmakers in both parties say major trade deals can't be negotiated and enacted without such negotiating powers.

Republicans generally support open trade more than Democrats do, regardless who's president. That's why Obama's top trade official -- U.S. Trade Representative Michael Froman -- got warmer receptions Tuesday from Republicans as he testified before key Senate and House committees.

Echoing Obama's remarks in the State of the Union address, Froman said enhanced trade promotion is essential, noting that 95 percent of the world's consumers live outside the United States.

Several Republicans on the Senate Finance Committee, including Rob Portman of Ohio, strongly agreed. Portman, who held Froman's job under President George W. Bush, said foreign markets are rapidly growing, and "our workers are getting left out."

But many Democrats, liberals, environmentalists and labor unions have grown increasingly hostile to trade deals. They say trade deals let foreign countries take U.S. jobs while abusing the environment, patent rights and, sometimes, local workers.

Froman said his negotiating team is pushing India and other countries to include greater safeguards for workers and the environment as they seek new trade agreements.

Several anti-trade protesters interrupted Froman's opening remarks Tuesday, and were ushered out by police. Some mentioned the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement, which many labor groups disdain.

Democratic Sen. Charles Schumer of New York echoed their concerns. He said he worries that new trade deals will not help middle class incomes.

Schumer also insisted the United States do more to prevent China from keeping its currency's value artificially low, which enhances Chinese exports and dampens imports.

China is not part of the pending Pacific-rim deal. But it figured heavily in Tuesday's debates.

Schumer said he won't support the Pacific-rim deal "if we do not at the same time enact new statutory law that includes objective criteria to define and enforce against currency manipulation" in China and elsewhere.

Froman said his team has made progress on the China currency issue, but needs to do more. He said he's pushing China on other issues too, "including protection and enforcement of trade secrets and other intellectual property rights."

Schumer and other Democrats demanded that Froman address currency manipulation in the Pacific-rim negotiations -- even if China is absent -- because Japan and other countries also engage in it.

House Ways and Means Chairman Paul Ryan, a Wisconsin Republican, said TPA and the Pacific-rim deal are badly needed. China and other fast-growing countries are making trade deals that leave American farmers, manufacturers and others on the sidelines, he said.

Ryan said the GOP-controlled Congress will insist on language guaranteeing transparency and other concessions. "We tell the administration what targets to hit," Ryan said.

Anti-trade activists criticized Froman's agenda in a conference call Tuesday.

"We're obviously going to push for no-fast track," said Leo W. Gerard, international president of the United Steelworkers. "But if we're going to have to have fast track, it has to be one that protects jobs."

Several lawmakers predict the Senate will support TPA, with overwhelming support from Republicans, plus a fair number of Democrats.

Prospects in the House are less certain. A big majority of House Democrats oppose new trade deals, and some Republicans appear increasingly dubious.

Associated Press writer Tom Raum contributed to this report.