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Dems push for majority caucus vote on Peru trade deal

By Jonathan E. Kaplan
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Democratic Democratic leaders worked hard in advance of a vote Wednesday night in an effort to persuade a majority of their caucus to support a free trade agreement with Peru, the first test of a deal on trade between House Democratic leaders and the Bush administration.

While the outcome of the vote is not in doubt given the support of Republicans, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and other Democratic leaders have been criticized for supporting a measure that is divisive within the Democratic Caucus. Winning majority support would boost Pelosi's argument that the Peru deal, which includes tougher labor and environmental provisions at the behest of Democrats, represents a new chapter in the annual congressional fights on trade policy.

leaders have concentrated their efforts on first-term lawmakers who might be wary of crossing their superiors, including Reps. Chris Carney (Pa.), Joe Donnelly (Ind.) and Yvette Clarke (N.Y.). They've also focused on conservative Democrats who might have an easier time voting for a trade deal.

Efforts began with phone calls to members over the weekend, and appeared to continue Wednesday on the House floor.

During a vote on Wednesday afternoon, Ways and Means Committee Chairman Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.) pressed Clarke and Reps. Edolphus Towns (D-N.Y.) and William Jefferson (D-La.). Rangel, who has taken a personal interest in securing strong Democratic support for the deal, also enlisted New York Democrats Gregory Meeks and Joseph Crowley to shore up support in his caucus.

Crowley and Meeks won support from Rep. Lacy Clay (D-Mo.), who is known for his independent liberalism.

Some lawmakers were unwilling to say how they planned to vote. For example, Carney said he had made up his mind, but added he would not share that information with reporters.

The vote took place after The Hill's press time.

Democratic leaders argue the Peru deal is a Democratic-negotiated trade agreement that would force the South American nation to upgrade its environmental and labor standards. They also

argued that the agreement would improve relationships between the United States and Latin America.

“This is the first trade agreement we have ever had with enforceable labor and environmental standards that is on par with other issues like intellectual property. [This is a] pretty good agreement if you care about progressive values,” Rep. Adam Smith (D-Wash.) said.

Many lawmakers have a difficult time casting votes for trade agreements because there are few political benefits.

Several freshman Democrats ran campaign advertisements against ratifying future free trade agreements and, as a result, Pelosi told the freshmen last week to “vote their districts.”

Still, the efforts to convince freshmen such as Clarke, Carney and Donnelly suggest Democratic leaders are going after as many votes as they can in an effort to reach a majority of the majority.

Winning what former Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) called the “majority of the majority” — Hastert would not consider legislation that did not have the support of a majority of the GOP conference — would further solidify Pelosi’s standing in her caucus.

Pelosi blessed the Peru deal after she and Rangel won commitments from the Bush administration to renegotiate the labor and environmental standards. They consider it a model for how to negotiate future trade pacts.

There are 233 Democrats in the caucus, meaning 117 lawmakers would need to support the trade pact to reach the majority threshold. Democratic supporters of the U.S. Peru Free Trade Agreement are hoping to get 100 votes in favor of the bill. Most Republicans are expected to support the measure, too.

In the minority, most Democrats opposed free trade agreements. Only 15 Democrats voted for a free trade agreement with several Central American countries, while Republicans from regions hit hard by economic downturns or from labor-friendly districts were forced to vote for agreements.

“We’re trying to educate people, but because of the politics some folks can’t be educated,” Meeks, a strong labor supporter, said. “It’s very important for the country.”

Some lawmakers suggested they could vote for Peru, but would vote against deals with Colombia and South Korea that so far do not have the blessing of Pelosi and Rangel. The Bush administration and business community have been pushing hard to get the Colombia deal considered.

“This is the easiest of the four trade agreements to vote for,” said one Democratic lawmaker who requested to speak anonymously.

The Bush administration made it more difficult for Pelosi to secure a majority of the majority when the president vowed to veto legislation that would provide expanded benefits to workers hurt by increased trade.

Still, Pelosi's goal has been helped by muted opposition from unions such as the AFL-CIO. At the local and state level, however, some unions have been much more vocal in their opposition.

Meanwhile, Democratic opponents, though certain they would not win the war over Peru, have tried to win votes against the deal. That could make it more difficult for other deals even to be considered in this Congress.

Michaud, Rep. Phil Hare (D-Ill.) and Ohio Democrats Marcy Kaptur and Betty Sutton have been outspoken in their opposition to the bill.

In a last-ditch attempt to persuade undecided colleagues, Rep. Raúl Grijalva (D-Ariz.) sent his colleagues a media report that the Peruvian government planned to declare a two-day miners' strike illegal, forcing miners to choose between returning to work and losing their jobs. They are striking for better pension benefits and more rights for subcontracted workers.