

Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP): Scapegoating Labor for Fast Track's Defeat

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The New York Times sums up opposition to fast track in one image: AFL-CIO president Richard Trumka. (Photo: Win McNamee/Getty Images)

Corporate media have a storyline ready to explain the defeat (for the time being, anyway) of the Trans Pacific Partnership : Big Labor is to blame.

This was set up well in advance of progressive Democrats outmaneuvering the Obama administration in Congress to thwart the passage of fast track authority—expedited rules for approving trade pacts that are seen as necessary to pass TPP, a vast commercial agreement among 12 Pacific Rim nations. A Wall Street Journal editorial ([4/16/15](#)) laid it out in April:

In the US, Democrats have tried to prevent giving the president trade promotion authority precisely because it will extend trade across both the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. For their friends in Big Labor, this is anathema.

USA Today editorialized in May ([5/7/15](#); FAIR Blog, [5/5/15](#)):

The pan-Pacific deal...would help the US retain a key role in the region, while promoting competition that would give consumers more choices and lower costs.

Democrats, however, are wedded to unions who blame trade, and trade agreements, for the decline in manufacturing jobs.

As the vote loomed, USA Today ([6/8/15](#)) returned to the theme:

House Democrats are fighting the deal for a simple, but not very good, reason. Labor has pulled out all the stops to persuade, cajole and pressure them into killing it.

The paper warned: "An overwhelming vote to block the trade deal...would be widely interpreted as the Democrats putting the interests of unions first."

Sure enough, after the vote, that was the interpretation—in corporate media, at least. "Labor's Might Seen in Failure of Trade Deal" was the New York Times' front-page headline ([6/14/15](#)). "Trade Defeat Is Huge Win for Labor," Politico([6/12/15](#)) declared. "A Big Win for Big Labor," The Atlantic ([6/12/15](#)) called it.



The broad coalition against TPP was seldom acknowledged in corporate media. (cc photo: Neil Ballantyne/Wikimedia)

Such pieces downplayed or ignored the broad progressive coalition that opposes fast track. A [letter](#) circulated by the Citizens Trade Campaign illustrates how widely the resistance to corporate-friendly trade deals has spread: Among its 2,000 co-signers are many union groups, to be sure, but also some of the biggest names in environmental activism, including Greenpeace, the Sierra Club, Friends of the Earth, Defenders of Wildlife, 350.org, the Natural Resources Defense Council and the League of Conservation Voters, who [charge](#) that TPP would allow corporations to overturn environmental policies.

Numerous consumer groups joined in, like Consumers Union, the Consumer Federation of America and the National Consumers League, concerned about TPP's [impact](#) on consumer protection. Numerous groups representing family farmers also signed on, seeing TPP as aimed at [helping agribusiness](#) crowd them out. Likewise groups concerned about the pact's potential to make life-saving drugs [unaffordable](#), and to [expand copyrights](#) to the benefit of corporate media (who, it should be remembered, are reporting on a fight they very much have a dog in).

For these and other reasons, the declaration of opposition to fast track was joined by numerous general grassroots progressive organizations, like MoveOn.org, People for the American Way, Americans for Democratic Action and Common Cause, and by a wide spectrum of liberal religious institutions, including the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the United Methodist Church's General Board of Church and Society, American Friends Service Committee, the American Jewish World Service and Catholics United. Civil rights groups like the NAACP and women's rights groups like Feminist Majority also took the anti-fast track side.

"It's preposterous to think that the labor movement could browbeat a majority of House Democrats if most Democrats in Congress were not already sick of being strong-armed by corporate elites and Democratic presidents in thrall to them," wrote American Prospect co-editor Robert Kuttner (Huffington Post, [6/14/15](#)) in a post-mortem on the fast track vote. More to the point, it's impossible to imagine that labor alone could have swayed a majority of Democrats—and overcome the [9-to-1 advantage](#) pro-fast track groups had in campaign contributions—if virtually every organized Democratic constituency hadn't made it clear that defeating fast track was a top priority.

Yet all these movements tended to drop out of establishment media accounts of the fast track fight, leaving labor as the lone opponent. Nine-tenths of the way through, that

“Labor’s Might” New York Times piece [acknowledges](#) that “the hostility of the industrial unions toward trade deals has spread to a growing roster of liberal activists”—but gives no clue as to who those activists might be.

Think how different the impact of these stories would be if, instead of limiting fast track opposition to organized labor, which now represents just 11 percent of US workers, media reported that pretty much every environmental group you’ve ever heard of thinks TPP will be bad for the planet, consumer groups warn that it will be bad for consumers, and maybe the church you attend on Sunday is against it too.

Interestingly, the openly right-wing press is more willing to acknowledge environmental opposition, perhaps assuming that for their audience treehuggers are as much a bogeyman as labor: The New York Post ([4/28/15](#)) says that “Obama’s problem” is “fellow Democrats — pandering to unions and greens,” while the Wall Street Journal ([4/16/15](#)) says that “on the Democratic left the opposition includes an array of unions, environmentalists and anti-business activists.” Such admissions are seldom to be seen in news outlets whose audiences actually care what environmental groups think.

One corporate outlet that did a notably better job was Newsweek ([6/12/15](#)), whose explainer, headlined “What Is the Trans-Pacific Partnership and Why Are Critics Upset by It?,” actually attempted to answer that question. Reporter Taylor Wofford notes that “internet privacy advocates like those at the Electronic Frontier Foundation say that regulations in the leaked chapter on intellectual property go too far” and that “environmentalists were upset at what they saw in the leaked chapter on environmental regulations.”

In the last paragraph, Newsweek notes that “other groups have shown concern too”—like “the AFL-CIO, a federation of unions,” for instance.

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