

## COLOMBIA: WHERE U.S. POLICY KILLS

### VIOLENCE AGAINST WORKERS

*On November 7, 2007 Consuelo Restrepo Campo Mercedes, a Colombian trade unionist and teacher of 30 years, was shot five times by two men on a motorcycle as she was standing outside of the school where she taught in Cartago, Valle de Cauca. She was the third Colombian trade unionist killed between November 2nd and 7th, 2007.*

#### COLOMBIA IS THE MOST DANGEROUS PLACE IN WORLD TO BE A TRADE UNIONIST

- Since 1991, over 2,200 Colombian unionists have been assassinated. Over 450 of these killings have occurred since 2002.
- The number of Colombian unionists murdered over the past five years exceeds the rest of the world's combined total.
- An average of one Colombian trade unionist has been killed every three days for the past 20 years.
- 98% of these cases of homicide have gone unpunished, the vast majority never even being investigated.
- Workers in Colombia are hit by all sides: the Colombian armed forces, right-wing paramilitary death squads, and left-wing guerrilla groups. However the vast majority of attacks on trade unionists have come from paramilitary groups. Between 2004 and 2006, paramilitary groups were responsible for 55% of all violations against trade unionists, with the Colombian armed forces in second place with 38% in cases where the assailants were known.



- The U.S. State Department, the UN High Commission on Human Rights, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch have all documented Colombian military links with paramilitaries and the International Labor Organization notes that **the official military has in some cases created paramilitary units to carry out assassinations.** In addition, over 90 Colombian officials (including current and past members of Congress, governmental councils members, governors, mayors, state legislators, and former director of the DAS — Colombia's FBI) are being held for links with paramilitary groups showing the deep collusion between the Colombian government and right-wing death squads.

#### U.S. TIES TO ANTI-UNION VIOLENCE AND WEAK LABOR RIGHTS IN COLOMBIA

**Plan Colombia:** The U.S. has supported the Colombian armed forces with over \$4.9 billion since 2000 despite the Colombian armed forces well-documented links with paramilitary organizations who attack trade unionists. In addition, this massive support has continued unabated despite direct military attacks on trade unionists and the Colombian government's lack of political will to convict those responsible for the assassinations of trade unionists.

**U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement:** The U.S. and Colombian governments have negotiated a bilateral free trade agreement, which would eliminate and lower tariffs on trade between the two countries, however it has not yet been approved by the U.S. Congress. Approval of such an agreement would essentially give a blank check to a country who's competitive advantage on labor costs has been a systematic annihilation of trade unions.

**SOA/WHINSEC:** The U.S. has trained over 10,000 members of Colombia's military and police at the School of the Americas (SOA). Past SOA training manuals developed by the U.S. encouraged troops to torture and murder those who do "union organizing and recruiting," pass out "propaganda in favor of the interests of the workers," and "sympathize with demonstrators or strikes."



**NOW IS THE TIME TO STOP PLAN COLOMBIA AND THE US-COLOMBIA FREE TRADE AGREEMENT!**

(see other side for how to end these flawed policies)

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Police line the streets during a recent May Day march in Bogotá. In 2006, riot police attacked protesters and beat 15 year old Nicolas Neira to death.

### LABOR LAW IN COLOMBIA

Colombian law undermines worker rights and promotes underemployment.

- Workers have short term contracts with little or no access to pensions, health-care, or job security. There has been a surge in the use of “cooperatives” which are essentially a way for employers to get out of direct labor contracts with their workers. Many of the cooperatives don’t even pay the low minimum wage of approximately \$250 per month.
- Unemployment is estimated at 20% and 60% of workers are in the informal sector, meaning they have no job security or benefits.
- In practice, Colombian workers do not have the right to strike. In the past ten years 95% of strikes in Colombia have been declared illegal by the government, which gives the companies the right to fire striking workers.

**In the past 20 years, due to violence and changes in labor law, unionization in Colombia has decreased by 50%.**

### MULTINATIONAL CORPORATIONS IN COLOMBIA

Corporations have supported and benefited from violence against trade unionists.

- **Chiquita Brands** was found guilty of having given \$1.7 million to paramilitary groups in Colombia’s banana growing region. It was fined millions of dollars; however, the families which were effected by the paramilitary violence due to the financing by Chiquita have not received any reparations.
- **Coca-Cola** has been sued for allegedly hiring paramilitaries to kill, threaten, torture, and kidnap union members.
- **Drummond Coal**, based in Alabama, has been sued for the alleged hiring of paramilitaries to assassinate three union leaders in 2001. One witness claims to have seen a briefcase with \$200,000 pass from the hands of local Drummond management to paramilitaries for the assassination of the union leaders.
- **Dole Fresh Flowers** has used weak Colombian labor law to thwart independent trade unions on their flower plantations. Workers report anti-union actions including intimidation and illegal firing of union members, installing company unions, and even closing down a plantation in order to break the union.

The proposed U.S.-Colombia free trade agreement would give incentives to multinational corporations to take advantage of the extremely violent situation for Colombian workers in order to continue to prioritize profits over worker rights.

### Paramilitaries Continue to Attack Workers

While the current Colombian administration claims that the paramilitary forces have completely demobilized, on-the-ground evidence suggests otherwise. In addition to the continued existence of paramilitary groups that did not disarm, and demobilized groups that have begun to re-arm, evidence also points to new criminal organizations headed by ex-paramilitary leaders. Since the supposed demobilization of the paramilitary structures, workers continue to be threatened and attacked by paramilitary groups.

### JOIN WITNESS FOR PEACE IN SUPPORT OF WORKER’S RIGHTS IN COLOMBIA!

- ◆ **Pressure your U.S. legislators** to stop supporting the Colombian military through Plan Colombia (part of the Foreign Operations bill) and oppose the U.S.-Colombia free trade agreement due to labor rights violations. Colombian trade unions and civil society are calling for an end to military aid in Colombia and a just and equitable trade model for their country.
- ◆ **Educate your community** about unjust U.S. policies in Colombia through events and media.
- ◆ **Join Witness for Peace and learn more about U.S. policy in Colombia!** Find your local WfP regional organizer on the WfP website: [www.witnessforpeace.org](http://www.witnessforpeace.org).

