

There is no education in the second kick from a mule



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The labor movement is often a fractious family. We are united in purpose but often divided on tactics. But there is one issue that unites us all—public-sector employees, the building trades, the service sector and manufacturing workers alike. We all oppose Fast Track.

The so-called Fast Track trade bill is legislation that would allow the Obama administration (and any future administration) to negotiate international “trade” agreements in secret and then ram them through Congress on a straight up-or-down vote, with no chance to amend them. On Fast Track authority, something Congress may act on this month, we

are united in our opposition—the entire AFL-CIO as well as non-affiliated unions such as SEIU, the Teamsters and the NEA.

That unity was on display in Atlanta in February when every single member of the AFL-CIO Executive Council, including me, signed a letter to members of Congress urging a “no” vote on Fast Track. We staged a powerful rally with hundreds of members of all our unions in Atlanta, including dozens of NALC members from the greater Atlanta area, along with former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich. (See picture on page 47.)

Our message was clear: Fast Track poses a serious threat to our democracy and to our standard of living. If you want to quickly learn why, go to nalc.org and watch Reich’s two-minute video on the Trans-Pacific Partnership or TPP—it’s called “The Worst Trade Deal You’ve Never Heard Of.”

The video explains that agreements like the TPP, which would cover countries in Asia and the Americas, are not primarily about trade at all. They are secretly negotiated agreements designed to protect the interests of multinational corporations and to deal with subjects far removed from tariffs or quotas and other restrictions on imported or exported goods and services. They focus on investment rules, the rights of corporations and the ability of countries to regulate in the public interest. These agreements threaten to weaken or eliminate labor, health and safety laws; prohibit domestic content policies (“buy American”) in government procurement; and force countries to compensate companies for profits lost to new environmental regulations. Worst of all, they establish private tribunals outside of our court system—secret and unaccountable to voters—to resolve disputes.

We’ve seen this movie before. Fast Track authority paved the way for enactment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and for China’s entrance into the World Trade Organization (WTO). These agreements have depressed wages in America and devastated our manufacturing sector by helping companies shift production overseas to countries with weak unions and few labor protections, where workers often work for less than a dollar an hour. More than 60,000 American factories have closed since 2000 and our trade deficits have soared.

As I said at the rally in Atlanta, “There is no education in the second kick from a mule”—a line I learned from brother Cecil Roberts of the United Mineworkers. We should have learned our lesson from NAFTA and China-WTO—Fast Track doesn’t work for America’s workers.

Now you might be asking, “Solidarity aside, what does this have to do with our jobs?” A lot, it turns out.

That’s because Fast Track would not just allow for a quick vote on the TPP—which could include a ban on postal banking, thanks to the lobbying of Wall Street bankers who don’t want to see the success of Japan Post’s bank replicated elsewhere—but also on a number of other trade agreements under negotiation as well. The WTO is currently sponsoring the negotiation of a trade in services agreement (TISA) among dozens of countries, and the U.S. government is in bilateral talks with the European Union on a Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (the so-called T-TIP), which would cover our economic interaction with the EU’s 27 countries.

In both negotiations, the Europeans are calling for us to phase out the Postal Service’s monopoly on the delivery of letter mail—a policy adopted by the EU between 1992 and 2011. In other words, both the T-TIP and the TISA are a direct threat to our jobs and our system of affordable universal service.

We don’t think President Obama would agree to postal deregulation in a trade agreement, but we don’t know for sure. The negotiations are being conducted in secret. The first we would hear of it would be when an agreement is brought to Congress for a vote. And remember, under the Fast Track bill, nobody would be able to offer an amendment to strip out a provision ending our postal monopoly.

In fact, we are pretty sure President Obama would not agree to end the postal monopoly in a trade agreement, but because Fast Track authority would last for years, there is no guaranteeing what a future president might do.

NALC is working closely with our brothers and sisters in the labor movement to defeat the Fast Track bill. I know I can count on letter carriers, just like those who rallied with me in Georgia, to make our voices heard in Congress: “Vote no on Fast Track!”