

US House rejects Barack Obama on fast-track trade authority

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Washington: The US House of Representatives sidetracked a high-profile White House-backed trade bill on Friday, a blow to a pending Asian trade deal and a humiliating defeat for President Barack Obama inflicted by members of his own party.

The 302-126 vote leaves the trade legislation in perilous limbo and came a few hours after Obama journeyed to Congress to deliver a last-minute personal plea to fellow Democrats. The measure would allow him to negotiate global trade deals, including one with 11 Asian nations near completion, that Congress could approve or reject but not change.

The debate and vote are certain to reverberate in next year's presidential election. Most Republican contenders favour the trade bill. Among Democrats, Hillary Clinton is uncommitted, despite calls by rivals to take a position.

Business groups generally favour the measure. But strong opposition by organised labour carries at least an implicit threat to the re-election of any Democrat who votes in the bill's favour.

"Slow down the fast track to get a better deal for the America people," Democratic House Leader Nancy Pelosi said in a speech that drew handshakes and hugs from union-backed Democrats who have laboured for months to reject Obama's request for "fast track" authority in trade talks.

Obama drew applause when he walked into the meeting with Democrats, but sharp words after he left and few if any conversions for his efforts. The president's hastily arranged visit to Congress marked a last-minute bid to stave off a stinging defeat at the hands of his own party. His visit relegated much of the debate on the House floor to the status of a sideshow.

Republicans command a majority in the House, and Speaker John Boehner and the Republican leadership worked in harness with Obama to pass the legislation. But there were many defections among Republicans unwilling to expand the president's authority and not nearly enough Democrats supporting him for the bill to prevail.

The outcome was also a triumph for organised labour, which had lobbied lawmakers furiously to oppose the measure that union officials warned would lead to the loss of thousands of American jobs.

Technically, the vote was on a portion of the legislation to renew federal aid for workers who lose their jobs through imports.

A second roll call followed on the trade negotiating powers themselves, and the House approved that measure, 219-211. But under the rules in effect, the overall legislation, previously approved by the Senate, could not advance to the White House unless both halves were agreed to. That made votes something less than a permanent rejection of the legislation.

Republican Paul Ryan, a former vice presidential nominee, chairman of the House committee that deals with trade and a supporter of the measure, told reporters, "This isn't over yet." The White House agreed. "Our work is not done yet," said presidential press secretary Josh Earnest. He compared the day's events to a temporary setback in the Senate that was followed by the trade bill's passage

Pelosi said the bill was "stuck in the station," suggesting that changes could get it moving again. Even so, it was unclear

how majority Republicans and the White House would be able to gain the momentum.

"Basically the president tried to both guilt people and then impugn their integrity," said Congressman Peter DeFazio, a Democrat and one of the most outspoken opponents of the legislation.

Another Democrat, Congressman Steve Cohen, said Obama had told Democrats that "his whole philosophy, life, everything he's done has been to help people. And he thinks he's doing that with this trade agreement."