



Another Sign of the Conservative Antiworker, Antijobs Agenda

The Push to Scale Back Trade Adjustment Assistance

By Sabina Dewan

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Conservatives in Congress are excited to finally be able to vote in favor of the three free trade agreements with Colombia, Panama, and South Korea. But many are opposed when it comes to also voting in favor of Trade Adjustment Assistance legislation that provides crucial services to help retrain and reemploy U.S. workers who lose their jobs because of foreign trade.

Still, Trade Adjustment Assistance legislation passed yesterday. But only because those conservatives that voted in favor of the legislation successfully scaled back the program from its 2009 version. The current version reduces eligibility, chokes benefits, and makes it harder for workers who have lost their jobs because of trade to access the health care they need.

Back in 2009, Congress—with bipartisan leadership from Rep. Max Baucus (D-MT), Rep. Charlie Rangel (D-NY), Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-IA), and Rep. Dave Camp (R-MI)—anticipated the shocks of the economic crisis and expanded Trade Adjustment Assistance to provide better coverage to more workers.

Sen. Grassley said:

The President's Trade Policy Agenda also states that our trade policy needs a keener appreciation of the consequences of trade for workers, families, and communities. I believe our trade policy has reflected these consequences for some time. And, we recently addressed these consequences for our workers in the globalized economy of the 21st century when we achieved a true bipartisan reform and expansion of our Trade Adjustment Assistance programs.

Sen. Olympia Snowe (R-ME) echoed these comments, saying, “I have insisted that before any additional Free Trade Agreements are considered by Congress ... an expanded Trade Adjustment Assistance bill be enacted.”¹

What's more, the timeline below illustrates that Trade Adjustment Assistance has enjoyed support for 50 years:

Conservatives force a bad deal for our workers by scaling back a 50-year-old program

Trade adjustment assistance over the years

Date	Event
1962	Trade Expansion Act of 1962 formally establishes Trade Adjustment Assistance that provides crucial services to help retrain and reemploy U.S. workers who have lost their jobs because of foreign trade. Overly strong eligibility criteria mean no one receives benefits in the first seven years of the program.
1974	Trade Act of 1974 expands TAA eligibility and benefits. The new policy reduces the costs of applying, reduces the time it takes to process an application, creates a new program to assist communities, and improves benefits for workers and firms.
1983	President Ronald Reagan tries to eliminate TAA, but high unemployment means TAA has plenty of supporters in Congress who want to save a key job-training program.
2002	Trade Act of 2002 reauthorizes TAA for five years and adds a new health care tax credit for eligible workers as well as a program for farmers.
2007	Congress only extends TAA on a short-term basis as Senate gridlock prevents a full reauthorization.
2009	American Recovery and Reinvestment Act reauthorizes TAA for two years. The act provides additional funding for all elements of TAA, extends TAA eligibility to service workers and public-sector workers, reestablishes the communities program, and makes the health care tax credit more effective.
February 2011	The expanded benefits from the 2009 TAA reauthorization expire, leaving helpless workers out in the cold.
September 2011	The Senate votes to reauthorize TAA but it strips out key benefits included in the 2009 expansion despite high unemployment.

Today, even though 14 million Americans are out of work and many more are underemployed, conservative members refuse to provide them with the adequate retraining and support they need to get back on their feet. And the price tag of an extension of the 2009 expanded version of the Trade Adjustment Program would only have been .05 percent, or \$1.8 billion, of our overall budget.

Apparently we can't afford \$1.8 billion to help workers be productive members of the economy but we can afford \$58 billion in tax relief to millionaires as a result of the Bush tax cuts in 2010.

The scaled-back Trade Adjustment Assistance legislation passed in Congress is yet another sign that conservative talk about creating jobs and protecting American workers amounts to little more than rhetoric. When push comes to shove, conservatives will gladly pull out the rug from underneath millions of workers already struggling to make ends meet in these tough economic times.

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Endnotes

1 States News Service, "Snowe Comments on U.S.-Panama FTA," May 21, 2009.