3-17-1993

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U.S. Congress Holds Key To Nafta Ratification

by Carlos Navarro

Category/Department: General

Published: Wednesday, March 17, 1993

The US Congress appears to hold the key to whether the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) will remain on track or face demise. In recent weeks, members of Congress have repeatedly asked President Bill Clinton to negotiate tough parallel agreements that protect the US work force against massive job losses, discourage pollution, and prevent a surge in imports, conditioning congressional ratification on those issues. Trilateral negotiations on the parallel accords were scheduled to begin on March 17. On March 8, Rep. Robert Torricelli (D-NJ), chair of the Western Hemisphere subcommittee of the House Foreign Affairs Committee suggested that the parallel accords should include a 1% tax on all US trade with Mexico and Canada. Proceeds from the tax would be used to fund infrastructure improvements, mostly on the US border with Mexico. According to Torricelli, inclusion of the "border tax" would greatly help to secure congressional support for NAFTA ratification. Other House legislators, however, say the border tax by itself is not enough. "My reading on the floor of the House is that the votes are not there," said Rep. Robert Matsui (D-Cal.), a vocal supporter of NAFTA. "In fact, I even question whether or not we will have the ability to pass NAFTA at any time in the future unless there is a greater grassroots interest." Opposition to NAFTA is also strong among Democrats in the Senate. In a letter to Clinton, 25 Senators warned: "NAFTA, as it currently stands, fails to promote fair trade or serve American interests in the areas of fair labor standards, environmental protection, and worker health and safety standards." Nevertheless, in a March 11 interview with the Associated Press, US Commerce Secretary Ron Brown dismissed the congressional opposition, describing statements from US legislators as "typical rhetoric often heard before the start of negotiations." Brown said the Clinton administration remains committed to NAFTA, as long as proper side agreements are negotiated. Still, the administration and some US legislators disagree on what would constitute "proper" parallel accords. On one hand, members of Congress would like to see the creation of special commissions with extensive powers to punish violators. The Clinton administration, on the other hand, has hinted that giving enforcement powers to such commissions may be unwise. US Trade Representative Mickey Kantor told a Senate Finance subcommittee hearing on March 8 that the commissions should only publicize problems, which would in turn persuade governments to "react properly." Kantor said the proposed panels should not have the power to levy fines or sanctions because that could violate national sovereignty. He told the Senators that the commissions should investigate ways to assure better enforcement of existing laws. The positions adopted in the US Congress are being monitored carefully in Canada and Mexico. In Canada, some doubts emerged in early March on how vigorously the administration of outgoing Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney will pursue ratification of the treaty. The doubts were fueled in part by US congressional opposition to the treaty. Mulroney introduced the treaty for ratification in the Canadian Parliament on Feb. 25 (for previous coverage see SourceMex, 03/03/93). On March 1, three Canadian provincial premiers (governors) Bob Rae of Ontario, Roy Romanow of Saskatchewan, and Michael Harcourt of British Columbia, all from opposition parties urged the Canadian Parliament to delay ratification of NAFTA, at least until the US Congress decides whether to ratify the accord. According to an article in the March 7 edition of the Toronto Star, public opposition to the treaty has grown in Canada. The Star said Mulroney's Progressive Conservative Party fears it could lose popularity if
efforts are made to force the treaty through the Canadian Parliament prior to NAFTA ratification in the US Congress. Canadian Trade Minister Michael Wilson rejected the Star report, saying the Progressive Conservatives still plan to use their legislative majority to have NAFTA ratified by June of this year. Some Mexican opponents of NAFTA now also regard the US Congress as a potential ally. In testimony before a US House subcommittee on Feb. 25, two university professors asked US legislators to delay ratification of NAFTA until after the Mexican elections are concluded in July of 1994. Adolfo Aguilar Zinser of the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM), and Jorge Castaneda, a visiting professor at Princeton University, suggested that US ratification of NAFTA before the Mexican elections would amount to an endorsement of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in the elections. Zinser and Castaneda are identified with Mexican opposition parties. Meantime, Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari announced on March 8 that the government will spend about US$3.9 billion for environmental support programs along the border with the US and around Mexico City. In his statement, Salinas reiterated his support for the parallel agreements and recognized the need to increase wages in Mexico. At the same time, however, he called for modifications in US immigration policy. In a March 10 interview with the Dallas Morning News, Salinas said he will seek an agreement guaranteeing better treatment of Mexican migrant laborers in the US once NAFTA is implemented. "I believe that as we establish the free flow of goods and services, we will have to think about the free movement of people as well," he said. Salinas stressed that Mexican workers in the US are subject to "abuses of their labor rights and their human rights." (Sources: Agence France-Presse, 02/25/93, 03/09/93; Journal of Commerce, 02/28/93, 03/01/93; Reuter, 03/01/93, 03/08/93, 03/09/93; New York Times, 03/09/93, 03/10/93; Wall Street Journal, 03/10/93; Associated Press, 03/10/93, 03/12/93; Washington Post, 03/12/93)

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